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Humanism, Fatherhood, and Science in the Court of Urbino:

The History behind the *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo*

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In the painting *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo* (c. 1475), the artist depicts the eponymous Duke of Urbino as a man of learning, combat, and family. The presence of his son Guidobaldo shows that the artist made a concerted effort to portray the duke as a father with a personal interest in the life and upbringing of his child. All of those aspects together illustrate Federico da Montefeltro as the ideal embodiment of Renaissance values. Duke Federico da Montefeltro's own humanist and scientific leanings represent the larger intellectual atmosphere of the court of Urbino, which Baldessare Castiglione, author of *The Book of the Courtier* (1529), routinely praised as a place of superior minds and ideas.

The *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo* is an artwork of disputed attribution. Some art historians declare that Pedro Berruguete of Spain was its creator, while others point to either the Netherlandish artist Joos van Wassenhove or a shared authorship between the two.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, Berruguete and van Wassenhove come from different cultural backgrounds, evocative of a general similarity in Renaissance artwork that transcends national barriers. The evidence for Berruguete, however, is somewhat sparse. The composition of the

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<sup>1</sup> K.G. Boon, "Bouts, Justus of Ghent, and Berruguete," *The Burlington Magazine* 100 (1958): 12.

duke's face does not correspond to the faces of the subjects of other Berruguete works.<sup>2</sup> The art historian K.G. Boon, writing on the Berruguete-Wassenhove argument, states: "If Berruguete worked in the *Studiolo* [Urbino art studio], his share must have been a rather subordinate one. Such a rapid ascent to the heights attained in the portrait of Federigo and his son, with its very Italianate conception, seems hardly possible if one considers his later Spanish production on a rather provincial level."<sup>3</sup> The likelihood of Berruguete's authorship is questionable, leaving van Wassenhove as the most likely candidate.

To understand the *Portrait*, Montefeltro, and the court of Urbino within the context of the Italian Renaissance, one must first grasp the concept of Renaissance humanism. First and foremost, humanists of the Renaissance revered the men and works of Greek and Roman antiquity, believing that time to be the greatest epoch of human history.<sup>4</sup> The men they respected ranged from poets to warriors. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two examples of works admired by Renaissance intellectuals, venerating Homer for his epic poetry and the characters of his works for their valor, bravery, and skill in warfare. The classics of antiquity were the most treasured works of the Renaissance period. Furthermore, Renaissance humanists championed education, particularly in the areas of "grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy."<sup>5</sup> Author Frank Lovett writes that many of those warriors of the Classical Era held in high esteem those aforementioned subjects that Renaissance figureheads referred to as the humanities.<sup>6</sup> This rebirth of learning and intellectual fervor also laid the groundwork for an atmosphere conducive to scientific discovery.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Heim, Dorothee, "Pedro Berruguete y las intarsias de la sillería coral de Plasencia," *Goya* 343 (2013): 104.

<sup>3</sup> Boon, 12.

<sup>4</sup> "Humanism," *The Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, edited by Thomas Goddard Bergin et al., Aylesbury: Market House Books Ltd., 1987, *Credo Reference* (accessed April 22, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> "Humanism," *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by J. R. Hale, London: Thames & Hudson, 2006, *Credo Reference* (accessed April 22, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Lovett, "The Path of the Courtier: Castiglione, Machiavelli, and the Loss of Republican Liberty," *Review of Politics* 74 (2012): 594.

<sup>7</sup> "Humanism," *The Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*.

Renaissance humanists displayed their love of learning and antiquity in their poetry, prose, and artwork.

The *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo* contains several examples of imagery that exhibit characteristics of humanism. The artist specifically painted this portrait as part of a series on famous men.<sup>8</sup> The focus of the series on great men reflects humanist tendencies to bestow special importance on the role of individual men throughout history. In this work, Federico is reading a rather large and ornate codex, relating to the viewer the value that Federico placed on the written word. Indeed, at the time of Federico's death, his personal library contained over 1,100 separate volumes.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Federico was, as Jessica Wolfe writes, "an avid practitioner of mathematics, mechanics, and military engineering."<sup>10</sup> The duke's proclivity towards mathematics and the sciences foreshadow the general attitude of the court of Urbino during the reign of his successors.

Federico is also dressed in a full set of armor, portraying the duke as a man of combat in accordance with the Renaissance humanist championing of warriors.<sup>11</sup> Besides being a duke, Federico da Montefeltro was an experienced *condottiere* or "mercenary" who managed to wrest control of Urbino from his half-brother.<sup>12</sup> Federico was simultaneously an intellectual and a fighter, an occurrence that many today would consider to be an oddity. What Castiglione, author of *The Book of the Courtier* and a courtier himself in Urbino, writes can be applied to Federico da Montefeltro: "let the man we are seeking be exceedingly fierce, harsh, and always among the first,

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<sup>8</sup> Boon, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Wolfe, *Humanism, Machinery and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Elena Brizio, "The Poetics of Masculinity in the Early Modern Italy and Spain, (English)," *Quaderni D'italianistica* 32 (2011): 144.

<sup>12</sup> "Federico, II, da Montefeltro (1422-1474)," *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by J. R. Hale (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), *Credo Reference* (accessed April 22, 2015).

wherever the enemy is; and in every other place, humane, modest, reserved...”<sup>13</sup> Lovett once again notes that the idea of studying the humanities being effeminate and wrong for warriors was “roundly rejected” by people of the time.<sup>14</sup> Federico would have found no contradiction between his love of learning and his vocation as a mercenary.

The portrait also displays the duke as a responsible father, further adding to Federico’s numerous attributes. Guidobaldo in the *Portrait* represents the value of fatherhood and childrearing during the Renaissance. Castiglione writes the following about the importance of right upbringing in the life of a child: “Virtues can be learned, which is very true; for we are born capable of receiving them and of the vices too, and hence through practice we acquire the habit of both...” and “Good masters teach children not only letters, but also good and seemly manners in eating, drinking, speaking, and walking, with appropriate gestures.”<sup>15</sup> To Castiglione, being taught was a valuable part in any child’s life. *The Courtier*, completed in 1508, takes place in the court of Urbino in 1507 during the reign of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, the very same Guidobaldo as the young child in *The Portrait*.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Castiglione, seeing the respectable qualities of his duke, modeled his positions after the example of Federico and Guidobaldo. After all, Castiglione also appreciated noble birth. Castiglione regards the value of noble birth and upbringing: “Men... if they are tended in the right way, are almost always like those from whom they spring, and often are better.”<sup>17</sup> Even if Castiglione was not directly inspired by Federico and Guidobaldo, their royal court at Urbino most certainly left an impression on him.

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<sup>13</sup> Baldessare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Daniel Javitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Lovett, 593.

<sup>15</sup> Castiglione, 217.

<sup>16</sup> Lovett, 591.

<sup>17</sup> Castiglione, 21.

Although the main objective of *The Courtier* was to describe the ideal courtier and his relationship to his prince, Castiglione makes a number of enlightening references to the Court of Urbino. Remarking on the superiority of the Urbino court, Castiglione writes that “worthy pursuits were to which our minds were bent and wholly given over; and of this I confidently make bold to speak... and I can prove my claims by the testimony of men worthy of credence... who personally saw and knew the life and the customs that once flourished in that court.”<sup>18</sup> Castiglione spoke nostalgically about the court of Urbino, reminiscing about the great men who functioned there and in a time not far removed from the book’s setting of 1507.<sup>19</sup> He further writes that “the court of Urbino was far more excellent and adorned with singular men that we can set down in writing.”<sup>20</sup> Castiglione ascribes even more adoration upon the court of Urbino: “How praiseworthy the court of Urbino was, and how adorned it was with noble cavaliers, as nearly all that were ever reared there have adorned it.” Castiglione’s statements on the Urbino court make apparent the importance of individual men in Urbino.

Federico da Montefeltro, who was academic and humanistic in his own right, should be viewed as a part of a historical tradition of a courtly Urbino intelligentsia. Other achievements of the court of Urbino during his reign include texts from both Luca Pacioli and Piero della Francesca, pioneers in mathematics.<sup>21</sup> Castiglione, writing around thirty-three years after the creation of the *Portrait*, praises Urbino’s court as being above all other courts and decorated with the accomplishments of numerous individuals. In 1506 for example, two years before the completion

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<sup>18</sup> Castiglione, 147.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>21</sup> Wolfe, 37.

of *The Courtier*, the Collegio dei Dottori was founded in Urbino as a university set aside for scientific intellectuals.<sup>22</sup>

The scientific tradition, however, did not end in the time of Castiglione. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, the court of Urbino sponsored both men of science and philosophers. One early advancement brought about in that time was Commandino's Latin translation of Euclid's *Elements*.<sup>23</sup> Martin Frank writes extensively about mathematical achievement in Urbino in the second half of the sixteenth century, pointing to the works of the aforementioned Federico Commandino and Guidobaldo del Monte.<sup>24</sup> Del Monte's greatest achievement in Urbino was writing *Liber Mechanicorum* (1577), a study of mechanics.<sup>25</sup> Mechanics was an important scientific study at the time because of its increased need in the area of warfare, which was becoming increasingly modern and machine-based.<sup>26</sup> Del Monte's work, particularly that which was centered on the cannon, was a major contribution to that field.<sup>27</sup> In service to his duke, Guidobaldo carried out various tasks that involved mathematics such as: architectural design, evaluation of machines, and observing "the water intake of a mill."<sup>28</sup> This shows that Guidobaldo and others like him were not confined to singular tasks in the court of Urbino; instead, their job descriptions would likely have entailed an assortment of practical applications that utilized their scientific prowess.

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<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Frank, "Mathematics, technics, and courtly life in Late Renaissance Urbino," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 67 (2013): 306.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>25</sup> "Monte, Guidobaldo, Marchese Del (1545 - 1607)," *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by J.R. Hale (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), *Credo Reference* (accessed April 22, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Frank, 314.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

Urbino also dealt in the production of scientific instruments. As Frank writes, “The workshops in which these were produced were nationally, if not even internationally renowned.”<sup>29</sup> Those workshops even produced instruments for Galileo Galilei and intricate clocks for “Popes, Cardinals, Kings and Dukes.”<sup>30</sup> Urbino’s fame in the production of instruments supports its academic yet practical legacy.

Still, academic endeavors in Urbino from the time of Federico da Montefeltro into the late sixteenth century were not exclusively scientific. They also included the study of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. Jessica Wolfe writes the following statement concerning the court of Urbino’s peculiar intellectual atmosphere: “The scientific undertakings of the scholars and natural philosophers affiliated with the Montefeltro court are often difficult to reconcile with their non-scientific inclinations, their interest in mechanics sitting ill at ease with the Platonic leanings of scholars such as Bembo and Bessarion.”<sup>31</sup> This contradiction of thought continued into the late sixteenth century when Guidobaldo del Monte believed, as Frank states, “that mathematics was not sufficient to describe mechanics...” and “that mechanics would need to include elements of natural philosophy alongside mathematics.”<sup>32</sup> The state of mind of both the intellectuals of Federico’s time and Guidobaldo del Monte exemplify the general view of natural philosophers during the Renaissance when there was not yet a real distinction between the esoteric, philosophical, and concrete. Nevertheless, each facet of academia was present in the court of Urbino throughout the Renaissance.

The *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo* captures the nature of the Renaissance by melding the concepts of humanism, glory in combat, and fatherhood (i.e.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfe, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Frank, 325.



succession or dynasty). Those aspects of humanism were conducive to scientific progress, and they continued to be present in Urbino from the time of Federico into the time of Castiglione when Guidobaldo was the duke of Urbino. They even remained until the latter half of the sixteenth century, an era when scientific discovery and Aristotelian thought were not yet entirely at odds. The *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo* in conjunction with the legacy of Urbino reveals the value placed on the humanities, combat, and science during the Renaissance.

*About the author*

Christian Pye is a senior seeking a Bachelor of Arts in History at Armstrong State University. Christian plans to continue onto graduate education where he will focus on Medieval Islamic Studies.