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The Moral Discourse

In François de Sales’s *Introduction to a Devout Life* the *exemplum* of John the Evangelist (‘It is sometimes necessary to ease our spirit . . .’) opens a series of three chapters, respectively dedicated to an examination ‘Of honest and commendable pastimes and recreations’, ‘Of dauncing and some other passetimes which are lawfull, but dangerous withall’, and of ‘The times to sport and dance’.1 In one of its opening statements, the Bishop of Geneva observes that

> To take the ayre, to walke, and talk merrily and lovingly together, to play on the lute, and other such instruments, to sing in musick, to goe a hunting, are recreations so honest, that to use them well, there needs but ordinarie prudence, which giveth every thing due order, place, season, and measure.

A subsequent list includes ‘those games in which the gaine gotten by them serveth for a price and recompence of nimblenes of the bodie or industrie of the mind’ (‘tennis, baloone, stoole bale, chesse, tables, running at the ringe’). Here, again, only excess is to be avoided (it would wear the body and dull the mind). François de Sales’s ethics of moderation allows him to acknowledge that ‘without pleasure there can be no recreation’. His subtle advice is confined to suggestions that, as well as limiting the amount of time you set aside for it, ‘thou shouldst not so place thy hart upon these passetimes, as to be allways desirous of them, and not to be content without of them’.

With their combination of an acknowledgement of human nature and of a moral concern for the dangers arising from social life, these recommendations may offer one of the most representative examples of early modern attitudes and prescriptions in the matter of recreation.
However, the area was by no means one of unanimously held tenets, and had certainly witnessed positions of stricter ethical disapproval of the world of play.

**Reason versus Joy**

Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch, 1304–74) was internationally known as a moral philosopher, as well as a poet and a humanist. His *Remedies against Both Kinds of Fortune* had an enormous circulation, in manuscripts and subsequently as printed books, in its original Latin and in a wealth of vernacular translations. The title of the sixteenth-century English translation, *Physicke against Fortune*, may itself give an indication of how close such remedies could come to the language of medicine (even though Petrarch himself was the author of some *Invectives against a Physician*). In the fashion of late ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, where wisdom used to be described as a *pharmakon* preservative from the troubles of everyday life, the Tuscan writer warned the reader of this work against the detrimental effects that both success and failure have on the stability of the human soul. The first book deals with remedies against good fortune and, for the section that is relevant to our enquiry, is written as a dialogue between Joy (gaudium) and Reason (ratio). This series of chapters springs from a discussion of the implications of a prosperous life. In this context, rest from labour is considered after the consideration of banquets and dress, and followed by the topics of pleasant smells and sweet music, dance, gambling (with dice and tables), watching a multiplicity of performances, horse-riding and hunting. Until this point the list of pastimes owes a significant debt to the medical tradition, thus further suggesting the closeness that existed between the dominant discourses on the body and those on the soul; it subsequently gives way to a concern for the display of prosperity that is no longer related to recreation (availability of servants, magnificence of houses and castles, and so on). Joy, who takes no notice of its interlocutor’s objections, displays a naïve approval for all that which seems pleasant: ‘I lye idly in my bed chamber’, ‘I enjoy a long, and uninterrupted sleepe’, ‘I delyght in dauncing’, ‘I have played and won’, ‘I take delyght in the pastyme of jesters’, ‘I am very willing to see playes’. Reason attempts to undermine the emotion’s certainties. In its speeches the reader can easily identify the author’s standpoint – though one should never underestimate the restrictions imposed by a literary genre, which require that one writes in the prescribed style, rather than expressing personal feelings. Reason’s speeches present clear affinity