

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

The Book of the Courtier (1528)

Castiglione, Baldassare

Setting While serving as The Holy See's Ambassador to Spain (1524-1529) Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) took advantage of the opportunity to observe many ins and out of elite court life in early sixteenth century western Europe. He formed a notion of what constitutes the ideal courtier, a role commonly played in the regal and regional courts which dotted the pre nation-state political landscape of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Castiglione eventually decided to convert his observations into a fictive picture of life in his own home city, Urbino. He developed a kind of presentation which we might now call a frame story, in which tales told on four successive nights, after dinner at court, were joined into an on running closet drama, in which a blend of actual figures, from the time, discussed issues of importance to their world and lives; In doing so Castiglione created a genre which was unfamiliar but en route toward the early novel. (The plot was the ideas developed in conversation, while the characters were figures of contemporary reality.) Books without this degree of literary potential—development toward the novel was culture formative—were making themselves seen, as the boundaries between art and actuality were under exploration; princely etiquette or court books were popular in the Italy of the day—what they lacked was the fictive dialogue that Castiglione had built so substantially into his Courtier.

Fictive reality Fictive is the word, for Castiglione intended to do more than analyze the reigning social styles of his time—no televised Emmies, no *America you've got talent*, but plenty of room here for the central concept of the present kind of social drama, among highly placed court figures; for pieces of mini novel, advances over the tale telling that we find, say, in Boccaccio or Marguerite de Navarre. Much room, here, for the portrayal of *sprezzatura*, nonchalance, which will be the defining trait of the defining figure of the social drama we track here; the portrayal of the figure of the ideal courtier, in discussing whom a central figure of the age found itself unpackaged. Stylish sophistication, blended with a handsome mien and a wide range of social talents—horsemanship, musicianship, skill as a tennis player, wrestler and thrower, conversationalist above all— a key figure of the social scene dominant in court life was the nonchalant and multi-talented central figure—usually male It should be added-- that is the subject of Castiglione's interest. (The courtier, be it said, is himself but a step below the Prince, that other idealized figure whom Italian culture devotes much of its Renaissance energy to polishing and characterizing. Macchiavelli's Prince that was another novel in germ, which was rising from the hot milieu of Renaissance Italian culture.

Conversation Conversation—which is arguably the central activity of the courtier, is of course the raw material of the novel as well. (The full text of *The Courtier* consists of four books, each devoted to one night's conversation at the court of the Duke of Urbino. While one book, the third, gives voice to women's attitudes, and to advice on womanly behavior at court, the first book is a closet drama in which the Duke and Duchess of Urbino are the central figures—surrounded by congenial fellow elitists-- on the far side of a good dinner, and ready to meander into a rich conversation about social issues, and especially about a kind of personality, the courtier himself, whom historical destiny has put in a prominent position in Italian culture. The art of this book consists in the fluency with which a conversation about conversation—the courtier's—carries the tensions among the characters, weighting this person's traits, diminishing that figure's presence, tracking mood and attitude from one perspective to another, with the result that ideas function almost as characters. As the courtier himself is the principal topic of interest, we are induced to let our own emphasis circle around this talking figure.

Experience Castiglione's own experience, as Ambassador to the Holy See, will have plunged him into the world of high level diplomacy, where the always implication full in-talk is both idle and absorbing—to its participants. Arguably we are on the sill of the early novel, here; say, of works like *Don Quixote*, 1605, which were just beginning to appear, and in which character interaction and plot imagination are

coalescing to support an already burgeoning post-Gutenberg printing industry. (We are also looking at the first glimpses of that social fiction, in eighteenth century novelists like Richardson, which will make stories out of conversation, and nothing else.) The social political milieu, in Urbino, will have resembled that of a mini-Washington D.C. in which the news of the Beltway pervades and colors all social discourse, and in which certain kinds of personality rise to prominence, thanks to qualities highly valued in the culture--such as, in the present case, the courtier, a key figure in society and politics, and a character so implicitly valued that he deserves a central position in any discussion of the day's higher study. The courtier is not a figure for analysis, here, but a forceful character in the account he is being subject to.

Real life dialogue The closet drama text we open into thus blends 'real life' characters—Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) a noted poet and wit; Lodovico de Canossa (1475-1532) favorite of King Francis I, who granted him the precious Bishopric of Bayeux; Unico Aretino (1458-1535) a distinguished Tuscan poet in much social demand for his ability to extemporize and dazzle in language; Elisabette Gonzaga ('The Dutchess'), wife of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, her witty and talented husband, who was unable to bear children for her; plus a diverse additional group of upper class wits and dignitaries. The distinction of this court was a ripe seedbed for discussions of personal styles and the skills that ought by rights to go with them; and those discussions were, as befitted the new literary genre, themselves playing roles in the development of the text. The people were real, the issues they discussed were ample to join them in extended conversation, and Castiglione's genius was sufficient to bind them into tale units, which filled with their own humor and local reference. Castiglione's was not the first work of this distinctive genre—there were Della Casa's *Galateo* (1558) or Stefano Guazzo's *The Civil Conversation* (1574)—but those books fell into the camp of manners and etiquette more than of cultural style, and help us to see the uniqueness of the work of Castiglione. Where etiquette books instruct, fiction makers convince.

The ply of the argument; thought as plot In Book 1 the Count (Lodovico da Canossa) takes it on himself to advance directly into the issue of what makes a true model of a man in society. He reviews a number of possibilities: a 'man of talk,' popular and sought out, and him they call 'a pleasant fellow'; a modest man; an 'active man that is 'always doing'; 'one that shows quiet and respect in every matter'; and so on, each with his favorite attributes, vices always being renamed as virtues, and vice versa. Having disclaimed any special wisdom of his own, the Count weighs in with his own first choice, for the model of a man in society. He prefers for 'this our Courtier' to be 'a gentleman born and of a good house.' The Count's praise, for a man of finest birth, will seem exaggerated. He finds an unmistakably godlike character, to the man born with such perfections. Understandably, this contentious and hyper aristocratic proposition becomes a discussible talking point around which a diverse set of opinions—which function virtually as 'characters' themselves, aligns itself. There are pragmatists in the group, who would be sociologists a few centuries later but there are also idealists, who speak up for the potential of the courtier as a type.

Leonardo (Mustn't one think, in the background of this interplay of characters, and especially of the dynamic presence of the Courtier, of the inner visual ideal, say Leonardo da Vinci's, of the incarnate ideal human form; or of the Platonic ideal which rivetted the attention of the Italian Renaissance? Isn't the courtier a kind of potency of being which moves people and events, himself a force for tale, and a character in a tale about the courtier?) The stakes of achievement are high, with such a well born concept-person, for he will naturally be judged by expectations, which start out high. (The population of Castiglione's dialogues all come from 'approved stock.') The count goes on, expatiating on the history of great families, and on the internal obligations the men of those lines experience; life as a challenge to excel. In the ply of argument—this the pattern of the Castiglione dialogue—others raise voices on top of the argument leader, the Count, and the qualities important to the courtier grow in richness and tone.

The large picture of the courtier; who he really is: sprezzatura In the present turn of 'discussion,' other views of the courtier emerge. Each opinion acts its own role in the force vectors of the story. The speaker directly following the Count declares that 'armes' are the 'chief profession' of the courtier, not least because he must be able at all times to defend his honor—which, once stained—will leave an indelible spot on the man. From that point the discussion of the first Book splays out into colorful efforts to deal with the concept of *sprezzatura*, the Italian term for *nonchalance*, a try in English to appropriate an Italian term which had come to the courtly center at the time Castiglione was writing. (Has our contemporary

American 'cool' any value here as a parallel bit of language or is it too tainted with vulgarity and the shreds of the ad culture?)

Modesty etc. It is not long before the Count returns to the discussion amidst reminders that in antiquity the Romans customarily, when appropriately, praised themselves, but always and (ideally) only with reason. The discussion winds from this fruitful spool of thoughts out into the virtues and vices of pride—which challenges us usefully—and which can lead to noble men—while passing through the complexities that make up true conversation—such observations as that cowards are sometimes tough as nails, or that a successful lover may come on as a squat, bowlegged guy—in other words which can help us to see wrinkles on the notion that one should try to be perfect, in an imperfect world, or that *sprezzatura* can be bought at bargain basement values. Being nonchalant is not conforming to a label, but accepting character status as part of the life drama. Observations are traded, at such points in the conversation, at the expense of Bernard Bibbiena, a wit and self-mocker, or at the grand issue of 'men who look like women,' a product of the highly style conscious turn of the talk, which at subsequent points will turn heavily into matters of proper and elegant dress.) These conversational observations are moving pieces in our closet drama.

Prowess and attention as characters and characteristics The courtier must be able to fight, and to defend his honor readily. (Castiglione, the narrator, makes no bones about the difference, in this regard, between the genders. Men are by nature hot and passionate, and know how to fight and protect, while women are cold and passive.) Prowess and modesty, collaborating, guarantee the courtier a conspicuous place on many parts of life as athletic field. The exercise of social-athletic skills, in tandem with the required modesty, creates a kind of tightrope personality, in which, like a fine stallion, the courtier is forever ready to stand for himself. We approach the quality of *sprezzatura*, again, and realize that in *nonchalance* the courtier must wrap up all his most prominent characteristics—off hand bravery, readiness to protect, true competence and wit, not to mention many fine points touched throughout *The Courtier*. While much of the later part of *The Courtier* repeats familiar themes, spoken by a changing landscape of characters, the author's attention remains fixed on the character of court life; the new inflections are toward women, and their court worlds, and toward increasing finesse in the description of the courtier's own attributes.

Ultimate refinements of the courtier Later in the text we move into finer points about the courtly man of *sprezzatura*; we learn that he is not simply a composite of nimble strong body with sensitive mind system and responses, but that further training is required, to prepare a courtier for the true attainment of his ideal existence. (In a sense the ideal courtier of *sprezzatura* comes before us, in this entire text, as an ideal, hardly to be fully realized in any individual—although admirable partial portraits are scattered through the text. As an ideal, the perfect courtier is present in the culture formation of Renaissance society—did he not exist, we might want to say, we would have to create him, as a regulatory principle of social value, around which to build the actual complexity of court life in the sixteenth century. The savvy necessarily realized in the ideal courtier carries over into proper usages of language and awareness of the finer creativity of the arts.)

Language and the arts Conversation is the formative milieu of the mini dramas that compose *The Courtier*. Conversation is a character if anyone is. As a creature composed foremost of language, and continually on display through the manner of his speech—which should be gallant and contemporary—the courtier should be careful to speak carefully the language of his moment. Rather than inserting 'rare Tuscan words' into his dialogue, he should stick close to the language of Northern Italy (Urbino is fine), Piedmontese varieties of Italian; as for insertion of foreign language—the courtier must here, too, be on a careful walk path between too much eloquence—we are after all talking of a man who carries a rapier, can wrestle an opponent to the ground—and the presence of one who will defend his honor to the death. The courtier must manage plain educated speech—no tricks or arcane references—but—and this caveat is thunderous, given the educational mode in which Renaissance culture is steeped—the courtier must absolutely be prepared to grasp, use, and invent with classical Greek and Roman examples. Those scriptures-- for we hear little about religious scriptures in the *Courtier*-- will be the springboard for the courtier's own work in writing. The courtier as a machine for writing is part of the text written by Castiglione. It is important that the courtier should be able to compose—poems, songs for his lady, comic

dramas, or whatever additionally qualifies him as proper participant in the circle of the court. If the courtier should be so multi-gifted as to work in the plastic arts—sculpture or painting—so much the better. The complete courtier, a vague notion within a discussion which is in any case 'ideal,' will embrace as many fine achievements as possible, though always, we remember, within the limits imposed by 'existence' as part of a closet drama.

Study guide

With Castiglione, as with Macchiavelli, we are introduced to the intimacies of life inside the Italian city-state court. (in Machiavelli we considered advice to the Prince, in his arguments with fellow court figures, among whom he was supreme. The stress was on the diplomatic skills, the international political know-how, and the craftiness of the courtier, who borrowed from Macchiavelli's play book.

The valued trait of the courtier, sprezzatura, was an agility of mind and social behavior, which enabled him to make his way among contending (and shrewdly observant) figures on the political scene. How does this figure differ from the Prince, Macchiavelli's central concern? Do the two characters intersect?

Was Macchiavelli's Prince expected to have mastered the arts and skills required of the socially adept? The Prince was, after all, a leader in the intra-state conflicts which preoccupied much of the state-building of pre-national community conflict in Italy in the early sixteenth century. He was not, however, trained in the social and cultural skills of which the courtier was an exemplar. The prince might have you skillfully poisoned, but he was not likely to have run you through with his rapier, or downed you in a sonnet-contest.

What was the level of erudition expected of the prince? Were both the courtier and the prince products of formal education, or were they simply parts of a classically formed 'intellectual' milieu? The answer will lie in a combination, and yet the education is part of the required persona. We may say the same, of course, for Michelangelo, whose self-education, tools and genius in hand, surpassed all the etiquettes of 'knowledge,' and yet had time to train him thoroughly in the niceties of the sonnet.

Are you not struck by the prominence of Italianate culture, as we discuss the formation of a modern mind in the West? Is it just the luck of the text choices we have made? (Luck cannot be disregarded, in the selection of materials for a proving ground like the present anthology. Add in the chance of the position from which the writer is working, even the accident of the texts available to that writer; there you have the unforeseeable product of an exercise in thought. In the present instance 'luck' in formation is also checked by an historical state of affairs, that Italian culture, arguably still close to its Roman origins, had a vigorously ancient underpinning, from which to 'become modern.' The transition of the Middle Ages had in Italy less readjustment to make than in France, or of course in Germany, where there was little to build on, from the remains of an antiquity never really part of the German perspective.

Michelangelo, Sir Thomas More, Castiglione born within three years of one another, entering culture history at three widely differing points—as a polyvalent genius in the visual arts; as a statesman/social critic; as a critic of his contemporary society, in terms of one of its prominent cultural types, the courtier. Two Italians and an Englishman. The tapestry of unfolding cultural history is like the tight green cloth of the billiard room, across which the cue scatters the multiple and disparate energies of the billiard balls, the diverse individuals who by nudging, slamming, and tickling their fellow contemporaries, mobilize the kaleidoscope of disengaging and mutually impinging fellows. The modern mind, being established throughout this process, will find itself, by the fulness of the Renaissance, variegated and enriched, no longer the superstition susceptible and unscientific ground of, say, Ficino or Pico.

What does the growing modernity of society mean to you? Has modernity a single meaning? Is it measurable in terms of a new practicality, as we see it in Erasmus or More, a new self-awareness, as we see it already in Macchiavelli or Castiglione, or a daringly powerful new sense of body, as we see it in Michelangelo? All of these questions coagulate around the sense of 'progress,' which will in a couple of centuries—cf. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*—be a reigning doctrine in Western academic circles. Will this set of developments, this gradual movement toward the 'modern,' survive into our own time? Is the notion of the 'modern' already now past its prime? Would we still christen a hallowed art treasure by enshrining it in The Museum of Modern Art, or refer, as to a self-evident part of our intellectual landscape,

to the University Department of Modern History? If not, what kinds of nomenclature would more fittingly apply to the ultra new in culture? Would whatever terminology we settle for need now to include a reference to the Age of Technology?