

Castiglione's *The Courtier*

Castiglione's work was admired by Elizabethan writers because of its humanistic echoes, its definitions of goodness, beauty, and perfect love, and its outline of what the ideal courtier, soldier, and scholar should look like. While Castiglione's work seems to owe something to Andreas Capellanus' *Art of Courtly Love*, it is marked throughout by humanist Renaissance principles.

Castiglione's work is an example of a genre known as a "courtesy book" (so called since

it taught how the ideal courtier behaved, in a "courtly" or "courteous" manner).

Castiglione provided the nobles of the court of Elizabeth with a guide and conduct book which emphasized the importance to the courtier of displaying sprezzatura, easy grace in all he says or does, underscoring the importance of role-playing and pleasing the prince. The book also declared (admitting the conflict) that the chief function of the courtier is to give good and honest advice to the prince.

Castiglione, in his discussion on beauty and goodness anticipates the Elizabethan valuation of the proper use of human ingenuity (artfulness) as being to enhance nature. Another vital concern for the Elizabethans was the concern with models to transform and, if possible, to surpass. Norton Anthology of English Literature

Castiglione's defense of women is somewhat surprising, but it would give Elizabethans insight into how to praise Elizabeth. Even Castiglione's praise of the ideal love could serve as a model of "high style" for Renaissance writers, a style that uses apostrophe, balanced sentences (periods), metaphor, personification, alliteration, balance.

The greatest writers of the Renaissance in England were influenced by Castiglione: Spenser's *Hymns*, Shakespeare's sonnets and plays, and Milton's *Lycidas*. In particular, *Hamlet* is the courtier. He believed that Beauty and Goodness were one. He has physical strength, courage, and comeliness, he is a scholar given to the classics. He is a master of retort and can twist words however he wants; he is a passionate friend. He dresses his part. He is a musician. His celebration of man the masterpiece finds comparison with Castiglione's "Think now of the shape of a man." In particular, Hamlet has sprezzatura, "Castiglione's hallmark of gentility."

Nota Bene: the whole discussion on beauty and truth is Platonic.



Excerpts from *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldesar Castiglione

I, 15: "Here, without waiting longer, my lord Gaspar Pallavicino said: "In order that our game may have the form prescribed, and that we may not seem to slight the privilege given us to contradict. I say that this nobility of birth does not appear to me so essential in the Courtier; and if I thought I were say what was new to any of us, I should cite instances of many men born of the noblest blood who have been full of vices; and on the other hand, of many men among the humbly born who by their virtue have made their posterity illustrious. And if what you just said be true, namely that there is in everything this occult influence of the original seed, then we should all be in the same case, because we had the same origin, nor would any man be more noble than another...."

I, 26:"But before now often considered whence this grace springs, laying aside those men who have it by nature, I find one universal rule concerning it, which seems to me worth more in this matter than any other in all things human that are done or said: and that is to avoid affectation to the uttermost and as it were a very sharp and dangerous rock; and, to use possibly a new word, to practise in everything a certain nonchalance [*sprezzatura*] that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought. From this I believe grace is in large measure derived, because everyone knows the difficulty of those things that are rare and done well, and therefore facility in them excites the highest admiration; while on the other hand, to stive and as the saying is to drag by the hair, is extremely ungraceful, and makes us esteem eveything slightly, however great it be."

"Accordingly we may affirm that to be true art which does not appear to be art; nor to anything must we give greater care than to conceal art, for it is discovered, it quite destroys our credit and brings us into small esteem...."

I, 28: "Thus this excellence, which is the opposite of affectation and which for the present we call nonchalance, besides being the true fountain from which grace springs, carries

with it another ornament, which, in accompanying any human action whatever and however trifling it be, not only at once reveals the knowledge of him who performs it, but often leads us to reate his knowledge as much greater than in fact it is; because it impresses upon the minds of the bystanders the idea that he who does well so easily, knows much more than he does, and that if he were to use care and effort in what he did, he could do it far better....

“Often too in painting, a single line not laboured, a single brushstroke easily drawn, so that it seems as if the hand moves unbidden to its aim according to the painter's wish, without being guided by care or any skill, clearly reveals the excellence of the craftsman, which every man appreciates according to his capacity for judging....

I, 49: "Before we enter upon that subject, I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore think our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting...

"... for I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honorable and necessary thing, and it was admitted to the first rank of liberal arts; while by public edict they forbade that it be taught to slaves. Among the Romans too, it was held in highest honour, and the very noble family of the Fabii took their name from it; for the first Fabius was given the name *Pictor*, because, --being indeed a most excellent painter, and so devoted to painting that when he painted the wall of the temple of Health, -- he inscribed his name thereon; for although he was born of a family thus renowned and honoured with so many consular titles, triumphs and other dignities, and although he was a man of letters and learned in the law, and numbered among the orators, --yet he thought to add splendour and ornament to his fame by leaving a memorial that he had been a painter.”

52.- "Therefore painting seems to me nobler and more susceptible of skill, than sculpture. And I think that it, like other things, reached the summit of excellence among the ancients: which still is seen in the few slight remains that are left, especially in the grottoes of Rome; but much more clearly may it be perceived in the ancient authors, wherein is such honoured and frequent mention both of works and of masters, and whereby we learn how highly they were always honoured by great lords and commonwealths.”