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Castiglione, Baldassare



Born: 6 December 1478, Casatico, Near Mantua

Died: 8 February 1529, Toledo

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Abstract

Baldassare Castiglione, an Italian courtier and diplomat for the dukes of Urbino and for the Roman Curia, is the author of *The Book of the Courtier* (*Il libro del cortegiano*), a courtesy book examining social interaction between gentleman, ladies, and their rulers. It was published in 1528 to immediate international acclaim.

Biography

Castiglione was born in the Margravate of Mantua; via his mother he was related to a lesser branch of the Gonzaga family. When he was a teen, he was sent to Milan, where he received a humanistic education. Back in Mantua, he entered the service of the Marquis, but in 1504 he transferred to the Montefeltro court of Urbino, a vibrant epicenter of Renaissance culture, where he stayed until 1513, befriending among others, Pietro Bembo, Bernardo Bibbiena, and Raphael, who famously painted his portrait (Fig. 1). He carried

out important diplomatic missions (e.g., to England in 1506) and became Urbino's ambassador in Rome. Made a widower in 1520, he took minor orders and entered the service of the Roman Curia: in 1525 he was posted as a papal nuncio at the court of Emperor Charles V in Spain, where he remained till his death, facing sharp criticism about his failure to prevent the Sack of Rome. His diplomatic career is typical of how the Italian nobility was trying to cope with the rapid erosion of the peninsula's political clout by choosing career paths that lead to Rome, the only political center deemed capable of exerting a European influence.

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

Set at the court of Urbino, during four evenings in the spring of 1507, *The Book of the Courtier* discusses the qualities of the ideal courtier in dialogue form, closely imitating Cicero's *De Oratore*, whose interlocutors are well-known contemporary orators (Castiglione 2002, 2016a). Likewise, Castiglione's characters are exemplary courtiers and ladies who live at the court in Urbino: this courtesy book is as much trying to teach courtly behavior through the content of the discussions as through dialogic form itself: a witty, lively display, sometimes heated, but never aggressive nor pedantic, and always tending toward agreement (Cox 2008). Whereas topics such as the use of vernacular language and the virtue of women provoke intense debate with

Castiglione, Baldassare,
Fig. 1 Raphael, born
 Raffaello Sanzio
 (1483–1520), *Portrait of
 Baldassare Castiglione*,
 1514–1515, Oil on canvas,
 82cm × 67 cm, Paris,
 musée du Louvre (Inv 611).
 Photo (C) RMN-Grand
 Palais (musée du Louvre) /
 Daniel Arnaudet



rapid turn-taking, the qualities of the courtier and his lady, the nature of grace, and the service to the prince are presented in continuous speech, which contains entertaining examples and is occasionally interrupted by questions, comments, and objections. The dialogue culminates in Pietro Bembo's passionate monologue in defense of Neoplatonic love. Castiglione's dialogue, thus, can be read as an exemplary performance of conversational rhetoric (*sermo*).

Innovative and Original Aspects

The ideal courtier is virtuous but at the same time perfectly in control of his performance at court, pursuing both ethical and aesthetical aspirations. The most innovative aspect of the *courtier* is that perfect behavior is situated at the crossroads of rhetoric and practical ethics. A reader of both

Cicero's *De Oratore* and *De Officiis*, Castiglione firmly grounds the courtier's central quality, gracefulness (*grazia*), in decorum, i.e. the capacity to discern (*discernere*) – with judiciousness (*giudicio*, *discrezione*) – every single circumstance and to choose – with prudence (*prudenza*) – the most appropriate behavior (Saccone 1992). Appropriateness, or measure, is effectively an art to achieve grace for those who are born without it; however, to convince peers and prince alike of his true nobility, the courtier needs to hide the art behind grace: *sprezzatura* or effortlessness, the art of dissembling one's efforts, is rooted in the rhetorical figure of dissimulation and is ultimately the art to persuade the audience of one's innate nobility (Whigham 1984; Snyder 2009). The *Courtier's* fortunes as a courtesy book are probably linked to the presence of this encompassing rule, an adaptable tool to navigate complex life at court.

Impact and Legacy

Taking 15 years to complete *the Courtier*, Castiglione produces three full manuscripts (Motta 2003). The publication was eagerly anticipated, and unauthorized copies had started to circulate, prompting the author to a hasty final revision. The book was published in 1528 by the most prestigious publishers of the time: the Aldine press in Venice and, a year later, the Giunti of Florence (Quondam 2000) (Fig. 1). The text became a European bestseller, with as many as 115 publications and translations even before 1600 (Burke 1995). It was very quickly translated into Spanish (1534) and into French (1537), with other languages following soon after: Latin and English (1561) and German (1565). Castiglione's *Courtier* became the ultimate conduct book for court life during the ancien régime, a blueprint for its aristocratic role models such as the gentleman and the *honnête homme*. Castiglione also leaves an impressive body of just under 2000 letters, consisting of familiar and diplomatic letters, an important testament of the conversational spirit of Renaissance court life (Castiglione 2016b).

Cross-References

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- ▶ [Honnête homme](#)
- ▶ [Pietro Bembo](#)
- ▶ [Sermo](#)
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