



The Book of the Courtier

Conte Baldassarre Castiglione

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Baldassare Castiglione (1478 – 1529), count of Casatico, was an Italian courtier, diplomat, soldier and a prominent Renaissance author, who is probably most famous for his authorship of "The Book of the Courtier." The work was an example of a courtesy book, dealing with questions of the etiquette and morality of the courtier, and was very influential in 16th century European court circles.

The book is organized as a series of fictional conversations that occur between the courtiers of the Duke of Urbino in 1507 (when Castiglione was in fact part of the Duke's Court). In the book, the courtier is described as having a cool mind, a good voice (with beautiful, elegant and brave words) along with proper bearing and gestures. At the same time though, the courtier is expected to have a warrior spirit, to be athletic, and have good knowledge of the humanities, Classics and fine arts. Over the course of four evenings, members of the court try to describe the perfect gentleman of the court. In the process they debate the nature of nobility, humor, women, and love.

The Book of the Courtier was one of the most widely distributed books of the 16th century, with editions printed in six languages and in twenty European centers.

According to the Count, sprezzatura is amongst one of the most important, if not the most important, rhetorical device the courtier needs. Sprezzatura in The Book of the Courtier is “nonchalance”, “careful negligence”, and “effortless and ease.” The ideal courtier is someone who “conceals art, and presents what is done and said as if it was done without effort and virtually without thought.”

The aim of Castiglione's ideal Renaissance gentleman was not self-cultivation for its own sake but in order to participate in an active life of public service, as recommended by Cicero. To do this he had to win the respect and friendship of his peers and most importantly of a ruler, or prince, i.e., he had to be a courtier, so as to be able to offer valuable assistance and disinterested advice on how to rule the city. He must be a worthy friend, accomplished—in sports, in telling jokes, in fighting, writing poetry, playing music, drawing, and dancing—but not too much. To his moral elegance (his personal goodness) must be added the spiritual elegance conferred by familiarity with good literature (i.e., the humanities, including history). Furthermore, he must excel in all he does without apparent effort and make everything look easy and natural. In a famous passage, Castiglione's friend Lodovico da Canossa, whose views arguably represent Castiglione's own, explains "the mysterious source of courtly gracefulness, the quality which makes the courtier seem a natural nobleman."

This edition was translated from the Italian by Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (1858–1914).

This edition originally published in 1903; reformatted for the Kindle; may contain an occasional imperfection; original spellings have been kept in place.'

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