The Fortunes of the Courtier

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The European Reception of Castiglione’s Cortegiano

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Since I first read it in the late 1950s, Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, or *Courtier*, has been one of my favourite books. I read it then, as an Oxford student taking a Special Subject on the Italian Renaissance, in a historicist manner as a text which represented that movement. It is doubtless for that reason that the dialogue has been so often reprinted and translated in the last century or so, in Italy from the 1880s and in the English-speaking world from 1900, where it has appeared in the form of an Everyman, a Doubleday Anchor Book and a Penguin Classic.

During the Renaissance itself, on the other hand, the book was read for very different reasons. It was treated as a guide to contemporary conduct, not to the values of a past age. If modern readers tend to annotate the passages on graceful behaviour or the 'universal man', sixteenth-century readers often marked the jokes or the instructions on riding. The distance between the two kinds of reading has come to appear more and more fascinating. To understand, if not to close, the gap between the historicist and the pragmatic readings is my intention here, an intention complicated by the fact that the *Courtier* has long been interpreted in a variety of ways. It has been criticized as too cynical by innocents and as too innocent by cynics. It has been viewed as both idealistic and pragmatic, serious and frivolous. Whereas the text itself has been studied very carefully in recent years – indeed, it has almost been buried under a mass of commentaries – its readers have so far
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received much less attention. In this essay, on the other hand, they will occupy the foreground.

I have written primarily for people who already know and love the Courtier and would like to know more about its context, but I have done my best to make it intelligible to readers for whom Castiglione is little more than a name, in the hope that they will be attracted to his book. Since the text has been published in so many editions, it will be cited not by pages but by book and chapter (following the numbering of chapters in the 1884 edition, which has now become canonical). The Greek and Latin classics will be cited in a similar way. Unless otherwise stated, translations into English are my own, and spelling has been modernized in quotations, except for the name of Count Baldassare himself, which occurs in so many picturesque variations in the period. The portraits of Castiglione have been included not only as decorations but also as a visual parallel to the reception of the text.

In writing a study such as this, which sets out to explore the reactions and responses to a single book by readers scattered over a considerable part of the globe, the author has naturally accumulated many debts, which it would be extremely discourteous not to acknowledge. Derek Brewer scrutinized chapter 2 with the keen eye of a specialist in medieval literature, while Virginia Cox made constructive criticisms of the chapters on Italy. For advice, references, off-prints, books and other assistance I am indebted to Jim Amelang; Catherine Bates; Donna Bohanan; Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke; Richard Bushman; Daniele Fiorentino; Teodoro Hampe; Frieda Heijkoop; Manfred Hinz; Harald Ilsøe; Marc Jacobs; Kurt Johannesson; Bent Juel-Jensen; Gábor Klanczy; the late Tibor Klanczy; Dilwyn Knox; Thomas Krogh; Jirí Kropácek; J. M. Laspéras; Elizabeth Leedham-Green; Antoni Mączak; Brian McGuinness; Carmela Nocera; Stephen Orgel; Herman Roedeburg; Elena Santiago; David R. Smith; John Stevens; György E. Szönyi; Dora Thornton; Dalibor Vesely; John Woodhouse; and the librarians of five Cambridge colleges – Emmanuel, Jesus, King’s, St Catharine’s and Trinity. My hearty thanks to them all.

I am also grateful to the Getty Center at Los Angeles for having offered me the opportunity to write the book there, even though I was unable to accept the offer. I should have loved to have been able to discuss this essay with Sir John Hale, who encouraged my
entry into the field of Renaissance studies, and about whom one of my students once remarked that she understood the *Courtier* better by watching him light a cigarette than by any number of lectures.

This essay grew out of a talk delivered in various forms in Budapest, Cambridge, Canberra, Clermont-Ferrand, Constance, Edinburgh, Gothenburg, London, New Haven, Oslo, Oxford, Paris, Princeton, Warwick and Wolfenbüttel. It is appropriate that a study of dialogue should have developed in the course of dialogue, and that a book about responses to Castiglione should itself owe a great deal to the constructive responses of these diverse audiences. It is dedicated to the person who most influences my own behaviour, my wife Maria Lúcia.
Abbreviations

BL     British Library
BLO    Bodleian Library, Oxford
BNM    Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid
BNP    Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
DBI    *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 43 vols, in progress, Rome, 1960–
TCC    Trinity College, Cambridge
UL     University Library, Cambridge
I

Tradition and Reception

In the dedication to the translation of the book which he published in 1724, Robert Samber wrote that 'The Courtier was too great to be confined within the narrow limits of Italy... nor was it sufficient that he was read, loved and admired by the most celebrated courts in the Universe, unless, in order to become more familiar to them, they might dress him in the habit proper to each country.' In similar fashion the political theorist Sir Ernest Barker once remarked that 'it would be a fascinating study to examine comparatively the different national tinctures' to Castiglione's ideal.¹

This essay is an attempt to respond to these challenges. Its primary aim is to reconstruct the local and personal meanings of an international movement, thus putting bibliographical and sociological minutiae to use in answering broad general questions. I shall be emphasizing the elements in Castiglione's text which appealed to readers most widely or for the longest time, notably the discussion of grace and sprezzatura, while attempting to avoid reducing the many-sidedness of the dialogue, in the manner of some of its sixteenth-century editors, to a few simple propositions.

The period on which the book concentrates is essentially the first century after the Courtier was published in 1528, although the concluding chapters will discuss references to the text in later

¹ Barker (1948), 143. It is not clear whether he was aware of earlier studies in this field; Toldo (1900); Schrinner (1939); Krebs (1940–2).
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periods. The area with which I am concerned is essentially Europe, despite occasional references to readers further afield, from India to the Americas. My strategy has been to concentrate on readers outside Italy, because the greater the cultural distance from the author’s milieu, the more clearly the process of active reception is revealed. Although this was not the original intention, I have found myself paying particular attention to Castiglione’s reception in England, and hope that the close examination of a single culture, more or less from within, will compensate for the dangers inherent in any broad international survey.

The breadth is necessary because I hope to make a small contribution to the understanding of the ‘Europeanization of Europe’, in other words the gradual integration of European culture over the centuries. I shall therefore try to look beyond the Courtier, using the text as a case-study to explore three broader topics: the reception of the Renaissance outside Italy, the history of the book, and the history of value-systems.

The Reception of the Renaissance

From the time of Jacob Burckhardt’s Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860), if not before, historians have been studying this period as a time of changing attitudes to the self and to others. Burckhardt characterized the new trend as ‘the development of the individual’, noting both the rivalry and the self-consciousness of the artists and writers of the period, as revealed, for example, in their self-portraits and autobiographies.

More recently, the emphasis has changed. In the wake of studies such as Erving Goffman’s on what he called ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’, leading figures of the Renaissance such as the emperor Maximilian and Thomas More have been studied from the point of view of their self-presentation, ‘self-fashioning’ or Selbststilisierung. These studies of major figures provoke the question whether or not their lead was widely followed at the time. Castiglione’s dialogue looks very much like a guide to self-

3 Burckhardt (1860); Goffman (1956); Burger (1963); Greenblatt (1980).
fashioning, so it may be of interest to examine responses to it in the Renaissance, not only in Italy but also abroad.

This point about responses has wider implications. Traditional accounts of the diffusion of the Renaissance have often presented it as a triumphal progress through Europe in which one country after another succumbed to the spell of Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Pico della Mirandola, Ariosto, Machiavelli and other leading artists, writers and thinkers.4

There are two basic weaknesses in accounts of this type. The first is the assumption that Italians alone were active and creative at this time, while other Europeans were passive, mere recipients of 'influence', an originally astrological term which has often been employed rather uncritically by intellectual historians.5 The interest shown by some fifteenth-century Italians in paintings from the Netherlands shows that they at least noticed the originality of foreign artists.

The second weakness in the conventional story of the diffusion of the Renaissance is to identify what was 'received' with what was 'given'. Although the term 'tradition' originally meant 'handing down', it is difficult to deny that changes often occur in the course of transmitting concepts, practices and values. Traditions are constantly transformed, reinterpreted or reconstructed – whether this reconstruction is conscious or unconscious – to fit their new spatial or temporal environments. The classical tradition, for example, was reconstructed in this way in the Middle Ages. Homeric heroes such as Achilles were transformed into knights, the poet Vergil was turned into a necromancer, Jupiter (on occasion) into a scholar, Mercury into a bishop, and so on.6

If we shift our focus from traditions to individuals, we will often find them practising a form of bricolage, in other words selecting from the culture surrounding them whatever they find attractive, relevant or useful, and assimilating it (consciously or unconsciously) to what they already possess. Some individuals are more attracted by the exotic than others, but all domesticate their discoveries by a process of reinterpretation and recontextualization.

4 Burke (1987).
6 Warburg (1932); Seznec (1940).
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In other words, readers, listeners and viewers are active appropriators and adapters rather than passive receivers.\(^7\)

It should be added that the appropriation they practise is not random but has a logic of its own. This logic of appropriation is often shared by a social group, which may therefore be described as an ‘interpretive community’, or on occasion as a ‘textual community’ in which a book is used as a guide to the group’s thought and action.\(^8\) Such notions of community can be misleading, but all the same it is difficult to do without them. They are dangerous insofar as they lead us to forget or minimize individual differences of opinion, but they remain indispensable in reminding us of what is shared.

This constant process of reinterpretation and recontextualization in one sense erodes tradition, but in another sense maintains it by ensuring that it continues to meet the needs of different groups. If for some reason this process of gradual reinterpretation is impeded, a pressure for more radical change or ‘reform’ may build up. The cultural movement we call the ‘Reformation’, for instance, is a dramatic instance of a radical reinterpretation of a Christian tradition.

It follows from the argument presented in the previous paragraphs – an argument which to support adequately would require a book much longer than this one – that the conventional distinction between ‘invention’ and ‘diffusion’ should be viewed as a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind. Invention itself is best seen as a process of creative adaptation – the printing press an adaptation of the wine press, the novel as an adaptation of the epic, and so on.

In the case of the Renaissance, it may therefore be useful to abandon the idea of a simple ‘influence’ or ‘spread’ of new ideas and images from Florence outwards, and to ask instead what the ‘uses’ of Italy may have been for writers, scholars and artists in other parts of Europe, what was the logic of their appropriations, and why and how far new Italian forms or ideas were assimilated into everyday life and into indigenous traditions, from Gothic architecture to scholastic philosophy. To answer all these ques-

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7 De Certeau (1980); Chartier (1987).
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It is necessary to study the ways in which the recipients interpreted what they saw, heard or read. We have to pay attention to their perceptual 'schemata'. We have to concern ourselves with what literary theorists have come to call their 'horizons of expectation'.

In short, cultural historians have something to gain by assimilating the still somewhat exotic notion of 'reception', using it to modify the traditional idea of tradition. In fact, the word, if not the notion, should not sound too unfamiliar to students of the Renaissance, since the term Rezeption first came into use to describe the spread of humanism and Roman law in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. In any case, the Renaissance debate on the nature of literary imitation (below, pp. 81–2) was concerned with one of the central issues in reception theory, that of the compatibility between tradition and innovation.

The study of the reception of texts raises some large problems. An ordinary working historian would be ill-advised to take sides in current controversies in the field of literary theory, and especially to pronounce on the ultimately metaphysical question whether the true or essential meaning of a text resides in the mind of the creator, in the work itself (which gradually reveals its meaning in the course of time) or in the responses of its readers. All the same, there can be little doubt of the relevance of reception theory (concerned as it is with a temporal process), to the work of cultural historians in general and in particular to historians of the book.

The History of the Book

As a self-conscious approach to cultural history, the history of the book was developed in France in the 1960s, although, as often happens, the approach existed long before it was baptized. Two examples from the year 1910 should remind us that the present generation of historians was far from the first to be interested in this subject. Daniel Mornet made a quantitative study of the

9 Warburg (1932); Gombrich (1960).
10 Gadamer (1960); Jauss (1974).
11 Jauss (1974); Fish (1980).
contents of 500 French libraries between 1750 and 1780, while Caroline Ruutz-Rees focused attention on the marginal annotations of a single Elizabethan reader, Gabriel Harvey, a name which will recur in these pages.\textsuperscript{12}

Students of Machiavelli in particular have long been concerned with the variety of responses to his work inside and outside Italy, in England, France, Spain and elsewhere. They have paid particular attention to hostile responses to his notorious \textit{Prince}, the banning and burning of the book, for example, and the denunciation of its author as a villain and an 'atheist'. In some sixteenth-century contexts, so it turns out, Machiavelli was denounced not (or not only) for his own sake but as a symbol of Italian influence on England, France or Poland, or as an indirect way of attacking the ruler – Catherine de’ Medici, for example. Yet the condemnation of the author did not prevent more orthodox political theorists from adopting some of Machiavelli’s ideas, which they were careful to attribute to an ancient writer, Tacitus, rather than a modern one.\textsuperscript{13} Some foreign responses to the \textit{Courtier} followed the same model, as we shall see.

As these examples suggest, there are a number of possible approaches to the history of the book, varieties of cultural history which have attracted many scholars in the last decade or so.\textsuperscript{14} One of these approaches concentrates on editions, their geography and chronology and the modifications made to the original text by editors and publishers. Another focuses on translations, adaptations and imitations of the original text. A third approach involves the examination of particular copies for underlinings and marginalia which reveal the responses of individual readers.\textsuperscript{15} With the rise of the history of reception, it was recently remarked, marginalia have become central.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, there is the study of library catalogues, auction catalogues, inventories and lists of subscribers in order to discover what kinds of people were interested in a particular book. All four methods will be utilized at

\textsuperscript{12} Mornet (1910); Ruutz-Rees (1910).
\textsuperscript{13} Toffanin (1921); Meinecke (1924); Bleznick (1958); Malarczyk (1962); Raab (1964); Procacci (1965); Thuau (1966).
\textsuperscript{14} Darnton (1986); McKenzie (1986); Chartier (1987).
\textsuperscript{15} Leonard (1949); Brunner (1956); Chevalier (1976); Jardine and Grafton (1990).
\textsuperscript{16} Jackson (1992–3).
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some point in this essay. They all help to bridge the gap between the great books of the past and the ‘mentality’ – the habits of thought or unspoken assumptions – of their period.

I have tried to take the last approach a little further than usual by means of a prosopography or collective biography of 328 presumed readers of the Courtier in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, readers who are listed in appendix 2. Since reference will be made to this list on more than one occasion, the problems raised by this approach must be discussed, however briefly.

As is usually the case in the history of reading, the sources – inventories of libraries, for example – have more to tell us about owners than about readers. It cannot be assumed that every owner of a given book had actually read it. Eight names in the list are those of booksellers. To make matters worse, the best-documented libraries are generally the larger ones, and as some readers will know all too well, the larger the library, the lower the probability that the owner is familiar with all its contents. The Danish professor Peder Scavenius, for instance, who will be discussed in chapter 8, owned not only a first edition of the Courtier but about 6,000 other books. The Colbert family, notably the famous Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV’s minister, and his son the marquis de Seignelay, owned more than 18,000 books, thus reducing the significance of the copy of the Courtier in Italian to be found among them.

Some of the owners to be discussed below will have inherited their libraries rather than built them up for themselves. James VI and I may have been as interested in the Courtier as his mother Mary Queen of Scots, but I doubt whether very much should be made of the fact that Castiglione was present in the library of the English lawyer Sir Edward Coke, given that most of his Italian books had come from the collection of the courtier Sir Christopher Hatton. The same goes for a seventeenth-century priest from Besançon, Jean-Baptiste Boisot, who had acquired the library of Cardinal Granvelle. 17

Despite these problems, it is possible to reach a few conclusions. One of the most interesting points to emerge from this research, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 8, is the importance of

17 Mornet (1910), 452; Hassall (1950); Jolly (1988–92), vol. II, 469.
networks of readers, friends and acquaintances who pass the text on to one another. In other words, although in the long term print helped to diminish the role of face-to-face groups in the diffusion of information, such groups still influenced—as they surely continue to influence—the choice of books to be read and even, perhaps, the way in which their messages are perceived and interpreted. Two examples make this point particularly clear. Discussions of the perfect courtier inspired by the book are recorded by the Lombard writer Matteo Bandello and by the Englishman Thomas Nashe. We have moved from Castiglione’s representation of a discussion to the discussion of a representation (itself in turn represented in print).18 These examples, together with the networks of readers discussed in chapter 8, remind us that a system of oral communication underlay the circulation of printed texts.

Before we study the after-life of the Courtier, however, it will be useful to examine the courtier before the Courtier, since the book emerged from, as well as helping to form, what is often called a ‘discourse’, a larger as well as a vaguer unit than the propositions or ideas on which intellectual historians used to concentrate their attention.19 A discourse may be described as an ensemble of ideas or propositions, more than a random grouping but less than a logical system. The particular discourse, or series of discourses, which will be studied in the following section was concerned with behaviour in society.

The History of Systems of Values

Historians of culture have often emphasized the importance of the study of ‘ideals of life’, as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga called them, or ‘cultural patterns’, ‘systems of values’, or the ‘social imaginary’, to use the more recent formulations of Georges Duby and other French scholars.20 It should be noted that ‘values’ is a broader term than ‘morals’. It is not confined to rules which are supposed to be morally binding but extends to social rules or matters of taste.

18 Bandello (1554), book II, no. 57; Nashe (1589), dedication.
20 Huizinga (1915); Duby (1968, 1972, 1978).
The *Courtier* is one of a series of famous descriptions or codifications of such values to be found in the works of western writers from ancient Greece onwards. As such, it figures, though perhaps not as prominently as it should, in the famous account of the 'civilizing process' by the sociologist Norbert Elias, who devoted two substantial volumes to describing and explaining the rise of self-control in the West.\(^{21}\) Like other conduct-books, Castiglione's dialogue can be studied as a kind of litmus paper which reveals past ideals of life, on condition that attention is paid to the manner in which readers interpreted and responded to the texts.

To trace the history of European ideals of life in the space of no more than a few pages, it will be necessary to focus on keywords, whether they are best viewed as what a literary scholar once described as 'fashion words' (*Modeworte*) or as what the historian Reinhard Koselleck calls 'fundamental concepts' (*Grundbegriffe*).\(^{22}\) Such words are generally difficult if not impossible to translate, and this may be no accident. As a leading contemporary novelist with personal experience of two cultures advises his readers, 'To unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words.'\(^{23}\)

In ancient Greece, one of these untranslatable words was *areté*, more or less 'excellence'. The *areté* of a horse was to run swiftly, while that of a man was to be brave, to be respected, to love honour. The man with most *areté* was *aristos*, from which derives 'aristocracy', literally 'the rule of the best', in practice the rule of a hereditary nobility. This ideal of excellence was exemplified by Achilles and the other heroes of Homer's *Iliad*, and the poem was in turn treated as exemplary. Homer was considered the educator of Greece, and the *Iliad* was studied in schools in ancient Greece and Rome precisely for the sake of the values it was believed to inculcate in the young.\(^{24}\) When Ottaviano Fregoso, a speaker in the *Courtier*, claims that Homer described Achilles as an exemplary hero (4.47), he was standing in a long tradition.

\(^{21}\) Elias (1939).
\(^{22}\) Williams (1976); Weise (1936); Koselleck (1972); Brunner et al. (1972–90).
\(^{23}\) Rushdie (1983), 140.
Hundreds of years later, in the fourth century BC, the philosopher Aristotle stated his ideals in his *Ethics*, or rather the ideals of his time, since he claimed to keep close to generally received opinions on these matters. The kinship between the ideal of magnanimity (*megalopsychia*) described in Aristotle and the behaviour of Achilles (say) or Hector will be obvious enough. Aristotle's magnanimous or great-minded man shows a pride in his superiority over others. He is brave and he is liberal. Indeed, he practices 'magnificence' (*megaloprepeia*), defined as the appropriate expenditure of large sums of money. Leaving the high ground of philosophy for a moment, Aristotle also tells us that a great-minded man maintains his dignity by walking slowly and speaking in a low voice.

On the other hand, Aristotle's stress on *phronesis* ('prudence' or 'practical intelligence') and self-control (*sophrosyne*, traditionally translated as 'temperance'), has more in common with Odysseus than with Achilles, while his emphasis on the doctrine of the golden mean is distinctly unhomeric. Courage is defined as the mean between rashness and cowardice, liberality as the mean between extravagance and parsimony, and so on. Aristotle was attempting to achieve an equilibrium between opposing forces within an ethical tradition already riven by conflicts.

Another Greek text deserves to be mentioned here because of its importance for Castiglione (as indeed for Renaissance humanists in general). Xenophon's *Cyropædia* or 'Education of Cyrus' presented Cyrus, king of Persia, as an exemplar of royal and aristocratic virtues, notably self-control, modesty (*aidos*, more literally 'shame') and decorum (*eukosmia*). Cyrus is also said to have discouraged the Persian nobles from spitting or wiping their noses in public, and to have encouraged them to wear high shoes, make up their faces, and, above all, to spend their time in attendance at his court.

Despite their admiration for Greek culture, the patricians of the Roman Republic in the age of Cicero did not learn all their values from Homer. The ideal expressed in Cicero's book 'On Duties' (*De officiis*), a work of moral education addressed to his son and

25 Lloyd (1967), 206.
26 Aristotle (1926), 4.3.34.
27 Xenophon (1914); cf. Jaeger (1933-45), vol. III, 156-81.