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The book of the courtier by baldassare castiglione

© 1996-2014, Amazon.com, Inc. or its affiliates Your complimentary articles You've read one of your four complimentary articles for this month. You can read four articles free per month. To have complete access to the thousands of philosophy articles on this site, please On a chilly evening in early March 1507, high in the Apennine Mountains of northern Italy, a group of cultivated gentlemen and ladies sit around the fire in the audience chamber of the Duchess of Urbino discussing the qualities of the perfect courtier. Such is the setting of one of the most celebrated books of the Italian Renaissance, *The Book of the Courtier* (Il libro del cortegiano) by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), which was an international best-seller for a century after its first publication in 1528. The author, a minor nobleman from Mantua, was a humanistically-educated diplomat who served at the courts of northern Italy for most of his life, ending his career in Spain as Pope Clement VII's nuncio to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. However, notwithstanding the book's fame and its translation into all the major languages of Europe, there is little about *The Book of the Courtier* which at first glance would suggest philosophical seriousness, and certainly nothing to intimate that it contains a hard-headed political philosophy. None of its characters has the ruthless will-to-power of a Cesare Borgia, nor the icily unsentimental pragmatism of a Niccolò Machiavelli, both contemporaries of Castiglione. Instead, Castiglione's protagonists form what one eminent scholar has called a 'faintly effete community', and their discourse consists, for the most part, of light-hearted banter. The four nights of fictional dialogue Castiglione recounts display the ceremonial politeness of the Urbino courtiers, their easy familiarity with classical authors, their repeated outbreaks of laughter, and the apparent frivolity of some of the topics they discuss; but if the conversation happens to adopt a mildly philosophical tone, as it does when one speaker begins to use Socratic cross-examination with his interlocutor, or when two others start a debate involving Aristotelian concepts of matter and form, then a senior lady of the court typically intervenes, seeking (not always successfully) to cut the exchange short. Or at least this is the case for the first three nights. On the fourth night, the Duchess calls upon two of her courtiers to present their views on topics which will lead the discussion in a more philosophical direction. The first speaker, Ottaviano Fregoso, takes up the subject of the perfect courtier's highest aim or purpose - which involves him ethically training his prince; and the second speaker, Pietro Bembo, discusses the mature courtier's experience of love, which develops into an exposition of the ascent from earthly sensuality to divine contemplation reminiscent of Socrates' final speech in Plato's *Symposium* (c. 380 BC). These two discussions have often been criticised in ways which neutralise their philosophical significance. It was long held, for example, that the last night of the dialogues was an afterthought on Castiglione's part, and therefore did not form an organic whole with the previous three nights' discussions. Although this view is less often maintained today, it does show that many readers consider the final night to be thematically discrepant with the rest of the text, thus making it appear to be an appendix to the work rather than an integral conclusion to it. More importantly, the position Ottaviano Fregoso expounds regarding the perfect courtier's ethical mentorship of his prince has been dismissed as high-sounding but politically ineffective idealism, and Pietro Bembo's speech on love has likewise been dismissed as pure escapism, utterly unrelated to the realities of contemporary life in Renaissance Italy. On this reading, Castiglione's book is a work of no philosophical significance whatever. It presents three nights of discussion on courtly etiquette, and a fourth night of idealist rhetoric on topics which might make a contribution to superficial courtly conversation, but not to philosophical thought. Where an interpretation has sometimes found a more politically realistic undercurrent in Castiglione's writing, it has treated this aspect of his work as pragmatic career advice on survival and advancement at court, or as hinting that there are harsh political realities that lie outside the perfect courtier's role, but not, however, as a realistic political philosophy. Court scene by Andrea Mantegna, 1474 Castiglione's Veiled Philosophy Setting aside the above views, then, where do we find political philosophy in Castiglione's work? The answer is not straightforward, firstly because there is a large and usually unappreciated element of allegory in *The Book of the Courtier*. In addition, the work is written to address three different audiences simultaneously - the general literate public; ladies and gentlemen of the courts; and finally, a group of more 'judicious readers' as Castiglione calls them, who will penetrate beneath the veil of allegory. For such a judicious reader, the perfect courtier as Ottaviano describes him is more than just a moral guide for his prince: he also acts as a benevolent manipulator of the prince, and in extreme cases as a restraint on the prince's unjust actions toward his subjects, even to the point of working for the overt hrow of a prince who is incorrigibly unjust. On the surface Castiglione seems to present a virtue ethic, but only in an exhortatory sense (that is, he recommends that a prince should have an education in virtue), not in a philosophically developed way. Nevertheless, if we are attentive to Ottaviano's repeated invocation of the ancient analogy between the physician and the statesman - a comparison found the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, and many other classical philosophers - we discover that Castiglione is appropriating a well developed ethical system to guide his perfect courtier: the system of medical ethics derived both from Greco-Roman philosophy and from the moral tradition of Catholic casuistry. Castiglione then applies this medical ethical system to the ethics of statecraft by analogy. According to this system, for the physician's treatment of a patient to be ethical, the physician must have both the competence and the diligence to complete the action he undertakes; and the action in question must be one that will bring the patient more benefit than harm. Concerning statecraft, we see that in the case of a courtier acting to save his state from a corrupt tyrant, if these requirements had been routinely observed in Renaissance Italy, then many of the disasters that followed upon attempts to overthrow or assassinate tyrannical rulers would have been avoided: in most such instances the conspirators were captured, tortured and killed, while the ruler himself either resumed his rule with a harsher regime than before, or if assassinated, was replaced by an even more authoritarian tyrant. *The Book of the Courtier* provides, in veiled form, an ethical framework for the perfect courtier's interactions with his prince, including guidance for the extreme situation where a prince is so wicked that he cannot be expected to improve. If such a prince can be successfully removed without causing more harm than good to the state, then it is ethical for the perfect courtier to act toward this end. Otherwise, the courtier must simply turn his back on the wicked prince and seek a better prince elsewhere whom he can serve. There is one further question to be answered, however, which will bring us to the source of Castiglione's political philosophy, and that is: what authorises the perfect courtier to take on the role of a physician-like custodian of his state in the first place? To answer this question Castiglione relies on the ability of his judicious reader to recognise the multiple allusions in his text to Plato's dialogue *The Statesman*. In this Platonic dialogue the principal speakers agree that the true ruler must have a specific form of knowledge that enables him to judge rightly and command appropriately. A person who holds the office of ruler but lacks this knowledge is a ruler in name only; while a person who has this knowledge, even if he holds no office at all, is nevertheless entitled to rule. Crucially, for Plato's interlocutors, the sign that a person has the knowledge that entitles him to rule is the fact that he is able to advise a ruler correctly - and this is just the quality which defines the perfect courtier in Ottaviano's discourse. So while Castiglione is every bit as willing as Machiavelli to recommend forceful political action, even to the point of sanctioning the assassination of a ruler in extreme circumstances, he nevertheless does so within an intellectual context which Machiavelli abandons - that of classical political philosophy. Thus, under the veil of allegory, Castiglione's book sets out a coherent and realistic political philosophy drawn from classical sources. Moreover, its political philosophy is of interest for more than historical reasons, for it can be applied by anyone today who works closely with or acts as an advisor to a person with significant decision-making authority, and not just to the Renaissance courtier who undertakes to counsel his prince. Love Finally, let us look briefly at Pietro Bembo's discourse on love, which is the last major episode in *The Book of the Courtier*. As in Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, Bembo recommends ascending by a series of stages - sometimes known as 'the ladder of love' - from the contemplation of beauty in individual bodies to the contemplation of beauty in itself, or in religious terms, the contemplation of divine beauty. Critics have rightly observed that this speech advocates turning away from worldly concerns and devoting oneself entirely to contemplative meditation. What has rarely been noted, however, is that Bembo describes this ascending path as one that will be followed to the end only by very few. So although it is true that a person who has reached the later stages of the ascent could not be an effective political actor, it is also true that only a small number of people will ever reach this level. For someone at the middle of the ascent, however, the situation described by Bembo is quite different. Here the politically-active courtier achieves enough philosophical detachment to be free from the distractions of passionate love that characterise the initial stages of the ascent without having to abandon the affairs of the world, as those at the final stages must necessarily do. To be at the mid-point of Bembo's ascent, then, enhances the perfect courtier's political effectiveness rather than dissipating it. Conclusion Castiglione's aim of addressing three different audiences simultaneously in a single text explains why *The Book of the Courtier* has often been thought of as presenting a diversity of opinion without reaching any conclusions, or as little more than a conduct manual (which is indeed the way most of its early modern readers regarded it). But the light entertainment which Castiglione provided for his first audience, and the refined courtly rules of behaviour which he provided for his second, do not exhaust his work's meaning. They are in essence only the 'faintly effete' velvet glove within which he concealed the perfect courtier's more politically-effective hand - a hand which could, in extreme cases, even assume the features of a mailed fist. © Prof W.R. Albury 2015 Randall Albury is Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities at the University of New England, Australia, and is author of *Castiglione's Allegory: Veiled Policy in The Book of the Courtier* (Ashgate, 2014). • *The Book of the Courtier*, Baldassare Castiglione, 1528, is available in a number of translations.

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