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Structure and Meaning in *The Courtier*
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Structure and Meaning in The Courtier

BEMBO'S discourse on love at the end of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* has been much admired. It is one of the clearest and briefest as well as one of the most influential expressions of Renaissance Platonic love, and within *The Courtier* as a whole the passage stands out by virtue of its elevated intensity of thought and feeling. Beyond questions of influence and intrinsic beauty, however, lies the question of Bembo's function in relation to the rest of the work; and here there has been less unanimity of response. To many readers, Bembo's words, coming as they do with special emphasis in the closing moments, mark a climax and provide an appropriate and powerful conclusion to all that has gone before.¹ Other readers, however, have disagreed. Some, for example, have objected that the discussion of Platonic love lies outside the limits of the work's proper subject, courtiership, and therefore has the effect of destroying the focus of the discussions rather than of completing them. Still others, stressing the looseness and heterogeneity of *The Courtier's* overall structure, have contended that no final discourse, no matter how cogent or impassioned in itself, could tie together and properly conclude the varied themes that Castiglione introduces. And the most recent contribution to the debate argues that while Bembo's doctrines may provide a conclusion that is satisfying from a "dramatic" point of view, they are philosophically quite inadequate. According to this most recent view, *The Courtier* has no true philosophic conclusion because it has no philosophic development. Unlike Platonic dialogue which builds through constant "refinement and modi-

1. The popularity of this view among English-speaking readers is probably due to the influence of Sir Walter Raleigh's essay on *The Courtier*, first published as the introduction to the Tudor Translations' reprint of Hoby's version (London, 1900). See pp. lxvii-lxix.

fication" of its central ideas, the discussions of *The Courtier* are "linear" and in the end amount to little more than an accumulated "list" of the courtier's qualities. Platonic love is no conclusion, then; it is just the last item on the list.²

As the case now stands, the last and best word seems to belong to this latter point of view. The arguments that tend to disintegrate *The Courtier* by denying the philosophic appropriateness of its conclusion have never been met by any thoroughgoing demonstration of its structural integrity. Even the most extensive recent analyses of the book, which seem to take for granted that it does possess fundamental structural integrity, are fragmentary, deal at length with particular ideas or themes, but never rise to a comprehensive view except in the most general terms.³ The purpose of the present essay is to sketch the outlines of a new reading of *The Courtier* which will be both comprehensive and precise and which will describe the coherent development of its various parts, both philosophic and dramatic, towards their proper conclusion in Bembo's discourse. As I read it, *The Courtier* reveals Castiglione's close understanding and imitation of Platonic dialogue. Castiglione's aim is not to compile a mere list of courtly attributes, but rather to lead the reader gradually through "refinement and modification" of the earlier ideas of the courtier to the fullest possible understanding at the end. In its first three and a half books, *The Courtier* examines a number of views of courtiership, all of which finally expose their inadequacy. It is the thorough examination of all these flawed views, the progressive exploration of the problems inherent in them, that constitutes the structural design by which Castiglione leads us to recognize the necessity for Bembo's doctrines at the dialogue's conclusion.

The first view of courtiership comes to light at the beginning of the first book. Castiglione explains that he wrote *The Courtier* because a friend, Alfonso Ariosto, asked him to express his opinion about "the form of courtiership most befitting a gentleman living at the courts of princes, by which he is able and knows how to serve them perfectly in every reason-

2. For these attitudes towards Bembo's discourse see Raleigh, p. lxxviii; David Paul, "A Book of Behaviour," *Cornhill*, CLXI (1945), 474-78; and William Schenk, "The 'Cortegiano' and the Civilization of the Renaissance," *Scrutiny*, XVI (1949), 93-103. The "most recent contribution" is Lawrence Lipking's "The Dialectic of *Il Cortegiano*," *PMLA*, LXXXI (1966), 355-62.

3. I have in mind here especially Erich Loos' *Baldassare Castigliones "Libro del Cortegiano": Studien zur Tugendauffassung des Cinquecento* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1955), John S. White's *Renaissance Cavalier* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), and Giuseppe Toffanin's *Il "Cortegiano" nella Trattistica del Rinascimento* (Napoli, n.d.).

able thing, thereby acquiring grace from them and praise from others; in short what sort of man he ought to be who is worthy to be called a perfect courtier" (I.i).⁴ Castiglione's restatement of his friend's request focuses our attention at the very outset on the main concerns of courtly life—reasonable service and the acquisition of grace and praise—around which much of the discussion in *The Courtier* and its most serious issues in fact develop.⁵ Moreover, through his precise wording Castiglione makes Ariosto the spokesman within the work for a particular interpretation of those concerns, the spokesman for a particular view of the proper relationship between service and grace. By asking to learn how courtiers can serve princes "perfectly in every reasonable thing," Ariosto seems to imply that unreasonable service is of course incompatible with perfect courtiership; and the syntax connecting the clause "thereby acquiring . . . from others" to the rest of the sentence implies further that reasonable service will of course suffice to win the grace and praise that the courtier desires. Of the courtier's two main concerns, then, Ariosto's request implies that reasonable service must be primary; it merits attention for its own sake, and it is also the proper and sufficient means to acquire grace and praise.

Thus, Castiglione raises an expectation about the contents of his book. Since the book is addressed to Ariosto, and since he is described in its opening sentence as a "most dear" friend, one might expect that it would reflect his opinions, that it would express a rather high-minded and optimistic

4. "... la forma di cortegiania più conveniente a gentilomo che viva in corte de' principi, per la quale egli possa e sappia perfettamente loro servire in ogni cosa ragionevole, acquistandone da essi grazia e dagli altri laude; in somma, di che sorte debba esser colui, che meriti chiamarsi perfetto cortegiano." All book and section numbers from *The Courtier* refer to *Il Cortegiano, con una scelta delle Opere minori di Baldesar Castiglione*, ed. Bruno Maier (Torino: U.T.E.T., 1955). The translations are my own. Generally I have followed closely Charles S. Singleton's excellent version in modern English (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), but in some cases my analysis requires a greater literalness than he gives. For example, it is sometimes important for the reader of my essay to be assured that the key word "grazia" actually occurs in a given passage. Therefore I always translate "grazia" by the same English word—"grace"—whereas, for the sake of a more idiomatic and elegant English, consistent with his different purpose, Professor Singleton often varies his translation of "grazia."

5. The concept of "grace" is central in *The Courtier*, and its meaning for Castiglione has been frequently discussed (e.g., Edward Williamson, "The Concept of Grace in the Work of Raphael and Castiglione," *Italica*, xxiv [1947], 316–24, and Loos, pp. 117–19). To prevent possible misunderstanding in the discussion that follows, it may be useful to point out here that Castiglione generally uses the term in a nontheological way. Most commonly, "grace" refers to (1) the favor of princes (as in the request of Ariosto), or (2) a quality in the courtier (as when one speaks of a "graceful" bearing). Thus "grace" can come from without as well as from within a man; the courtier strives both to win "grace" from others and to be "graceful" in himself.

view of courtiership, stressing reasonable service as at once the only morally acceptable and the most effective course for the courtier to follow. More precisely, one might expect the bulk of the book to be devoted to discussions of reasonable service, to inquiry into the peculiar problems that face a man who seeks to be guided by reason through the complex social and political pressures of the courtly world. This expectation is soon disappointed, however; as the first book develops, the unproblematic relationship between reasonable service and the acquisition of grace and praise that Ariosto's request assumes is called into doubt, and attention consequently turns to other means of acquiring grace and praise. In the process, moreover, it becomes increasingly clear that for many of the courtiers in the dialogue the acquisition of grace and praise rather than reasonable service constitutes the primary concern of courtiership. And the inevitable effect of these two developments is that concern for reasonable service, although never entirely lost, fades into the background. Ariosto's high-minded and optimistic view of courtiership is replaced by a different, more realistic view.

It is in fact Castiglione himself, speaking in his own voice, who first raises doubts about Ariosto's view. Immediately after restating his friend's seminal request, Castiglione explains that he was at first reluctant to comply because he feared being thought rash by "all those who know how difficult it is, among so great a variety of customs as are practiced in the courts of Christendom, to choose the most perfect form and, as it were, the flower of courtiership." The variety of customs leads him to reflect on their power and finally to conclude rather pessimistically "that usage is more powerful than reason in introducing new things among us and in blotting out old things" (i.i). "Us" may no doubt be taken generally, to refer to all men, but more specifically, in the context, "us" means those who live at courts. Custom and usage, Castiglione would have us understand, are more powerful than reason in courts. We can hardly be as confident as Ariosto, then, that a courtier's reasonable service will surely be recognized and rewarded.

Thus, with a courtly kind of irony devoid of bluntness, Castiglione suggests that his friend's optimism about court life may be unjustified and naïve. Within the context of *The Courtier* as a whole, moreover, this suggestion is supported by a recurrent stress upon the irrationality and unpredictableness of life and especially of court life. This stress is not restricted to one character or to one part of the book; it is a pervasive theme coloring the attitudes of many characters and the discussions of every

major topic, encompassing references to broken promises and the perversity of human judgment, amorous folly and the harsh reality of politics, and summed up darkly in the many comments upon the malign power of time, Fortune, and death. Moreover, Ludovico da Canossa's admission that high birth and false reputation have enabled "dull witted and maladroit" courtiers to fool the courtiers of Urbino themselves "for many days" (I.xvi) indicates that even the court that Castiglione holds up as an example to the world is under the sway of irrational custom. We should not be surprised, then, that when Ludovico, to whom the task of describing the perfect courtier first falls, turns to the problem of acquiring grace and praise, his emphasis is not on reasonable service but on a technique of calling attention to oneself, a technique for insuring, in a world ruled by the prejudices of custom and usage, that one's services will be recognized. This technique Ludovico sums up in a "new word": *sprezzatura*. To win grace and praise, one must

use in everything a certain *sprezzatura* which hides art and makes whatever is done and said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. From this, I believe, comes much grace: because everyone knows the difficulty of things that are rare and well done; wherefore facility in these things causes the greatest wonder; and, on the other hand, to labor and, as they say, to drag forth by the hair of the head causes the greatest disgrace and makes everything to be esteemed lightly, no matter how great it may be. (I.xxvi)

Ludovico's doctrine of *sprezzatura*, his "new word" about how to acquire grace, is based squarely on the cynical assumption that those whose judgment the courtier values, especially princes, are more likely to be impressed by the manner of a courtier's service than by its reasonableness. Great deeds will not be admired if the courtier is observed to work too hard at accomplishing them, while the appearance of facility in a difficult achievement will cause it to be considered of more worth than the same achievement without the show of facility. Taking into account the fact that the courtly world is a world of custom and usage rather than of reason, a world dominated more by apparent than by real worth, *sprezzatura* offers the courtier a way to free himself from an uncertain dependence upon the unadorned merit of reasonable service alone. To gain recognition, he must learn the art of concealing art. *Sprezzatura* is essentially a kind of dissimulation that enables the courtier to show off without seeming to. Thus, Ludovico's doctrine of *sprezzatura* suggests a new view of courtiership, more calculating but also apparently more realistic in its understanding of courtly life than Ariosto's optimism.

But what about Ariosto's high-mindedness? Must it be abandoned along with his optimism? Apparently not. It seems to be taken for granted by most of the participants in the dialogue that the cultivated dissimulation involved in the exercise of *sprezzatura* does not preclude a high-minded view of the courtier himself. As far as one can tell from the first book at least, all the courtiers present seem to assume that the necessity for the dissimulation involved in *sprezzatura* derives solely from the unreasonableness of the world and does not imply any deficiency in the courtier's own soul. The essentially reasonable quality of his service will not be tainted by the dissimulation necessary to make that service pleasing. Consequently, no objections are raised when, not long after the discussion of *sprezzatura*, Ludovico contends that the courtier must not only practice *sprezzatura* but also be a "true moral philosopher who wishes to be good" (I.xli).

In spite of the fact that no one objects, however, we may wonder how harmonious the cultivation of *sprezzatura* and goodness would prove in practice, for Castiglione contrives, through the arguments and explanations of Ludovico himself and through the development of the dialogue generally, to suggest how easily a concern for recognition through *sprezzatura* might conflict with virtue and reasonable service. At one point in the elucidation of his new doctrine, for example, Ludovico reveals that its usefulness is not only to make the courtier's reasonable service look attractive but also to suggest that his accomplishments are greater than in fact they are. According to Ludovico, *sprezzatura* can make "any human action, however small," appear "much greater than it really is, since it impresses upon the minds of the onlookers the opinion that he who performs well with so much facility must know how to do more than he actually does, and that, if he were to devote care and effort to what he does, he would be able to do it far better." Simply knowing how to strike an easy pose while handling weapons will make people believe that one is expert in using them; a single graceful step can suggest that one is an excellent dancer; and a few well-chosen notes or one elegantly drawn line can give the impression that one knows the arts of music and painting (I.xxviii). That such impressions can be false is obvious, and more than one passage in *The Courtier* (many of the jokes in the second book come to mind immediately) attests to the fact that one can learn the gestures and poses of an activity or of virtue itself without knowing that activity thoroughly or without being truly virtuous. From a moral point of view, then, the doctrine of *sprezzatura* is potentially dangerous. By teaching the gestures and poses that are able to make a small action look great, *sprezzatura* goes be-



PLATE I



PLATE II

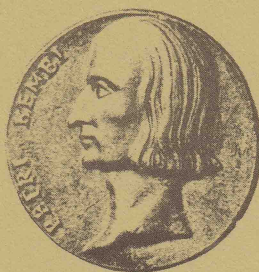


PLATE III

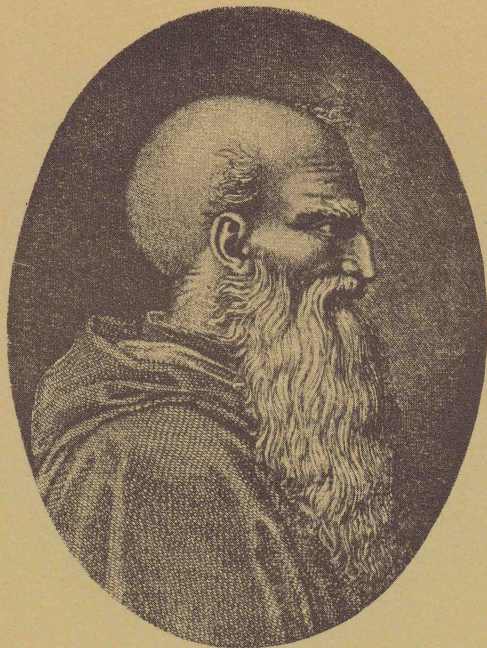


PLATE IV

Plate I. The Sala delle Veglie at the Ducal Palace of Urbino; Castiglione sets the conversations of *The Courtier* in this room, and from its windows on the east the assembled courtiers see the dawn at the end of their long discussions: "Aperte adunque le finestre da quella banda del palazzo che riguarda l'alta cima del monte di Catri, videro già esser nata in oriente una bella aurora di color di rose e tutte le stelle sparite, fuor che la dolce governatrice del ciel di Venere, che della notte e del giorno tiene i confini; dalla qual pareva che spirasse un'aura soave, che di mordente fresco empindo l'aria, cominciava tra le mormoranti selve de' colli vicini a risvegliar dolci concenti dei vaghi augelli" (iv.lxxiii). ("Then, when the windows were opened on the side of the palace that looks towards Mount Catria, they saw that a beautiful rosy dawn had already come into the east, and that all the stars had disappeared except the sweet mistress of the heaven of Venus that marks the limits between night and day; from which a soft breeze seemed to come, filling the air with a refreshing coolness and beginning to awaken sweet concerts of pretty birds in the murmuring woods of the nearby hills.")

Plate II. (Top) Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino (1471-1526). The dominant figure in the brilliant social life of the court. (Bottom) Emilia Pia (d. 1528). Acting as the Duchess' deputy, she chooses the "game" and initiates the discussion in Book I. Moreover, she has the last word at the end of Book IV. *Plate III.* (Top) Guidobaldo of Montrefeltro, Duke of Urbino (1472-1508). Shown here as a boy. Guidobaldo was crippled by gout and (according to some accounts) syphilis at an early age. As a result, he played almost no role in the society for which his court became famous. (Bottom Left) Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours (1479-1516). He undertakes to describe the court lady in Book III. Known in *The Courtier* as "the Magnifico," he was the youngest son of the much greater "Magnifico," Lorenzo the Magnificent. It was to Giuliano that *The Prince* was at first dedicated. His splendid tomb by Michelangelo is in the Medici Chapel of San Lorenzo in Florence. (Bottom Right) Pietro Bembo (1470-1547). The famous man of letters whose discourse on love brings *The Courtier* to a moving and fitting close appears here as a young man. He probably looked like this in 1506, when the conversations of *The Courtier* are supposed to have been held. *Plate IV.* Bembo as an old man.

yond the mere embellishment of reasonable service and offers courtiers a way to win grace and praise for appearances that are not backed by any substance. In spite of Ludovico's apparent intentions, his words suggest how *sprezzatura* might become a substitute for, rather than an adornment of, reasonable service.

In presenting the doctrine of *sprezzatura*, then, as when he disengaged himself from the optimism of his friend Ariosto, Castiglione works through irony and implication, leaving the reader to draw the explicit conclusions. Ludovico is no less Castiglione's friend than Ariosto, but by the same token Ludovico is no more than Ariosto to be taken uncritically as Castiglione's spokesman. *The Courtier* takes its ideas seriously, but its presentation, like that of Platonic dialogue, is essentially dramatic; it requires our careful and critical participation before it becomes fully intelligible. The first book of *The Courtier* is designed to leave one with an essentially problematic view of courtiership. The high-minded and optimistic view associated with Alfonso Ariosto at the book's beginning has been found wanting in its understanding of the world and has given way to Ludovico's more realistic doctrines. But Ludovico's doctrines in turn have revealed a serious problem of coherence and a vulnerability to exploitation. The relation between his demand for reasonable service and the temptations implicit in his doctrine of *sprezzatura* seems precarious.

It is a significant aspect of *The Courtier's* dramatic structure, moreover, that the conduct of the courtiers of Urbino themselves forces upon us a sense of this precariousness. If the danger that *sprezzatura* might function as a substitute for, rather than as an adornment of, reasonable service is to be averted, it is clear that desire for grace and praise must be subordinate to the ideal of service in the courtier's conception of his role. But if one compares the amount of time and ingenuity in the first book devoted to *sprezzatura* with the amount devoted to reasonable service, one cannot avoid the impression that in the best court that Castiglione knows interest in the arts of pleasing takes precedence over interest in the problems of service. The second book confirms and strengthens this impression. Federico Fregoso sets the tone at the very outset when he justifies further discussion on the ground that it is not easy for a courtier to know how "to refrain from praising himself on the wrong occasion, or from indulging in tiresome presumption, or from saying something which he thinks will provoke laughter but which, because said at the wrong time, turns out to be cold and without grace" (II.vi). In all of these examples Federico's concern is with pleasing manners rather than service, and under his direction the dis-

cussion focuses quite frankly on the courtier's means of making an impression: on how to look best in battle, even though this may be incompatible with the common effort (II.viii), how to dress (II.xxvi, xxvii), how to employ skill to give the impression of possessing even greater skill (II.xxxix, xl), and how to tell jokes (II.xlii, xciv).

Of course the second book does not allow the reader to lose sight entirely of the courtier's need for virtue. When accused, for example, of turning the courtier into little more than "a noble flatterer," Federico hastens to add that the courtier must please princes only in their "wishes that are reasonable and honest" (II.xviii). And in another passage he insists that the courtier ought to refuse to serve a wicked prince (II.xxii, xxiii). On the whole, however, these reminders of the courtier's higher obligations arouse little interest; they are introduced from time to time, hastily agreed to, and then passed over without any real attempt to square those obligations with the predominant concern for the projection of an effective image through *sprezzatura*. As reminders, nevertheless, they serve to keep us aware of what is being neglected and thus illuminate ironically the second book's almost exclusive preoccupation with appearances, a preoccupation that leads the courtiers of Urbino finally and appropriately into the joke fest with which the book concludes. The art of telling the right joke in the right way at the right time represents *sprezzatura* as the most trivial kind of ingratiation. Neither the jokes nor the advice about joking at the end of the second book aim at anything more than the passing amusement of the drawing room, and the courtiers of Urbino who devote so much of their discussion to this lowest form of pleasing seem a prophecy of those later courtiers who, as glorified valets and court jesters, were to throng the courts of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, of the Bourbon kings of Naples and Spain, of Charles II, of Louis XIV, and of others like them.⁶ Of course an art that enables a courtier to seem more virtuous than he is might be used to more sinister ends. For an ambitious man, an Edmund rather than an Osric, the first two books of *The Courtier* might complement *The*

6. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo has argued that "the attention that Castiglione gives to gesture, manner, games, jokes, and anecdotes" should not be considered a sign of triviality because it is perfectly consistent with the broadly human conception of "the self as a work of art" that informs the whole book. See "Castiglione's *Courtier*: The Self as a Work of Art" in *Renaissance and Revolution* (New York, 1965), 131-60, esp. pp. 147-48. Castiglione may have thought of the courtier as a work of art, but I think that he would also have insisted that some kinds of art can be trivial, that mere embellishments can be degrading unless they are subordinated to a higher purpose. He would have suggested that courtiers form themselves in the spirit of his friend's masterpieces in the *Stanza della Segnatura* rather than in the spirit of a rococo drawing room. Cf. the discussion of painting (I.xlix).

Prince. Charles V is said to have kept the two works together at his bedside, along with the Bible. Nevertheless, Castiglione chooses to conclude his examination of *sprezzatura* with an image of triviality, and thus provides a further ironically amusing comment upon the court of Urbino. Perhaps it is one sign of that court's goodness that there are no potential princes among those of its courtiers who do not rise above a concern for mere *sprezzatura*.

If within the dramatic structure of *The Courtier* as a whole the section on joking is Castiglione's representation of the nadir of courtiership devoted to mere *sprezzatura*, it also serves ironically to lead the courtiers quite unexpectedly back to more serious matters. In spite of the prevailing lightness of tone, there are jokes here and throughout the section which unmistakably suggest to the reader more searching reflections about human nature and human affairs than the jokers intend. And as the emphasis at the end of the section turns to jokes involving women, real moral questions persistently arise. "Why was it not as permissible for Ricciardo Minutolo to deceive Filippello's wife and cause her to go to that bathhouse as it was for Beatrice to make her husband Egano get out of bed and get a sound beating from Anichino, when she has been lying with the latter long since?" Why should a courtier's joking show more respect for women's honor than for men's? Are women less capable of moral virtue than men? Does a lover seek to possess the mind of his beloved or only the body (II.lxxxix-c)? These are questions which raise serious moral issues whether certain courtiers wish to recognize them or not. Thus the joking about women, which is obviously introduced to provide a transition to the subject of the third book—the court lady—serves in addition to reintroduce a note of moral seriousness to the discussions. And this renewal of moral seriousness also looks forward to the third book; by contrast with the second, it exhibits a convincing concern for goodness.

It may have been surprising to many would-be courtiers in the book's early audience, especially to those who shared Gaspar Pallavicino's attitudes towards women, to discover that the discussion of the qualities of the court lady serves to introduce for the first time a sustained and serious concern for virtue, both moral and political, but such is the irony with which Castiglione confronts us. Giuliano de' Medici, who initiates the discussion in the third book, acknowledges at the outset that the lady must "know how to gain and keep the grace of her mistress and of all others, to perform well and gracefully all the exercises that are suitable for women" (III.iv). But moral philosophy is clearly more interesting to him than *sprezzatura*.

Consequently, a question about the relative merits of men and women, a question which, like the whole question of women itself, could easily lend itself to trivial *jeux d'esprit*, in fact raises for Giuliano the very serious problem of what is essentially human, the body or the mind. And this discussion in turn leads to discussions of the role of sexual differentiation in nature, of the psychology of love, and finally to analyses of the virtues of temperance and courage that are far more searching than anything earlier (III.xii–xix). Although necessarily brief, these discussions and others like them in the third book stand in sharp contrast to the earlier spirit of mere *sprezzatura*, and they express a serious concern for the virtues upon which rational courtly service could be founded.

The passage which makes Giuliano's opposition to mere *sprezzatura* clearest, however, is the one in which he castigates hypocrites

who—forgetful, or rather scornful, of Christ's teaching, which requires a man to anoint his face when he fasts in order that he may not be known to fast, and commands that prayers, alms, and other good works shall be done, not in the public square nor in synagogues, but in secret, so that the left hand shall not know what the right hand does—affirm that there is no better thing in the world than setting a good example: and so, with head bent to one side and with downcast eyes, letting it be known they do not wish to speak to women or eat anything save raw herbs—grimy, with their habits all torn, they deceive the simple. (III.xx)⁷

Nothing could be further from the spirit of *sprezzatura* than the teaching of Christ to which Giuliano refers here. The courtier as described by Ludovico and Federico, whose constant concern is to perform in as conspicuous a manner as possible, certainly does not want the left hand to be ignorant of what the right hand is doing. On the contrary, he learns through *sprezzatura* to advertise himself by calculating every gesture; sometimes he may even, by leading men to believe that he possesses virtues that he does not, "deceive the simple."

Thus, under the influence of Giuliano, the discussions of the third book begin to exemplify that subordination of *sprezzatura* to virtue that we have seen is necessary to prevent courtiership from degenerating into deception and triviality, and we should not be surprised that a high moral seriousness

7. "... i quali, scordati o più presto facendo poco caso della dottrina di Cristo, che vole che quando l'om digiuna se unga la faccia perché non paia che degiuni e comanda che le orazioni, le elemosine e l'altre bone opere si facciano non in piazza, né in sinagoge, ma in secreto, tanto che la man sinistra non sappia della destra, affermano non esser maggior bene al mondo che 'l dar bon esempio; e così, col collo torto e gli occhi bassi, spargendo fama di non voler parlare a donne, né mangiar altro che erbe crude, affumati, con le toniche squarciate, gabbano i semplici."

informs the stories about women which fill nearly half the book. It is significant that these stories have nothing to do with *sprezzatura*. None of them teaches the art of showing oneself off to the best advantage. Rather, they exemplify almost all the virtues. Chastity is, as we should expect, the most common subject, but the other virtues are discussed as well. The story of Alessandra, wife of Alessandro, king of the Jews, for example, exhibits her tough and resourceful political prudence (III.xxii). Epicari and Leona are types of constancy (III.xxiii). Aspasi and Diotima represent wisdom (III.xxviii). Justice is praised in Anne of France and in Margherita, the daughter of the Emperor Maximilian (III.xxxiv). And Isabella of Castile is said to have possessed all the virtues, including that of extending her dominions, in the highest degree (III.xxxv). Structurally, these stories and the many others with them form a parallel to the jokes that take up half of the second book; but the point of the parallelism is a contrast, to mark the radical change in moral tone between the two books.

As examples of virtue, however, Giuliano's stories shed little light on the specific problems of courtiership. His heroines are simply good women drawn from all walks of life; and it remains for Ottaviano Fregoso, at the beginning of the fourth book, to make explicit the significance of this shift in moral tone and to direct the discussion of virtue specifically into a discussion of the courtier's reasonable service. Ottaviano functions partly as a choric figure who puts into explicit language the judgments that have emerged implicitly from the dialogue of the first three books. Thus he condemns as "frivolities and vanities" many of the accomplishments which have been attributed to the courtier by Ludovico and Federico, "such as dancing, merrymaking, singing, and playing," unless they are employed as means to the end of reasonable service. According to Ottaviano, the acquisition of grace and praise should be important to the courtier mainly because it enables him to lead his prince to virtue:

I think that the end of the perfect courtier, which we have not spoken of up to now, is to win for himself, by means of the accomplishments ascribed to him by these gentlemen, the benevolence and the mind of the prince whom he serves that he may be able to tell him and always will tell him the truth about everything that he needs to know, without fear or risk of displeasing him; and that when he sees the mind of his prince inclined to a wrong action, he may dare to oppose him, and in a gentle manner avail himself of the grace acquired by his good accomplishments, so as to dissuade him of every evil intent and bring him to the path of virtue. (IV.v)⁸

8. "Il fin adunque del perfetto cortegiano, del quale insino a qui non s'è parlato, estimo io che sia il guadagnarsi per mezzo delle condizioni attribuitegli da questi signori talmente la benivolenza e l'animo di quel principe a cui serve, che possa dirgli e sempre gli dica la verità

Once Ottaviano's choric function has become clear, once the implicit limitations of the earlier concerns have been made explicit and the conception of the courtier has been reinvigorated with a high-minded concern for reasonable service, one might expect the book to end. That it does not, however, indicates the fullness and complexity of presentation that make it a great book. One more step is necessary to complete the intellectual and dramatic design. For, although Ottaviano elevates the idea of courtiership and introduces the serious topics with which courtiers dedicated to reasonable service should be concerned, the specific discussions that he initiates raise more problems than they solve. Throughout the opening passages of the fourth book, Castiglione introduces characters who question and oppose Ottaviano on specific issues, and although Ottaviano usually has the last word he often fails to meet the arguments of his opponents fully and convincingly. Thus his account of the Socratic idea that if one truly knows the good one will never do wrong is simply not full enough to dispel the problem raised by Bembo's commonsensical objection that we often act badly in spite of the fact that we know better (iv.xiv-xvi); nor, to take another example, is Ottaviano's defense of monarchy sufficient to answer the claims of republicanism put forward by Bembo (iv.xix-xxi). Ottaviano always makes a good case, but so do his opponents, especially Bembo, and the result is an inconclusiveness that runs throughout the first two-thirds of the book and points to the necessity for further thought. The discussions under Ottaviano's leadership exemplify how courtiers ought to proceed, what questions they ought to ask if they are to become true moral philosophers and learn to serve reasonably, but the answers to those questions, the content of true moral philosophy and the precise nature of reasonable service, remain unrevealed.

Ottaviano's earnestness, then, is not enough. Moral and political earnestness must be enlightened by real understanding, by wisdom, and if the courtier takes seriously the injunction to reasonable service he must be prepared to search for the truth by going beyond the discussions of the opening section of the fourth book.⁹ Within *The Courtier* itself, this further search for truth is expressed by Bembo's concluding discourse. Ostensibly Bembo sets out to show how the courtier can be a lover of women as well

d'ogni cosa che ad esso convenga sapere, senza timor o pericolo di despiacergli; e conoscendo la mente di quello inclinata a far cosa non conveniente, ardisca di contradirgli, e con gentil modo valersi della grazia acquistata con le sue bone qualità per rimuoverlo da ogni intenzion viciosa ed indurlo al camin della virtù."

9. Cf. Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, Phoenix Books ed. (Chicago, 1963), p. 46.

as a prudent counselor, but in fact his account of the lover's ascent by a ladder of love to divine beauty transforms the courtier from a lover of women into a lover of wisdom, a philosopher in the root sense of the word. For the divine beauty to which the lover aspires as a result of the progressive discovery of the inadequacy of lower kinds of beauty is indistinguishable from the highest truth: "This is that beauty which is indistinguishable from the highest good, which by its light calls and draws all things unto itself, and not only gives intellect to intellectual things, reason to rational things, sense and appetite for life to sensual things, but to plants also and to stones it communicates motion and the natural instinct proper to them, as an imprint of itself" (iv.lxix). The inconclusiveness of the earlier discussions leads to the recognition that reasonable service depends upon knowledge. Only by the light of that ultimate divine truth and beauty by which all things are seen in their proper perspective will the answers to the particular and immediate questions of moral philosophy and reasonable service, questions such as Ottaviano raises but does not answer, fall into place.

Thus Bembo's discourse completes the presentation of courtiership by making us aware of the proper relationship between two ways of life—the active and the contemplative—that the Renaissance was accustomed to considering mainly in terms of opposition. The active life of courtly service must be founded upon the contemplative ascent to divine truth and beauty. In an explicit discussion of these two ways of life which occurs earlier in *The Courtier*, Ottaviano asserted that the prince ought to live so that he can participate in both activity and contemplation (iv.xxiv). Bembo indicates that this rule obtains for the courtier too. But he also indicates that the contemplative life should not be seen only or even primarily as the means to solving political and moral problems. For it stands as an end in itself, higher in kind even than the ends of activity. Indeed, contemplation appears to be the highest end for man, for in it "we shall find a most happy end to our desires, true rest from labors, sure remedy for miseries, most wholesome medicine for illnesses, safest refuge from the whirling storms of this life's tempestuous sea" (iv.lxix).

The double vision of divine truth and beauty, both as the only means to virtue and reasonable service and as man's highest end in and for itself, confronts the reader with a perplexing sense of the courtier's situation at the end of the book. What will draw him back to the world of courtly service once he has glimpsed a better home in contemplation, safe from "the whirling storms of life's tempestuous seas," safe from those forces of

irrationality and disorder whose power is a recurrent theme throughout *The Courtier*? The courtier would seem to be left in the position of the philosopher at the beginning of the seventh book of *The Republic* who has escaped from the cave but who must return to it and direct its affairs in spite of the fact that he would prefer to stay entirely in the sun. What compulsion brings this philosopher back is not entirely clear, but he must return, and so, apparently, must the courtier. We know that Bembo, who must be acquainted with the vision he describes, is living as a courtier in Urbino; and we know that Castiglione's own life was steadily devoted to active service. Perhaps we can conclude that both lives, the active and the contemplative, are good in a way and necessary in a way; the contemplative is higher but the active is also noble and necessary. Bembo expresses the balance and complexity of his view most beautifully when he describes the experience of divine love paradoxically as "the beginning and end of all good": "Thou art father of true pleasures, of the graces, of peace, of gentleness and benevolence, enemy of boorish savagery and baseness—in short, the beginning and end of all good" (iv.lxx). Divine truth and beauty are the beginning and the end; the contemplation of them is the highest end of human life, but that contemplation is also to be understood as a beginning, the beginning of true courtiership, the beginning of a life of active service filled with grace, peace, gentleness, and benevolence, and free from boorish savagery and baseness.

Bembo's discourse, too, is both an end and a beginning; it provides a conclusion to the pattern of the work, and it also leaves its readers and the courtiers of Urbino poised at the beginning of the intellectual and spiritual ascent that they must make both for its own sake and to become perfect courtiers. Does Castiglione wish us to assume, then, that Bembo's listeners are in fact about to set out upon the most beautiful ascent? Apparently he does not. No doubt the mood of awed eagerness and expectancy that holds the group when Bembo stops speaking is sincerely felt, but it is also important that *The Courtier* does not end precisely at this high point. Instead, the elevated mood that Bembo has created is gradually allowed to dissipate in the last three sections of the book: as Emilia Pia plucks Bembo by the robe with a kind of mockery to break the spell of his words, as other courtiers add their comments, as the old, rather trivial quarrel over the relative merits of men and women returns to the surface, and as the sun comes up, a symbol of the light that Bembo's discourse has shed upon all the preceding discussions but also a reminder of mundane reality and the fact that it is past time to go to bed. With the great good humor and sense

of comic irony that is characteristic of the whole book, these final sections impress upon us Castiglione's firm grasp of the dramatic reality of his characters. He is too shrewd not to know that men like Ludovico and Federico are not to be transformed into philosophers, into seekers after divine truth, by a single speech, no matter how eloquent. He is too honest and too keenly aware, as the first two books demonstrate, of the limitations of even the best group of courtiers to try to persuade us that they have been miraculously changed for the better. They have been moved, but Bembo's elevation and intensity are too much to sustain for a group in which concern for mere *sprezzatura* runs so deep. Ludovico's opinion notwithstanding, virtue is not easy to attain. *The Courtier* points out the path to perfection to those courtiers who are able to see it and willing to follow it, but at the same time the book leaves us with a clear and unsentimental image of the gap that in reality separates most courtiers from this path.¹⁰

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10. In "The Dialectic of *Il Cortegiano*," Lipking contends that Bembo's doctrines at the end and elsewhere in the work are over-refined and over-intellectual and that Emilia Pia's mockery, marking a return to mundane concerns, is meant to undercut his effect on the reader (p. 358). In my opinion, however, Emilia Pia's mockery and the mundane concerns of the other courtiers are meant by Castiglione as a comment upon their own limitations rather than upon Bembo's. Castiglione is aware that Bembo's ladder is not open to everyone, but his vision remains nevertheless the measure of other courtiers' failings rather than vice versa.