

*Castiglione's Allegory: Veiled Policy in The Book of the Courtier*. W. R. Albury. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. xiii + 276 pp. \$124.95.

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Forcefully argued and solidly researched (the works cited fill thirty pages), this study presents a novel interpretation of Castiglione's classic work. The author, a historian of philosophy and medicine, rejects the application of modern theory to *The Book of the Courtier*. He presents, instead, an early modern reading grounded in the historical context, whereby "a close reading of the text, with . . . attention . . . focused on the finer details of what is said and done by Castiglione's characters" (158) enables him "to recover a serious political message which . . . is lost from sight when the work is approached primarily as a courtly etiquette book" (3). The allegory, readily accessible to the select group of more judicious readers that Castiglione was addressing, stems from "the danger of forthright political speech" (17) that Albury believes is alluded to in three passages in book 4. Thus, unlike other scholars who describe the more obvious if contrasting views expressed in straightforward terms by the speakers in book 4, Albury highlights the political role of the courtier-statesman that is conveyed in an indirect manner from the very outset.

In the introductory first chapter Albury stresses the importance of the setting for the fictional conversations and discusses characters who rarely attract critical attention. Pope Julius II, who has already departed, and his nephew Francesco Maria della Rovere, who arrives late, together with the silent members of the papal retinue remaining in Urbino as informers, are actually “centrally important determinants” (28). Consequently, criticism of friars is halted so as not to offend Julius II who had a Franciscan education, and the court ladies are excluded from Emilia’s metagame because they lack the status of advisors.

Chapter 2 develops the interpretation of *The Book of the Courtier* as a Francescopedia, “designed to persuade the absent pope through his proxy observers that the court of Urbino is the ideal place for the education of Francesco Maria as a future prince” (22). The young Della Rovere, Albury surmises, would have been paying close attention as he sought to learn to avoid the folly of Gasparo’s extremism on the subject of women, for instance.

In the remainder of the study Albury clarifies the political message expressed obliquely, that is, the dangerous allegorical meaning, or “acutezza recondita,” that he detects in the text — a phrase, it should be noted, actually uttered by an interlocutor who defends ancient Tuscan in the discussion on language in book 1, but interpreted by Albury as meaning not simply “hidden [linguistic] subtlety” (12) but more specifically “veiled policy” (18). In chapter 3, dealing with the verbal exchanges of the philosophers on the ladder of love, Albury maintains that Bembo, who repeats ideas borrowed from Ficino, is fundamentally “unphilosophical” (81), while Ottaviano Fregoso, a significant political and military figure, demonstrates greater skill at philosophical reasoning. Thus politics and its spokesman Ottavio displace Neoplatonic love and Bembo as the ultimate message and messenger in the text. Moreover, Albury identifies as a fundamental source for Castiglione not the Platonic theory of love mediated by Ficino but rather Plato’s treatise *Politicus* (The statesman) as interpreted by Ficino. Using charts to compare episodes and texts, he demonstrates its influence on the chiasmic structuring and other aspects of Castiglione’s work.

Up to this point the thesis is quite convincing. However, it may be carried too far when, signaling the analogy of the courtier as physician who makes ethical use of harsh medicine, Albury proposes that Castiglione advocates tyrannicide in the case of an incurably wicked prince. Similarly overstressed is the elaborate discussion of Castiglione’s impresa in the last chapter. The medallion featuring Aurora and combining pagan and Christian elements deriving from Ficino’s version of the *Statesman* represents not simply spiritual rejuvenation in the progression from darkness to light, but rather “the perfect courtier’s obligation, in extreme cases, to replace the tyrannical actions of a wicked prince with the divine instruments of right rule” (230). Questionable too is the recourse to English texts, rather than Dante and the Italian tradition, to explain the Renaissance concept of allegory, as is the anomalous discussion of James I to illustrate the celebration of a new age.

Throughout his study Albury highlights the subtlety of Castiglione’s writing and he demonstrates an equal degree of “acutezza” himself in his detailed analyses and argumentation. Although his interpretation of Castiglione’s book as advocating tyrannicide may be somewhat

overstated, his approach does succeed in bringing fresh insights into various parts of the text and in identifying a new Platonic source. On these grounds *Castiglione's Allegory* constitutes a very significant contribution to Castiglione studies. The volume is carefully edited and only seven minor typos were noted. Regrettably, the name of the well-known critic Barberi Squarotti is misspelled twice (1n and 237).

OLGA ZORZI PUGLIESE, *University of Toronto*