

The Path of the Courtier: Castiglione, Machiavelli, and the Loss of Republican Liberty

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Abstract: Although Castiglione's *The Courtier* was one of the most popular products of the Italian Renaissance, it has largely escaped the attention of modern political theorists. Many dismiss *The Courtier* as an apolitical work characterized by nostalgia and escapism, but it should not be so dismissed: on the contrary, Castiglione's book expresses a definite political program. This essay explores that program as a "politics of the second best"—as a pragmatic response to unfortunately diminished political opportunities. Put simply, given the choice between trying to make one's master a better person, on the one hand, and not having a master at all, on the other, surely one would not opt for the former unless the latter was not available. Reflection on this point informs the debate between proponents of "negative liberty" and those of "republican liberty."

Baldesar Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) was by all accounts one of the most popular products of the Italian Renaissance. First published in 1528, *The Courtier* had gone through more than one hundred editions by the end of the century, and was translated into Spanish by 1534, French by 1537, English by 1561, Latin by 1561, and German by 1565. A 1588 edition presented the text in parallel English, French, and Italian columns.¹ Apparently, *The Courtier* was one of three books the Emperor Charles V kept at his bedside—the other two being variously reported as either the Bible and Machiavelli's *Prince*, or else Machiavelli's *Discourses* and Polybius's *Histories*.²

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¹Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier: The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano* (Malden, MA: Polity, 1995), 61–66, 158–62.

²See Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution: The Remaking of European Thought* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 131; and Burke, *Fortunes of the Courtier*, 58, respectively.

In light of this success and popularity, it is remarkable that Castiglione's work has largely escaped the attention of political theorists.³ No doubt this is partly due to the fact that Castiglione must live under the shadow of Machiavelli, and that compared to *The Prince* with respect to originality and political insight at any rate, *The Courtier* is no doubt an inferior work. Both authors contributed to the veritable flood of advice books produced during the Renaissance, but unlike Machiavelli and many of the others, Castiglione set out to advise fellow courtiers like himself rather than rulers.⁴ On these grounds, Jacob Burckhardt declared in 1860 that the "inner impulse which inspired him was directed ... not to the service of the prince, but to his own perfection," and most readers in the century following similarly dismissed *The Courtier* as an essentially apolitical work characterized above all by nostalgia and escapism.⁵ Indeed, even in recent years it is still not uncommon to find Castiglione described as advising the courtier to turn inward, and aim simply at constructing himself as a "work of art."⁶

In my view, Castiglione should not be so dismissed. On the contrary, *The Courtier* expresses a very definite political program, which this essay aims to explore. My interest in exploring it has less to do with the merits of that program, the aims of which are perfectly understandable given the historical circumstances (though, as we shall later see, Machiavelli offers more effective means for achieving the same end). It lies rather in what Castiglione's discussion inadvertently reveals about the moral and ethical significance of relations of domination: put simply, given the choice between trying to make one's master a better person, on the one hand, and not having a master at all, on the other, surely one would not opt for the former unless the latter was unavailable. Castiglione's program must always therefore represent something of

³There exists, of course, a well-established line of contemporary European literary scholarship on Castiglione; its central preoccupation, however, has been reconstructing the story of *The Courtier*'s composition. Leading contributions to this line of research include Ghino Ghinassi, "Fasi dell'elaborazione del *Cortegiano*," *Studi di Filologia Italiana* 25 (1967): 155–96; José Guidi, "De l'amour courtois à l'amour sacré: La condition de la femme dans l'oeuvre de Baldessare Castiglione," *Centre de Recherches sur la Renaissance Italienne* 8 (1980): 9–80; Amedeo Quondam, "Questo povero *Cortegiano*," *Castiglione, il Libro, la Storia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000); and Uberto Motta, *Castiglione e il mito di Urbino: Studi sulla elaborazione del "Cortegiano"* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2003). While fascinating in its own right, this topic largely falls outside the scope of the present discussion, and will be referred to only when relevant.

⁴Most Renaissance advice books followed the "mirror-for-princes" genre established in the Middle Ages. For discussion, see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), chap. 5.

⁵Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 269.

⁶E.g., Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 12; and Burke, *Fortunes of the Courtier*, 32.

a “politics of the second best,” so to speak—a pragmatic response to tragically diminished opportunities for civic participation. This fact, in turn, reveals precisely what is wrong with relations of domination; indeed, as I shall suggest, the force of this observation is plainly evident in the text despite Castiglione’s best efforts at evasion and suppression.

The political reading of *The Courtier* advanced here contributes to a relatively recent trend in the specialized literary scholarship away from the once standard apolitical reading of Burckhardt and his successors: Daniel Javitch, Eduardo Saccone, Joseph Falvo, and others have already initiated the project of rediscovering the forgotten political dimensions of Castiglione’s work.⁷ But these authors generally portray *The Courtier* as addressed specifically to a newly constrained feudal elite that had lost its way under new political conditions of monarchical absolutism. In what follows, I will also attempt to show that this reading mistakes both the book’s intended audience and its message, thus obscuring some of its most interesting features. While my argument will be centered on the fourth book of *The Courtier*, the stage must first be set with some consideration of the preceding books, to which I now turn.

I

The Courtier is written in the form of an imagined dialogue taking place over four evenings at the court of Urbino in March of 1507. The participants—nineteen gentlemen and four ladies—are various churchmen, scholars, and aristocrats known to Castiglione, many from his own time at Urbino in the service of Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro between 1504 and 1508; according to his own report, Castiglione was initially inspired to compose such a dialogue when the Duke’s death in 1508 prompted happy memories of

⁷Among those contributing to this political turn, see Daniel Javitch, *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), and “Il Cortegiano and the Constraints of Despotism,” in *Castiglione: The Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Robert W. Hanning and David Rosand (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Dain A. Trafton, “Politics and the Praise of Women: Political Doctrine in the Courtier’s Third Book,” in *Castiglione*, ed. Hanning and Rosand; Eduardo Saccone, “The Portrait of the Courtier in Castiglione,” *Italica* 64 (1987): 1–18; Joseph D. Falvo, *The Economy of Human Relations: Castiglione’s “Libro del Cortegiano”* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); and Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For a partial critique of the political turn, however, see Virginia Cox, “Castiglione and His Critics,” in *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Virginia Cox (New York: Everyman, 1994). Note that these authors have yet to find a significant audience among political theorists: this is suggested by the fact that a search across all dates for all 146 political science journals archived by JSTOR returns exactly zero articles with “Castiglione” in either the title or the abstract.

those years. He sets the dramatic date, however, at a time when he was away on a diplomatic mission to England. Thus neither he nor indeed the Duke appears as a character, a point we shall have occasion to remark on later. Though an early draft of *The Courtier* was apparently penned quickly, only after some twenty years of belabored writing, reflection, and revision was it finally published, just a year before Castiglione's death in 1529; by this time, its scope and seriousness had expanded considerably.⁸

After some opening pleasantries, the discussion recounted by Castiglione settles on the topic of "the character and the particular qualities needed by anyone" deserving the title of a "perfect courtier" (I.12; 51).⁹ No sooner does one of the participants—Lodovico da Canossa—begin to outline this ideal, than the debate is joined on the problem of whether the perfect courtier must be of noble birth.¹⁰ On the one hand, it is argued that "noble birth is like a bright lamp that makes clear and visible both good deeds and bad, and inspires and incites high performance as much as fear of dishonour or hope of praise" (I.14; 54); but on the other, one must admit that there are "many people who, though of the most noble blood, have been wicked in the extreme," and also "many of humble birth who, through their virtues, have won glory for their descendants" (I.15; 55). This latter claim is not disputed, and so we might expect actual deeds to count more than accidents of birth. But surprisingly the debate is settled in favor of the former view, on the strength of Lodovico's further observation that a perfect courtier "must be a nobleman if only because of the immediate impression this makes on all concerned." As he goes on to explain,

given two gentlemen of the court, neither of whom as yet has shown what he is like by his actions, either good or bad, as soon as it is discovered that one of them was well born and the other not, the latter will be respected far less than the former, and only after a great deal of time and effort will

⁸Amedeo Quondam, "On the Genesis of the *Book of the Courtier*," in *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 283–295.

⁹Citations are to book and chapter, followed by the page number in the widely available Penguin edition: Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1976). Though less literal and arguably based on an inferior text, Bull's translation is considerably more clear and vigorous than Singleton's earlier one, reprinted in the Norton edition (see n. 8 above). With respect to the broader themes addressed here, there are no relevant differences of substance between the translations. When referring to the Italian original, I rely on Walter Barberis's excellent critical edition: Baldesar Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (Turin: Biblioteca Einaudi, 1998).

¹⁰Friend and relation to Castiglione, Lodovico was himself a nobleman and an exemplary courtier in his own right. At the dramatic date of the dialogue, however, his career was still before him, and he is selected to describe the ideal courtier because of his love of controversy rather than his expertise (I.13; 52).

he win the good opinion that the other acquires instantly, merely because of his nobility. (I.16; 56)¹¹

It is curious that such stock should be placed in mere first impressions, but Lodovico's point is accepted by all, and the discussion moves on.

The perfect courtier is next endowed with a range of virtues related to the profession of arms—"the first and true profession of the courtier" (I.17; 56). These include not only general qualities of character such as courage, daring, and loyalty; but also specifically cultivated abilities in combat, riding, sport (hunting and tennis), parlor games, and so on. It is crucial, however, that the perfect courtier display each of these virtues with discretion, good humor, and grace, while carefully avoiding excessive pride or brashness. Most importantly, he must

steer away from affectation at all costs, as if it were a rough and dangerous reef, and (to use perhaps a novel word for it) to practice in all things a certain nonchalance [*sprezzatura*] which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless. ... So we can truthfully say that true art is what does not seem to be art; and the most important thing is to conceal it, ... [since] to reveal intense application and skill robs everything of grace. (I.26; 67)

It is surprising, perhaps, that such lavish attention is paid to these points—what constitutes genuine grace, whether and how grace can be learned, and so forth—whereas the courtier's "honour and integrity" are remarked on only in passing (I.41; 87). Why should outward appearance matter so much more than inward virtue? The excessive regard devoted to the perfect courtier's external comportment apparently rests on the rather thin ground that the graceful warrior is "much more agreeable and admired" by others than one lacking grace (I.27; 69).¹²

The final issue of the first evening's discussion concerns whether the perfect courtier should concentrate his studies on arms alone, or also endeavor to become a master of arts and letters—adding the famous *studia humanitatis* (literature, history, rhetoric, etc.) together with music and painting to his program of education. One view, attributed to the French rather than any participant in the dialogue, holds that the humanities breed effeminacy, and are thus detrimental to the profession of arms. This view is roundly rejected. First, it is pointed out the great generals of antiquity placed a high value on the

¹¹Lodovico may well be relating his own experience here as a novice courtier enjoying the advantage of noble birth.

¹²For detailed treatments of the importance of moderation and discretion in Castiglione, see Javitch, "Constraints of Despotism," and Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness*, esp. chap. 2; for nonchalance and grace, see Saccone, "Portrait of the Courtier," and Henry Berger, *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 1.

humanities; second, that a familiarity with literature itself inspires a love of glory that “spurs men on to bold deeds” (I.43; 89); and finally, that “in addition to the satisfaction this will give him personally,” the ideal courtier ought to study arts and letters because “it will enable him to provide constant entertainment for the ladies, who are usually very fond of such things” (I.44; 90).¹³ It is again noteworthy that such weight is given to apparently frivolous considerations.

Nor are the second and third evenings’ discussions likely to reassure us on this score. While they add considerable layers of detail to the portrait of a perfect courtier, the additions are again almost exclusively to its more superficial aspects. During the second evening, the Genoan scholar and politician Federico Fregoso (another friend of Castiglione) elaborates on the comportment appropriate to the perfect courtier, emphasizing the need to balance displays of virtuosity with prudent discretion in combat, sport, musical performance, dress, and so forth. The perfect courtier should endeavor to make himself agreeable to his prince, and to exercise moderation in his dealings with his peers. Detailed attention is given to the courtier’s sense of humor. The third evening finds Giuliano de’ Medici (his family currently in exile from Florence) expounding at great length on the subject of the perfect courtier’s associations with court ladies and vice versa.¹⁴

At the end of the third evening, the description of the perfect courtier—that is, his character and particular qualities—is declared more or less complete: Emilia Pia, companion to the Duchess of Urbino and moderator of the conversation, observes that there is not “anything to add ... seeing that these gentlemen have already said as much as they knew” (III.76; 277), and Federico’s brother Ottaviano agrees that “since everyone is happy with him as he is, I also am satisfied with him; nor would I change anything about him” (III.77; 277). The upshot is an elaborate portrait of the *uomo universale*—a self-contained model of “human perfection” that, as one influential commentator puts it, “is the result of the harmonious relation of normally opposed impulses,” and which achieves a “mastery of the major capacities of human nature” by “developing no single human function at an excessive charge

¹³Lodovico’s argument finds a humorous rejoinder in *Don Quixote*, I.37–38, where the eponymous knight harangues the company at an inn on the preeminence of arms over letters. This is, of course, only one of many instances in which Cervantes seems to take issue with the courtly tradition established by Castiglione. Another is the insensitive and ultimately cruel treatment of Don Quixote and his squire by the Duke and Duchess in II.30–57, which seems to respond critically to Castiglione’s discussion of practical jokes near the end of the second evening’s discussion in *The Courtier*.

¹⁴Many rich details are necessarily glossed over in these brief remarks. Some further aspects of book 2 will be considered below, and for interesting discussions of book 3, see Trafton, “Praise of Women,” and Berger, *Absence of Grace*, chaps. 4–5.

against another one."¹⁵ It is little wonder, given the first three evenings of discussion, that *The Courtier* has often been read apolitically, either as a straightforward (perhaps nostalgic) manual for the personal education of gentlemen or, somewhat more subtly, as a (perhaps escapist) "guide to the fully realized human life."¹⁶

And indeed, this aspect of the work no doubt accounts for its remarkable popularity at the time it was first published. For it was during the Renaissance that transformations in the technology of warfare and the centralization of monarchical power had rendered the profession of medieval knight obsolete. As the militaristic value-system of the feudal nobility deteriorated, aristocrats were in desperate need of a new social role and class ideal, and this is precisely what *The Courtier* articulated for them.¹⁷ Alas, what recommended Castiglione to many of his contemporary readers is precisely what tends to repel his modern readers—namely, in the words of one modern translator, his "combination of intense and selfish individualism with appalling snobbery," together with his apparent flight from "the realities of life to its idealization."¹⁸ If Castiglione had concluded *The Courtier* after the first three evenings of discussion, the work might indeed have little to recommend itself beyond its utility as "a compendium of Renaissance thought" or as "a faithful portrait of the conversations and diversions of the Court of Urbino."¹⁹

But *The Courtier* does not end here. Although Ottaviano admits that there is little to add to the description of the perfect courtier per se, he nevertheless believes there are "many other splendid things still to be said" about him, and so the conversation is set to continue for another evening (III.76; 277). What remains to be discussed, it turns out, is precisely an account of the proper aims of courtiership. Far from reflecting a "grand aesthetic idealism" together with an "apparent unconcern for the hard facts of the political life," the discussion of the fourth evening demonstrates that, in Castiglione's view, achieving the *uomo universale* ideal is not properly understood as an end in itself.²⁰ On the contrary, it is here that the specifically political aspect of *The Courtier* finally comes into clear view.²¹

¹⁵Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution*, 135. Castiglione's model of human perfection is heavily indebted, of course, to classical sources—Aristotle and Cicero in particular.

¹⁶Lawrence V. Ryan, "Book Four of Castiglione's *Courtier*: Climax or Afterthought?," *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972): 158.

¹⁷Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 157; Burke, *Fortunes of the Courtier*, 35; and Quondam, "Genesis of *The Courtier*," 293.

¹⁸George Bull, introduction to *The Book of the Courtier*, by Castiglione (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 16.

¹⁹Bull, introduction, 17; and Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution*, 134, respectively.

²⁰Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution*, 138.

²¹Contrary to the assumption of some earlier commentators, the political discussion in book 4 was no mere afterthought on the part of Castiglione. Although earlier drafts

II

The discussion of the fourth evening begins with a distinction, familiar from Plato, between things that “are always good simply in themselves,” on the one hand, and things “that are good ... depending on the end to which they are directed,” on the other. The perfect courtier, it turns out, is an example of the latter. In other words, the *uomo universale* ideal is not to be pursued for its own sake: “if the only fruit produced by the courtier’s noble birth, gracefulness, charm and skills were just himself,” Ottaviano clearly states,

I should not consider it right for a man to put into acquiring the perfection of courtiership all the study and effort that are certainly necessary. On the contrary, I should claim that many of the skills that have been attributed to him, such as dancing, entertaining, singing and playing games, *were vain and frivolous, and in a man of rank deserving of censure rather than praise.* (IV.4; 284, emphasis added)

Indeed so! What then is the end to which courtiership is appropriately directed? If the courtier is “quick-witted and charming, prudent and scholarly and so forth,” it follows that he will be able “to make his prince realize the honour and advantages that accrue to him and his family from justice, liberality, magnanimity, gentleness and all the other virtues befitting a ruler.” The perfect courtier, in other words, should aim to make his prince a better person, and thereby (we must presume) a better ruler.²² The courtier’s manifold qualities, lavishly detailed in the first three evenings of discussion, all derive their value and point from this end: “just as music, festivities, games and other agreeable accomplishments are, so to speak, the flower of courtiership, so its real fruit is to encourage and help his prince to be virtuous and to deter him from evil” (IV.5; 285).²³

of *The Courtier* had only three books, most of the substance of the political discussion we shall discuss was present in the draft of 1520–21. His later decision to divide the last book in two and concentrate his explicitly political material at the opening of the newly created fourth book had the effect, perhaps, of heightening its significance. For further discussion, see Ghinassi, “Fasi dell’elaborazione del *Cortegiano*”; Ryan, “Book Four”; and Quondam, “Genesis of *The Courtier*.”

²²Castiglione’s argument here depends, of course, on the assumption that good people necessarily make for better rulers; though this connection was (and perhaps still is) widely assumed, it might easily be challenged.

²³The passages cited here cast doubt on Ryan’s interpretation of book 4, according to which the courtier must involve himself with political affairs merely in order to secure the peaceful conditions necessary for his own complete flowering as a *uomo universale* —i.e., “the practical virtues are but means to the end of intellectual perfection” (Ryan, “Book Four,” 165).

By no means is it easy for courtiers to do this. Many people, concerned only with their own welfare, “dare not criticize the prince openly for fear of being punished.” Even those who do have the welfare of their prince at heart will be “wary of reproaching him for his faults as freely as they reproach ordinary people,” according to Ottaviano. Rather, “in order to win grace and favour,” they will often “think only of suggesting things that are agreeable and diverting, even though this may be dishonourable and wicked.” Thus “from being friends they become flatterers,” and in the end find themselves “telling lies that foster ignorance in the prince’s mind not only of the world around but of himself” (IV.6; 285–86).

This tension between the need of courtiers to compete with one another for the approval of the prince, on the one hand, and the need of princes for honest and impartial counsel, on the other, was undoubtedly familiar to Castiglione from personal experience.²⁴ It was also among the most popular themes of Renaissance political writing, as evidenced by discussions in More, Erasmus, Machiavelli, and many others. Given the tactics courtiers are constrained to employ, their general ill repute is not at all surprising. In typical fashion, Petrarch for example warns Francesco da Carrara, the ruler of Padua, not “to give control of the state to one of your courtiers and thus give Padua a lord other than yourself. History has seen many instances of princes,” he says, “who wanted to exalt their followers but who actually debased themselves and became contemptible and despised in the eyes of their subjects”; Machiavelli likewise warns princes against “flatterers, who swarm in the courts,” and exhorts them to “choose wise men” for courtiers, and permit them “the freedom to speak the truth” without offense.²⁵

The consequence for rulers of excessive flattery is perfectly predictable and familiar. As described in *The Courtier* by Ottaviano:

never hearing the truth of anything, princes become drunk with the power they wield, and ... (seeing themselves always obeyed and almost adored, with so much reverence and praise and never a hint of censure or contradiction) they pass from ignorance to extreme conceit. ... Believing that it is very easy to know how to rule and successful government requires no art or training other than brute force, they devote all their mind and attention to maintaining the power they have and they believe that true happiness consists in being able to do what one wants.

²⁴For example, from his failure while serving as ambassador in Rome to prevent the pope from deposing Francesco Maria della Rovere, the Duke of Urbino, in 1516.

²⁵Francesco Petrarca, “How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State,” in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 64; and Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 76.

Thus, many princes “hate reason and justice because they think these would act as a bridle to their desires” and “suppose that their power would be neither perfect nor complete if they were constrained to obey the call of duty and honour” (IV.7; 286). Nor is this bad only for princes themselves. On the contrary, “ignorance of how to govern peoples gives rise to so many evils, so much death, destruction, burning and ruination, that it may be said to be the deadliest plague of all” (IV.8; 287). Here Castiglione seems to concur with Erasmus’s view that “a flatterer does more damage to the state” through his bad influence over the ruler “than does someone who steals from the public treasury.”²⁶ The extremely difficult art of good courtiership should thus not be seen as a service primarily to oneself, nor even to one’s prince, but rather to one’s country most of all: since “there is nothing so advantageous to mankind as a good prince, and nothing so harmful as an evil one,” Ottaviano observes, the perfect courtier deserves “far greater praise and reward than for any other good work he could possibly do” (IV.10; 289). We must therefore reject the once common view that Castiglione “left the knowledge of government to one man and offered harmless erotic ecstasies to the rest,” and that his “interest in the problem of political action” is “slender.”²⁷ Quite the contrary, he means to offer courtiership as a model for public service.

The manifold attributes of the courtier are specifically tailored to this end. Thus, for example, while noble birth may or may not be of much intrinsic credit to the courtier, it is extremely useful toward the end of capturing the attention of a prince. The mastering of arts and letters, games and amusements, and so forth, may or may not enhance the real dignity of the feudal aristocracy, but it is invaluable toward the end of leading a prince “along the stern path of virtue” by adorning it with “shady fronds” and “strewing it with gay flowers to lessen the tedium of an arduous journey for one whose endurance is slight” (IV.10; 288). Only by resorting to such stratagems, in Castiglione’s view, can the courtier overcome the inherent difficulties discussed above. Unless the courtier can first “win for himself the mind and favour of the prince he serves,” he will not be in a position to “tell him the truth about all he needs to know, without fear or risk of displeasing him” (IV.5; 284). In order to succeed, the courtier must endeavor to guide the prince toward personal virtue and beneficent government, “under the cloak of pleasure [*velo di piacere*]” (IV.10; 289). It is often remarked how the breezy elegance of *The Courtier’s* finished prose conceals Castiglione’s intense compositional labors, and thereby displays the very graceful nonchalance he

²⁶Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, ed. Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 56. It follows, according to Erasmus, that flatterers should receive no worse a punishment—namely, the penalty of death.

²⁷Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution*, 137.

recommends to his readers.²⁸ It is less often remarked, however, that in delivering a serious and perhaps distasteful political message under the pleasurable cloak of light-hearted conversation among a company from which both the author and his prince are strategically absent, Castiglione also follows his own advice on disarming and winning over a potentially unreceptive audience through indirection and self-restraint.²⁹

While certainly improving on the traditional interpretation, many of the more recent political readings of *The Courtier* tend to miss the public-service aspect of Castiglione's argument, emphasizing instead the new political constraints and personal dependency experienced by feudal aristocrats-turned-courtiers.³⁰ The full significance of his program, however, can be better appreciated in light of the background historical situation in northern Italy at the time Castiglione was writing.³¹ From the late eleventh century or so, nearly all the Italian cities and towns from Rome northward had organized themselves into autonomous "communes" or republics. These remarkable city-republics were politically self-governing—elective councils typically sharing authority with a rotating chief executive known as a *podestà*—and committed to an ideal of free and equal citizenship under the rule of law. Having flourished for more than a century, however, the Italian city-republics later began to fail: under the dual pressures of internal social discord and external military danger, they gradually found themselves compelled to forfeit their self-government to hereditary ruling elites known as *Signori*. By the close of the thirteenth century, the republics of Milan, Ferrara, Ravenna, and Verona had succumbed to signorial despotism. Bologna, Padua, Modena, Parma, and Pavia followed in the fourteenth, and Genoa in the fifteenth century. By the time Castiglione came of age in the 1490s, only a few

²⁸E.g., by Falvo, *Economy of Human Relations*, 3–5; Burke, *Fortunes of the Courtier*, 31–32; and Quondam, "Genesis of *The Courtier*," 295.

²⁹We should not infer, however, that Castiglione had this purpose in view from the outset: after all, the form and style of *The Courtier* was established in early drafts, apparently before he had resolved on any specific political message for the work. His aim initially might simply to have been, as he suggests in the dedication, to imitate the dialogues of Plato, Xenophon, and Cicero—much as we would expect from a humanistic author of the Italian Renaissance. On the significance of the dialogue form, see Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness*, chap. 1; on the significance of the author's absenting himself from that dialogue, see Berger, *The Absence of Grace*, chap. 6.

³⁰Here see the authors cited in n. 7 above.

³¹The following history is familiar, but for further details, see J. K. Hyde, *Society and Politics in Medieval Italy: The Evolution of the Civil Life, 1000–1350* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973); Skinner, *Foundations*, esp. parts 1–2, and "The Italian City-Republics," in *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey*, ed. John Dunn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); and Daniel Waley and Trevor Dean, *The Italian City-Republics*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 2010).

city-republics survived, and indeed none of great note apart from Florence and Venice—the former itself falling under Medici domination during his lifetime.

For the capable and virtuous citizen with political ambitions, this failure of republican institutions must be regarded as a great loss. Before the introduction of signorial rule, public-spirited individuals like Castiglione would no doubt have been active participants in the political life of their communities; by the close of the fifteenth century, such opportunities had all but disappeared. Unless one happened to have the incredible good fortune to be born into one of the ruling families, and thus perhaps to become a prince oneself, courtiership represented the only possible outlet for active public service. It is thus unfair to characterize *The Courtier* as a mere “handbook for gentlemen” that “conceals the most shameless opportunism under the cloak of a tiresome refinement.”³² Castiglione’s contemporary Francesco Guicciardini, a courtier himself, provides a sharp rejoinder to such complaints:

I say that a good and loyal citizen should seek to maintain good relations with the tyrant not only for his own safety ... but also for the benefit of his country. For if he does, he will be able, through word and deed, to help many good causes and to hinder many evil ones. Those who censure him are mad; they and their city would be in a fine situation if the tyrant had no one but wicked men around him.³³

Unless we are prepared to say that any interest in public service must be opportunistic, or that quietism is the only ethically possible stance in the absence of republican institutions, we must admit courtiership a potentially honorable, if decidedly second-best, political calling.

There may, of course, be limits, which Castiglione considers during an earlier, and strikingly poignant exchange in book 2: if a ruler is sufficiently “wicked and malignant,” he admits, the courtier must at some point abandon his service “to avoid experiencing the bitter anguish of all those good men who serve bad masters.”³⁴ Leaving the service of a bad ruler can often be very difficult, however, “and in this matter courtiers are like caged birds” (II.22; 130). Here the true moral and ethical significance of domination is again inadvertently revealed. The fault lies not in the would-be courtier, who must resort to the devices of studied refinement and forced congeniality to make any contribution to public service, but rather in the signorial despotism that supplies him no more dignified alternative. Thus Guicciardini, with

³²Bull, introduction, 17.

³³Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections (Ricordi)*, trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 122.

³⁴This passage perhaps clarifies Castiglione’s cryptic remark in the preface to book 1 that his aim is to describe a courtier “so perfect that the prince who is worthy of his service, even though his dominion is small, can count himself a truly great ruler” (I.1; 40).

greater self-consciousness than Castiglione perhaps, reflects that when he was young, he “used to scoff at knowing how to play, dance, and sing, and at other such frivolities.” Later, he wished he “had not done so,” since only “skill in this sort of entertainment opens the way to the favor of princes” and, alas, “the world and princes are no longer made as they should be.”³⁵

III

It is of course doubtful whether Castiglione ever personally felt the loss of republican institutions and the concomitant loss of opportunities for political engagement on terms of equal citizenship. His home city of Mantua surrendered its political freedom in the 1270s, first to the Bonacolsi and later the Gonzagas. In his own career as a courtier, Castiglione never served under a republican government. Urbino, the setting of *The Courtier*, had been under the control of the Montefeltros since the thirteenth century.

Nevertheless, Castiglione was well aware of the grand contest between republicanism and signorial despotism, which was entering its final phase during his lifetime. There is a tendency among many of his interpreters to assume that he was responding to the decline of feudal aristocracy—that his work represents an “attempt to redefine the identity of Italian nobles at a time when their traditional roles were under threat.”³⁶ As we observed above, the fact that *The Courtier* later served in this functional role no doubt accounts for its remarkable career in print, but it is a mistake to read this subsequent history back into the original context of its composition. When alternative political arrangements are discussed in *The Courtier*, traditional feudalism is never considered (nor could it have been, since the idea of feudalism as a distinct sociopolitical system did not yet exist). Rather, the question posed during the conversation on the fourth evening is whether “the rule of a good prince, or the government of a good republic” is the “happier form of government and the more likely to restore the golden age (IV.19; 296).

The case for a free republic is presented by Pietro Bembo, the renowned Venetian scholar and writer who also presents a lengthy discourse on Platonic love in the second half of book four. Bembo is an obvious choice for the latter, since he had in fact published a well-known dialogue on that very topic, but his choice as spokesman for republican government is more

³⁵Guicciardini, *Maxims*, 86.

³⁶Burke, *Fortunes of the Courtier*, 35. This tendency is evident in Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?”; Javitch, *Poetry and Courtliness* and “Constraints of Despotism”; Ullrich Langer, “Merit in Courtly Literature: Castiglione, Rabelais, Marguerit de Navarre, and Le Caron,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988): 218–41; Falvo, *Economy of Human Relations*; Berger, *Absence of Grace*; and Quondam, “Genesis of *The Courtier*,” for example. Note that the tendency cuts across both the more recent political readings and also the more traditional apolitical readings.

curious, and perhaps deliberately ironic: though born and raised in a republic, he chose to live most of his adult life elsewhere in the service of popes and princes, and thus knowing readers might discount his republicanism as disingenuous.³⁷ At any rate, the terms of the defense are familiar from Aristotle and others.³⁸ First, he argues that “since God has given us the supreme gift of freedom, it is wrong that it should be taken from us or that one man’s share should be greater than another’s.” In a republic, there can be “freedom among true equals, when those who sometimes command, sometimes obey as well.” Moreover, he adds, “it more often happens that the opinion of a single man is false than that of many.” This is because “a single man is more prone to lose his equanimity” owing to “anger or indignation or lust” (IV.21; 297).

These arguments, compelling though they may seem to us, are not found decisive. In his reply to Bembo, Ottaviano states that “true freedom” is not “in living as one wishes but rather in living under good laws” (IV.21; 298). This much, of course, republican partisans readily agreed with. Machiavelli in his *Discourses*, for example, notes that when people “are too free to choose and can do just as they please, confusion and disorder become everywhere rampant.” Ideally, republics should be “led to laws and institutions whereby the liberties of the public benefited.”³⁹ Guicciardini likewise insists that “the fruit of liberties and the end for which they were instituted” is precisely “the observance of just laws and order,” and Alamanno Rinuccini, in his discourse on the subject, that “liberty is a kind of potential for enjoying freedom within the limits set by law and custom.”⁴⁰ But Ottaviano goes on to suggest that the chief benefit of good laws is not liberty at all, but rather peace: thus it is specifically “the duty of a good ruler to give his people the enduring laws and ordinances that will enable them to live safe and dignified lives in peace and quiet [*nell’ocio e nella pace senza pericolo e con dignità*] and enjoy in a worthy manner the tranquility for which they actively strive” (IV.27; 302). Our highest aspiration, it seems, is not to live in equal freedom with fellow citizens, as the republicans would have it, but rather simply to be left alone in peace and quiet.

Although not stated explicitly in the text, the implied assumption here is that whereas principalities can secure peace, republics necessarily tend to foment political discord—“there was never any thing so dearly bought,” Thomas Hobbes would later write, and “with the effusion of so much

³⁷It is possibly significant, however, that Bembo read and commented on an earlier draft of *The Courtier* for Castiglione (see Quondam, “Genesis of *The Courtier*,” 286–89).

³⁸See, for example, Aristotle, *Politics* III.11, VI.2; and Cicero, *De republica* I.47–50.

³⁹Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 112, 115.

⁴⁰Guicciardini, *Maxims*, 69; and Alamanno Rinuccini, “Liberty,” in *Humanism and Liberty: Writings on Freedom from Fifteenth-Century Florence*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1978), 199.

blood," as love of the "tumults" of republican liberty.⁴¹ Why does Castiglione pass over this crucial assumption? Perhaps he regarded an explicit discussion as unnecessary in light of the historical experience of the Italian city-republics: the burden of proof lies with those who, like Machiavelli, would advocate for republican liberty in spite of its disorderly tendencies.⁴² Or perhaps Castiglione means to convey the point more subtly, through his singular choice of Ottaviano Fregoso as spokesman for the advantages of princely government. The Fregoso, as it happens, were a leading family in the chaotic politics of republican Genoa. After extensive clashes with political rivals and a period in exile, Ottaviano managed to secure the leading office of Doge in 1513, but only two years later he was forced to acknowledge French supremacy over the city, and in 1522 he was captured by the Spanish and imprisoned. Far from having enjoyed the "peace and quiet" of a tranquil principality, he died in foreign captivity. Regardless of the explanation, however, the assumption is clearly made, and the debate thus concludes with Ottaviano's assertion that "the gentle government of a constitutional monarch" is best (IV.22; 298–99).

IV

The experience of lost republican liberty is more vividly illustrated, of course, not in the biography of Castiglione, but rather in that of Machiavelli. He actively served the Florentine Republic as a diplomat and civil servant from 1498 until the restoration of the Medici in 1512. After being dismissed from his post, he was arrested and tortured on suspicion of conspiracy; later, in celebration of Giovanni de' Medici's election as Pope Leo X, Machiavelli was released as part of a general amnesty. He now faced precisely those diminished political prospects we have discussed: his only opportunity for continued public service was to become a courtier and gain the trust and favor of his new rulers. This appears to be exactly what he set out to do.

Machiavelli's masterwork *The Prince*, written after his release, is dedicated to one of the Medici, and (on one possible reading) it is a particularly ingenious attempt to guide the prince toward beneficent government, much as Castiglione's perfect courtier aims to do. But recognizing, perhaps, the futility of trying to shape unruly passions into benign virtues, Machiavelli turns instead to the counterbalancing weight of interest: rather than appeal to the prince's love of entertainment and good company, he appeals more directly

⁴¹Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998), 143.

⁴²In any case, the relative instability of republics was a commonplace in medieval political theory: see, for instance, Aquinas, *De regno* I.3.

to his love of power.⁴³ With unflinching single-mindedness, he demonstrates what a prince must do in order to secure and maintain his position. Under this very persuasive cloak, however, we find the prince inexorably led to adopt policies that, in practice, will actually benefit the people. Advised that generosity is not in his long-term interest, the prince will restrict his spending and keep taxes low; advised that clemency will eventually undermine respect for his authority, the prince will rigidly maintain law and order and bring peace to his territory; advised that it is better to be feared than loved (if one cannot be both), the prince will nevertheless respect his citizen's lives and property so as not to be hated; and so on.⁴⁴ The real would-be courtier Machiavelli, in short, outdoes the perfect courtier imagined by Castiglione—he finds more effective means to the same end. It is, however, a poignant achievement.

The value of the political freedom lost is brought home by our reflection on the personal lot of the courtier, which Castiglione cannot conceal from the reader. As he has Federico detail in a conversation back on the second day, the courtier must “never appear before his prince in a bad humour, or in a melancholy mood,” and “not be careless in sometimes saying things that may give offense, instead of trying to please.” He must “avoid foolish arrogance” and never “be the bearer of bad news,” and he must observe “always, and especially in public, the reverence and respect which should mark the attitude of a servant towards his master” (II.18; 126). In Guicciardini's more succinct description, “Men dependent upon the favor of a prince are attentive to his every gesture, his slightest sign, so that they may jump to serve him at his pleasure.”⁴⁵ These are the marks of servitude. It is an affront to moral equality and human dignity that people are ever compelled to resort to such obsequiousness and flattery in order to secure even their reasonable aims. Despotism anywhere—in politics, in the family, in the market—makes courtiers of us all, and this is precisely the argument against despotism.

But it is not an argument easily explicable in the language of liberty developed by Hobbes, and subsequently popularized by Jeremy Bentham and William Paley the early nineteenth century. On their “negative” conception of liberty as the mere absence of interference, it is by no means obvious that despotism and liberty are incompatible. This is because a benevolent despot might leave us as free or more from actual interferences as a republican government: by eliminating public debate and political faction, the despot might easily ensure that his subjects, in the expression of Castiglione, “live

⁴³On the use of interest to counteract passion, see the famous discussion in Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁴⁴Machiavelli, *The Prince*, esp. chaps. 16–17.

⁴⁵Guicciardini, *Maxims*, 63–64. The personal dependence of the courtier on the arbitrary will of his prince is emphasized by Javitch, “Constraints of Despotism,” esp. 22–28; and Langer, “Merit in Courtly Literature,” esp. 222–33.

safe and dignified lives in peace and quiet." Indeed, Hobbes introduced the negative conception precisely in order to argue this very point—that whether a state be “monarchical, or popular, the freedom is still the same.”⁴⁶ If we cared only about reducing actual interferences in our lives, then the only issue would be the effectiveness of various possible means. From this point of view, trying to make one’s master a better person is, in principle, no worse a strategy than trying to rid oneself of masters altogether.⁴⁷ This does not seem right. Surely what we want is to have no masters at all.

⁴⁶Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 143. For further discussion, see Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), esp. chap. 1; Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴⁷For a recent attempt to defend this view, see Robert E. Goodin and Frank Jackson, “Freedom from Fear,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 35 (2007): 249–65; and for a cogent reply, Philip Pettit, “Freedom and Probability: A Comment on Goodin and Jackson,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 206–22.