Review Essay: Burke, Peter. *The Fortunes of the Courtier: The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano*

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Cultural historian Peter Burke sets out to chronicle how readers over the years have responded to Castiglione's guidebook to contemporary conduct. Though often read today in a historicist manner as an embodiment of the spirit of the High Renaissance, the Courtier in its own day was read as a practical guide to contemporary conduct, rather than as a representative of the values of a past age. It is the distance between these two kinds of reading—the historicist and the pragmatic—that fascinates Burke and that compels him to try to close the gap. The emphasis lies not on the mass of commentary that sometimes buries the work but on the work's readers; consequently, this is a study of context, not content.

Following an introductory chapter on "Tradition and Reception" (in which Burke looks briefly at the reception of the Renaissance, the history of the book, and the history of systems of values—the broad topics that this case-study seeks to explore) and two chapters on the Courtier in its own time and in Italy, the author concentrates on how the Courtier has been translated, imitated, criticized, and revived in European culture over the centuries. Though the emphasis falls on Castiglione's reception in England, Burke's goal, in effect, is to contribute to an understanding of what he calls the "Europeanization of Europe" (2).

Given the broad international range of this study, the author is forced to limit himself to a very few of the Courtier's themes and thus wisely selects for emphasis those elements of the text traditionally of the greatest appeal to readers, most notably the discussions of grace and sprezzatura. By way of preparation, the rapidly drawn yet lucid history of fundamental values (Grundbegriffe) that run from Homer to Erasmus (9–18) is particularly useful. The principles of urbanity, chivalry, and courtesy (ideals of the city, the battlefield, and the court) are traced from the Greek world's predilection for excellence (Homeric arete), magnanimity (Aristotelian megalopsychia), modesty
and decorum (Xenophon's *aidos* and *eukosmia*); through the Roman world's interest in self-control (Ciceronian *decorum*, a midpath between Senecan *constantia* or *tanquillitas animi* and Ovidian spontaneity and negligence); to the medieval emphasis on modesty in every gesture (Ambrose’s *verecundia*) and discipline that is both religious (Petrus Alfonsi, Hugh of St. Victor) and secular (the laws of chivalry, as formulated in the *chansons de geste*, and of courtesy, measure, and courtly love, as developed in the courts and by the troubadours). The appeal of these ideals to the nobility of Renaissance Europe is also excellently scanned.

Most of what follows in chapter two (dealing with the *Courtier* in its own time) consists of summary (the antecedents and permutations of the dialogue form, the author's life, background material concerning the text itself, particularly its setting and characters), which, while developed with admirable clarity, will be useful mostly to those unacquainted with Castiglione. Longtime readers of the *Courtier*, instead, will probably find the discussion of traditional and innovative terms for behavior (29–32) and of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the text (33–38) to be more stimulating. *Courtier*'s fate in Italy, discussed in chapter three (with a full list of editions in Appendix I), is equally useful.

The Fortunes of the *Courtier*'s final five chapters analyze the European reception of the *Courtier*. One of the dangers of this type of bibliographical survey is that it turns into a list of names, with little to be said about any one individual. In defense of the technique, however, one might point out that a list does at least reveal patterns of dissemination, and the act of compilation itself saves less assiduous observers from carrying out an onerous task, the results of which do provide countless intriguing detail. Elements that come in for more extensive treatment include the translations of key words (*cortegiania*, *grazia* and *sprezzatura*) into various languages, four texts (each from a different culture) that adapt Castiglione to local conditions, expurgation of the text during and after the Catholic Reformation, the moral critique of dissimulation and external show, reasons for the book's fall from favor in the seventeenth century and its subsequent rival,
and the appeal of the work to more modern aesthetes. Whatever the subject, however brief the treatment, the work as a whole is remarkable for the lucidity of its presentation, its detail (Appendix II, for example, lists 328 readers of the text prior to 1700), and the thoroughness of the investigator.

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It is a paradox worthy of high romance that the most influential of Arthurian romances, Caxton’s book of “noble chyvalrye, curtoseye, humanyte,” was likely written by a persistent felon charged with extortion, rape, church-robbery, cattle-raiding, horse-stealing, and lying in ambush to murder his ducal patron. For over a hundred years, since Oscar Sommer and G. L. Kittredge first named Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, his criminal record has seemed so incompatible with the chivalric idealism of the *Morte Darthur* that critics have persistently looked elsewhere for the author. There was no shortage of alternatives: at least nine Thomas Malorys are recorded in the relevant period. But a century, two book-length studies, and a host of articles later the same man emerges as the only one of the name known to have been a knight and in prison when the *Morte Darthur* was completed by a “knight-prisoner” in the ninth year of Edward IV (1469–1470). That is the core conclusion of this new investigation by Peter Field, incorporating the results of various studies published by him in recent years.

This new biography, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, sketches the Malory ancestry, the four hundred or so recorded members, most of them descended from one of eight branches of a twelfth-century ancestor of French stock. The cadet branch to which Thomas Malory belonged held lands in the Midlands from the early