

### **Rhetoric: The Key To Winning, No Matter The Cost**

Count Baldassarre Castiglione was a well known man of his time. Born in 1478, he lived until 1529, and in that time he was engaged in the politics and wars of his home country, Italy. He was good friends with the painter Raphael, who made a famous portrait of the Count *circa* 1515. Towards the end of his years, Castiglione wrote a short text entitled *Il Cortegiano*, or *The Courtier*. It is structured as a dialogue between several fictional courtiers of the real-life court of Duke Urbino, of which Castiglione was himself a part.

In *The Courtier*, Castiglione describes, through the voices of his characters, what the theoretical perfect courtier is like. This perfect courtier is a person who heavily employs four of the parts of rhetoric described in Cicero's *De Inventione*: arrangement; style; invention; and delivery, in order that he may further his or her own social ends. The fifth part of Cicero's rhetoric, memory, is not much emphasized in Castiglione's text and neither will it be in mine. Also underplayed in Castiglione's work, but more conspicuously so for its artful yet insincere presence, is the strong moral component that pervades Cicero's text. Aristotle describes rhetoric as having three parts: *ethos*; *logos*; and *pathos*, and Castiglione's perfect courtier makes extensive use of one of these parts to the exclusion of the other two. Briefly, *logos* is the idea of facts, *pathos* is the idea of stirring emotion in the audience to achieve a purpose, and *ethos* is the presentation of the speaker in order to impel the audience to action. Castiglione focuses almost entirely upon the *ethos* of Aristotle's rhetoric, placing a significantly lower degree of importance on either *logos* or *pathos*.

*The Courtier* is to members of court as Machiavelli's *The Prince* is to rulers. The age of courts and lords was a very dangerous time for everyone involved. The lord's word was law, and we find that:

The ruler's desire to keep his subordinates in check, as well as the court's standards of polite refinement, compel its members to subdue or at least mask their aggressive and competitive drives. That is why such qualities as reticence, detachment, and understatement are so valued at court.... The courtier ... inhabits a world where graceful deceit is valued not only for its intrinsic delight but because the despot who governs that world makes it imperative. (Berger, 10 [Javitch, "Cortegiano", 23, 26]).

Castiglione coins a term for this "graceful deceit": *sprezzatura*, and it is upon this that *The Courtier* instructs its readers, though Castiglione frames his instructions in less bald terms and more noble turns of speech than Machiavelli uses in describing the ruthless nature of a perfect Prince. At the conclusion of Castiglione's work, he declares that,

The ende therefore of a perfect Courtier ... I beleave is to purchase him, by the meane of the qualities whiche these Lordes have given him, in such wise the good will and favour of the Prince he is in service withall, that he may breake his minde to him, and alwaies enfourme him francklye of the trueth of everie matter meete for him to understande, without feare or perill to displease him (Castiglione).

The perfect Courtier, then, is one who has the full confidence of his Prince and can operate around his Prince and interface with his Prince without fearing for his own life. Castiglione goes on to say that the perfect Courtier will use his situation to be frank, honest, and fully truthful about all matters, but we will see that this neither necessarily nor logically follows.

Castiglione notes that, "we are al the sort of us in very dede more enclined of nature to dispraise faultes, then to commende thinges well done" (Castiglione). It is basic human nature to more keenly observe a person's failings and to harp upon them, than to see his virtues and

commend him for those. Castiglione, recommending a way to overcome this obstacle to achieving “the ende ... of a perfect Courtier” (Castiglione), finishes his thought with:

Therefore it behoveth our Courtyer in all his doinges to be charie and heedfull, and what so he saith or doeth to accompany it with wisdom, and not onely to set his delite to have in himself partes and excellent qualities, but also to order the tenour of his life after suche a trade, that the whole may be answerable unto these partes, and see the selfe same to bee alwayes and in every thing suche, that it disagree not from it selfe, but make one body of all these good qualities, so that everye deede of his may be compact and framed of al the virtues (Castiglione).

Thus the courtier must endeavor to never present any faults to be harped upon. All his actions, all his words, both in the court and out, must work in concert towards one goal: possessing no quality of which complaint can be found. This is similar to Cicero’s process of arrangement, which is the prudent selection and placement of arguments, in that the courtier must carefully order all of the rhetorical qualities at his disposal to achieve the above stated goal. And, in turn, the goal of possessing no objectionable quality is itself arranged in service to the greater rhetorical discourse that will lead to the courtier’s position of power with his Prince.

The key to this appealing appearance is *sprezzatura*, a word coined by Castiglione to describe the artfully natural grace of the perfect courtier. The meaning of that word is a little more complicated, however, and is more aptly put as “the ability to show that one is not showing all the effort one obviously put into learning how to show that one is not showing effort” (Berger 9). In this we see the inherent complexity of *sprezzatura*, and that its primary aim is to dissemble, and to do it very (noticeably) well. Thus, to use *sprezzatura* is to show that you might have secrets, and can keep them if you do; that you probably have ambitions and plots,

and would be quite successful with them if you did, but you convincingly act as if you don't, but this is clearly just an act.... The intent is not to conceal your qualities, but to represent them as concealed.

Castiglione, in explaining why it is the perfect courtier must engage in these deliberate misrepresentations and convoluted deceptions, notes:

That lowliness is much to be commended in a Gentleman that is of prowess and well seen in armes: and as that fiercenesse seemeth the greater when it is accompanied with sobermoode, even so dooeth sobermoode encrease and shewe it selfe the more through fiercenesse (Castiglione).

Thus it is shown that a man who desires to attain "the ende ... of a perfect Courtier" needs must engage in dissemblance. Castiglione notes that it is quite often the case that fierce men are seen to be more fierce if they affect a sober mood. Likewise, a noble man is seen to be more noble if he carries himself with humility. Therefore, if one wishes to be seen as one thing, one has only to affect its opposite in order to gain one's true goal. It is not necessary to be truly modest to gain nobility; merely affect false modesty (and do it well) and you shall be esteemed as noble. Essentially, one must carefully choose the most effective words and descriptions to use in any given situation, which is precisely what Cicero's process of style dictates.

This curious use of style, wherein you clothe yourself in the opposite attribute to that which you wish to be seen as wearing, is at the very core of *sprezzatura*, which is all about appearing deeper than one really is. Plato was afraid that is what rhetoric would inevitably be used for, and that such use would necessarily lead to great evil. He accuses the flowery and influential rhetorician Gorgias of it when he says in one of his dialogues:

If a rhetorician and a doctor were to ... contend in speech before the Assembly or some other meeting as to which of the two should be appointed physician, you would find the physician was nowhere, while the master of speech would be appointed if he wished (Plato 93).

Although the title makes it clear who the intended audience of *The Courtier* is, the methods and stratagems held between its covers are not so restrictive. Any man, at any time or any place, could employ the art of *sprezzatura* to ingratiate himself with any entity, be it his Prince, or an Assembly, or some other crowd of people. And if the rhetorician Plato mentions were skilled in *sprezzatura*, we see that the rhetorician would indeed appear to be the better man in relation to the doctor, even in questions of medicine. Castiglione would agree that that is exactly what the outcome would be, and that it would be a good thing and a mark of honor for the rhetor that he could so adroitly dissemble and work his way into the “the good will and favour” of his audience. Cicero believed that rhetoric is a worthy discipline if practiced from a strong moral foundation, and so would disagree with Plato’s belief that rhetoric is only good for evil, but he would also strongly disagree with Castiglione’s highly dishonest approach to the rhetorical method.

Now we can see and may note the contradiction in Castiglione’s closing sentiments on “the ende ... of a perfect Courtier,” wherein it is believed he will “alwaies enfourme [his Prince] francklye of the trueth of everie matter meete for him to understande” (Castiglione) and yet he will simultaneously be dissembling his own nature through affected qualities. This strange dichotomy of character, this paradoxical pairing of truth and deception, is Castiglione’s own *sprezzatura* coming into play. Castiglione dissembles his work just as he prescribes, for in truth he advocates dishonesty, and therefore he affects the countenance of one who advocates the

truth, and thus is believed. Too, his words are clear and forthright, the potential for the abuse of such power and the implications of that obvious, and yet he concludes with powerful, seemingly sincere words to the effect that the ends of his methods are purely noble and virtuous, with only the good of the Prince and the kingdom in mind.

Castiglione focuses entirely on *ethos*, the presentation of the presenter, judging all else will flow from it, and that in the end, the source need not be truth. This is closely related to Cicero's process of delivery, where the presenter uses gestures and clothing, all things nonverbal, to improve his argument. The "court" in Castiglione's work isn't necessarily a place in the Renaissance, it could be any social environment in the contemporary world. Likewise the "courtier" can just as easily be any individual who seeks to gain power over others. Anywhere it is beneficial to make oneself indispensable to those in power as well as to the society as a whole, *sprezzatura* will be a powerfully useful tool. Plato would find this to be extremely disheartening and repulsive, as he always decried rhetoric's capacity for making the worst case seem the better, or the liar seem more virtuous than the hero. Unfortunately for Plato, he was an idealist, and it is the functional methods of men like Castiglione and Machiavelli that must operate in and shape our world.

Berger, Harry Jr.. *The Absence of Grace, Sprezzatura and Suspicion in two Renaissance Courtesy Books*. Stanford University Press. Stanford, CA, 2000.

Castiglione, Baldassare Count. English translation of *The Book of the Courtier* is that of Sir Thomas Hoby (1561) as edited by Walter Raleigh for David Nutt, Publisher, London, 1900. Transcribed by Richard Bear at the University of Oregon, 1997. Accessed May 13, 2004. <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/courtier/courtier2.html>

Plato. *Gorgias*. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Eds. *The rhetorical tradion: Readings from classical times to the present, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* Boston: St. Martins, 2001.