

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 33 (2016)

Artikel: Money, morals, and manners in Renaissance courtesy literature
Autor: Ghose, Indira
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-632499>

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Money, Morals, and Manners in Renaissance Courtesy Literature

Indira Ghose

This essay looks at the way the nexus between wealth and noble status is represented in Renaissance courtesy literature. For an elite whose pre-eminent position was under threat, it became imperative to find new modes of legitimation for its privileged status. The courtesy books discussed in detail use various strategies to justify the wealth of the elite. What they reveal are the social tensions in an age when money increasingly served as a catalyst for social mobility. Ironically, the texts that sought to shore up the position of the elite were drawn on as manuals for those aspiring to join the ranks.

“Let me tell you about the very rich. The rich are different from you and me.” The opening lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story, “The Rich Boy” (1926), describe a world in which the rich are the aristocracy. In an earlier era, it was the aristocracy who were the rich. The distinction, it would appear, is significant. What is striking, however, is the common assumption that undergirds the position of the elite in both societies: the notion that the wealthy possessed a unique set of attributes. This essay is concerned with the nexus between nobility and wealth in the English Renaissance and how the relations between the two are debated in courtesy literature of the sixteenth century. Treatises on manners articulate key ideas of the age. In doing so, they often reflect contemporary tensions in social relations, and they play a role in shaping cultural developments whose legacy remains influential to the present. At a closer look, it emerges that early modern society prefigured pervasive strategies to legitimate the wealth of the social elite – by attempting to demonstrate that they were different from the rest of society.

Economies of English. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 33. Ed. Martin Leer and Genoveva Puskás. Tübingen: Narr, 2016. 129-141.

The Renaissance saw the emergence of a distinctive body of texts that discussed an aristocratic code of ethics from a humanist point of view, marking a departure from the predominantly Christian ideals of chivalric culture (Watson 38-75). The spate of Renaissance courtesy literature was a reflection of the deep crisis the aristocracy was undergoing during this period (Elias; Stone). The crisis of the aristocracy, like the Renaissance itself, had its roots in Italy. The invasion of the French in 1496 had precipitated a process of fragmentation that shaped the political fate of Italy well into the age of Garibaldi. The Italian aristocracy, formerly defined predominantly through their military function, found their status eroded and their self-justification undermined. Their decisive military humiliation made it apparent that the days of cavalry and man-to-man combat were counted – new technological developments in warfare had made them obsolete. Throughout Europe, the process of state formation meant that local aristocratic power bases were increasingly weakened by a centralised polity dominated, to a greater or lesser degree, by an absolutist ruler. The aristocracy were under pressure to redefine themselves and find new sources of legitimation for their role as political and social elite.

One of the solutions mooted in social theory was the idea that the gentry define itself through public duty and service to the Commonwealth. This was the concept promoted in Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Booke of the Governour* (1531), which became one of the foundational works for the English concept of the gentleman.¹ Concomitantly, a culture of aristocratic self-cultivation emerged, launched by Baldassare Castiglione and reiterated by legions of writers of courtesy manuals in his wake. Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528) became a bestselling work both in the original and in translation, and its influence was felt in aristocratic circles throughout Europe. What Castiglione suggested was that what distinguished the wellborn from lesser mortals was their style – their refinement in matters of speech, demeanour and presentation, their superior knowledge of the finer points of social comportment. A vital element in the legitimation strategy of the elite was the glamour surrounding them in the public eye. Castiglione's treatise furnishes a gamut of strategies as to how to manipulate public opinion in favour of the aristocracy. Crucial in this respect was how outward appearance could project an image of innate superiority. As the scholar and diplomat Sir Thomas Smith puts it, "As for their outward shewe, a gentleman (if hee will be so ac-

¹ In the sixteenth century the terms nobility and gentility were used interchangeably. See Kelso 18-19.

counted) must goe like a Gentleman” (38). Wealth played an important role in the self-definition of the nobility. Traditionally, the aristocratic ethos had been bound up with a suspicion of commerce and a disdain for making money (Thomas 112-13). However, in an age that according to some historians saw the birth of consumer society, conspicuous consumption of luxury commodities, clothes, fashion, housing, hospitality and servants were a requisite badge of nobility (Peck).

Lawrence Stone sums up, “Money was the means of acquiring and retaining status, but it was not the essence of it: the acid test was the mode of life, a concept that involved many factors. Living on a private income was one, but more important was spending liberally, dressing elegantly, and entertainingly lavishly. Another was having sufficient education to display a reasonable knowledge of public affairs, and to be able to perform gracefully on the dance floor and on horseback, in the tennis-court and the fencing school” (27).

Courtesy books spell out the necessity to display one’s gentility in an appropriate manner. Stephano Guazzo in his *Civil Conversation* puts it in a nutshell: “Absolute gentlemen are those who to their gentrie by birth and vertue have great riches joined, which serve greatly to the maintenance of gentrie” (1.186). As Castiglione affirmed, it was imperative to demonstrate noble status in deportment and style of life. Furthermore, the aristocracy were expected to demonstrate munificence and generosity in their behaviour at all times. Riches, as Aristotle had argued, were essential to enable the virtue of liberality (*Politics* 1263b), which both Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1119b-1123a) and Cicero (1.42-60) list among the attributes befitting a gentleman. The ideal of magnanimity as set out by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1123b-1125a), which encompassed aspects such as courage, generosity, and a deep contempt for pettiness, was decisive in shaping the ethos of Renaissance nobility. The elite was defined by a distinctive set of moral standards, which, though premised on disdain towards the money motive, were in reality underpinned by economic relations.

In his *Courtiers Academie* (1585), translated into English by John Keepers in 1598, Annibale Romei sets out to imitate the pattern of Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*. His literary dialogue is set at the Court of Ferrara, not Urbino, and traces the course of a seven days’ discussion about the ideal courtier. As at Urbino, the handful of elegant courtiers while away the hours playing parlour games: amongst the ladies a different queen is selected every night, and she selects a courtier to discourse on a topic of common interest. The seven chosen topics evoke the standard topoi of courtesy books of the time: beauty, love, honour, sin-

gle combat, nobility, riches, arms and letters. While the desire to emulate Castiglione is clear, Romei's prose lacks the panache of its model. His text is of interest mainly as an attempt to fortify the embattled status of the aristocracy.

When it is his turn to discourse on nobility, the chosen speaker, one Signior Hercules Varano, makes it clear that nobility is to be defined through birth. As he declares, "Nobilitie is for no other respect, by all men had in price and estimation, but only because he noble seemeth borne with a better inclination, and disposition unto vertue than a plebeyan, or one extracted from the common sorte" (187). Furthermore, he takes care to draw attention to the fact that only those whose noble descent can be traced back four generations count as noble, by which time the taint of commonness will no doubt have worn off. Varano's definition is aimed at excluding even the most affluent upstarts who ape the lifestyle of the gentry. He is at pains to point out that "neither riches, nor sumptuous vestimentes make a man noble, but further it is necessarie, that the renowne of his progenie [ancestry] thereunto concurre: for hee borne of mechanicall parentes, although never so rich, cannot come within the compasse of this definition" (187). Varano refutes as "vaine and sophisticall" (190) the views of philosophers such as the Stoics who claim that since we are all created by God, we share the same blood and that therefore it is ability alone that makes the gentleman.

In response to a question as to whether riches, even riches begotten by avarice, conferred nobility in equal measure with "virtue, honour, magistracie, and glory" (196), Varano declares categorically that virtue is not possible without wealth. He attempts to exclude riches which are "not the companions of vertue" (197), such as those amassed by usurers and the like. His insistent interlocutor presents him with a list of classical figures who were virtuous but poor, culminating in Socrates. Varano dismisses this interjection, and announces: "Nobilitie cannot be nourished, nor brought to her perfection, without riches" (199). The reason is that the gentleman is expected to cultivate the liberal arts, "for as the practice of mechanicall and vile trade, is proper to him [who is] ignoble, so belongeth to him noble, to use freely liberall artes" (199). By the liberal arts Varano means above all the art of war and the study of law, both of which need to be exercised for their own sake, not for the sake of profit. He then cites Aristotle to buttress the statement that "the life of mechanicall artificers is base, degenerating from vertue, and unworthy a civill man" (199). Quiet and leisure are preconditions for the ac-

quisition of virtue.² To practise the liberal arts is impossible without affluence. Varano goes even further. Loss of wealth entails the loss of nobility, since impoverished gentry frequently “applie themselves to base courses, and mechanicall arts” to earn a living, and thus their nobility is tainted (200). In short, Varano asserts that riches are indispensable for nobility.

A further member of the circle reminds Varano of the Venetian aristocracy who are also merchants, famously mocked by Machiavelli. Here Varano draws on the distinction Cicero makes in *De Officiis* (1.151) between retail trade and trade with commodities “brought out of farre countries” (205), which, it seems, is undertaken mainly for the benefit of the commonwealth. Varano ties himself into knots to stress that trade practised “with Decorum” is perfectly acceptable, defining the decorous businessman as the merchant managing his business “by the hand of his agents,” without abandoning his study of the liberal arts, as is the case with the Venetian colleagues (205). These noblemen practise trade for largely altruistic reasons, to help their country and also many other neighbouring provinces. Varano’s rejoinder to the question as to whether heaping up treasure can be considered noble is that this is perfectly fine so long as the nobleman accumulate wealth for a “good & honest end” and with “decorum,” endeavouring each year to increase his revenues rather than the contrary, so that he “fal not into some distresse.” There is nothing more pernicious for nobility than to be in want. This, he blandly maintains, is the honest purpose of “gathering wealth.” In a remarkable contribution to Christian thought, Varano alleges that since one is heaping up riches for one’s children, this aim is even sanctioned by evangelical law (206).

The courtier selected to discourse on riches is Signior Tassone, who shares Varano’s views on the close relation between virtue and wealth. Riches, he insists, are “the principall instrument wherewith to exercise vertue” (243). He is challenged by another nobleman, Signior Antonio, who cites the standard Christian arguments against riches: that the source of material wealth is covetousness or worse, that its influence is corrupting, inducing arrogance, pride, envy, greed, and furthermore it breeds evils such as contention and war. Instead, a stoic indifference to prosperity is advisable. Tassone dismisses these arguments as rooted in envy. He draws an analogy to the commonwealth, which is made up of

² In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.7) Aristotle states that the highest form of fulfilment, namely mental activity and philosophical contemplation, is only available to an elite possessing the necessary leisure and education.

different professions; it follows that not all members of the state can be affluent. Those who pursue the liberal arts deserve riches to uphold their lives of virtue; as for those exercising arts mechanical, “their sordide lives requireth it not” (249). Aristotle is wheeled out to support the view that “nobilitie, rather accompanie the rich, then poore” (249). The poor often commit evil deeds to gain money, which is a fate spared the wealthy. The rich, it might be concluded, are not only different: they are more virtuous.

The Courtiers Academie might be a particularly blatant assertion of aristocratic privilege, complete with a Neoplatonic gloss. A variation on the nobility debate is provided by Giovanni Battista Nenna of Bari in his *Nennio, Or A Treatise of Nobility* (1542), translated into English by William Jones in 1598. The frame narrative is slightly different, and gestures towards the *Decameron*: a party of the *beau monde* take refuge from the plague in a country estate, where a mysterious lady appears, promises the noblest of two gentlemen a precious ring, and then disappears. The dialogue consists of three parts – the first gentleman, Possidonio, lays out the case for deserving the ring on the basis on his lineage and his affluence. The second contender, Fabricio, stakes his own claim on the grounds of his acquired virtue. The final part of the book consists of the judgement delivered by a third member of the party, Nennio.

The opposed arguments are not new. Possidonio rehearses the usual reasons why riches are an inseparable part of nobility. Without wealth a gentleman would be hard put to sustain the virtues of magnanimity and charity. Fabricio’s counterstatement consists of a disquisition on the theme that true nobility consists in the virtues of the mind. The genealogical argument is contemptuously rejected as pertaining to animal husbandry and not of relevance for humans. Riches, he insists, do not make us better people, but are at the root of all evil. Nennio’s judgement speech is carefully balanced and reconciles both sides: both birth *and* virtue are desirable qualities. Riches are not a precondition for nobility, “yet doe they bring some aide thereunto” (96). More interesting are the devastating sideswipes against the elite that spice up the somewhat anodyne narrative. Take, for instance, the tongue in cheek allusion to jokes in the *Cortegiano* that readers at the time would have enjoyed:

As it happened the other day, that being in companie with certaine Lordes (with some of you that are here present) where there were men of great-learning, and skill: and amongst them some of those who bragge so greatly of their Nobilitie, wee discoursed a great while both of hautie, and meane matters; and intending to passe the middle of the day, in iestes and disportes, we set abroche certaine tales, which seemed so much the more

pleasing unto us, as they were farre from the trueth: but these noble men did marvellously wonder at them: As the tale of the ape of India, that plaid so well at chesse, & this other, that in the midst of the river Tabor mens words do freese, & afterwards thawe when they come to the fire. (77-8)

While the members of the group Nennio belongs to chortle happily, the doltish noble lords stand amazed. But the joke takes a more savage twist:

Truely the ignorance of them is so great and grosse, that it depriveth them of their understanding, that it maketh them like unto brute beasts: as by an example which happened the other day, I will give you better to understand. For comming to church with certaine of my friends to heare masse, one of these worthy lords (whose name for some respect I will not utter) sate next unto me, even at the very instant when they lifted uppe that which they cal the body of Christ, and he hearing that I saide *Adoramus te Christe*, he demanded of me what these words *duramus te Christo* signified . . . afterwardes hee asked mee what the sacrament which the priest lifted up with his two handes, and the chalice did signify. (78-9)

While the otherwise conciliatory Nennio takes care to exclude all present members of the select society from the charges of palpable ignorance, obscenity and blasphemy, and to draw them into complicity with him, he makes no bones of his boundless contempt for the lords. The elite do not cut a pretty figure elsewhere in the text either:

Turne your eies (if you so please) upon every town and every place of the world, inhabited by noble men and those of the common sort; and you shall finde no place exempt, where there is not rooted amongst noble men one with another, amongst the nobilitie & the comminaltie, hatred, persecution, envy, ambition, ignorance, and pride. These are the fruites which nobilitie of bloud doe give to the mind. (82)

Far from being exemplars of virtue, the well-born practise every vice in the book. The alternative myth of origins that he cites is deeply cynical: “Nobilitie beganne in the first age, to be noted in those (and they were esteemed Noble) who either by force or fraude, did surmount others” (83). Instead of the tale of noblemen singled out for virtue, the narrative he offers is that of a vicious struggle for power. The first nobleman was the Biblical murderer Cain, who passed on the worthy tradition; “others, who descending from Cain (that proud murtherer and usurper of other mens goods, & so consequently noble) they were likewise esteemed noble” (83). Although the treatise punctiliously fulfils the norms of the

literary dialogue by treating its theme in an ostensibly even-handed manner (Cox), it smuggles a vitriolic attack on the ruling class into the discourse of Nennio, the arbiter of the debate.

As for Castiglione, he is far too sophisticated to allow even the shadow of partiality to fall across his polished prose. In Book 1 of the *Courtier* he briefly treats the question of how to define a gentleman. When enumerating the traits the ideal courtier should possess, Count Ludovico begins by naming gentle birth. The usual reasons are arrayed: the essence of nobility is a “hidden seed” (1.14; 21) planted by nature, which is passed on to one’s scions; the deeds of one’s forebears act as a spur to emulation. The eternal naysayer in the book, Gaspar Pallavicino, immediately objects by pointing to the innumerable cases of noblemen who are anything but paragons of virtue. Gifts of nature, Pallavicino maintains, are distributed quite randomly across humankind. The Count elegantly sidesteps the issue. He fully concedes that the lowborn might be richly endowed with gifts of nature. But what is decisive is public opinion. Merely by being well-born the courtier garners esteem; society is invariably prejudiced in his favour. The real point the Count wants to make is about the importance of first impressions: “anyone who aspires to have the rank and name of good Courtier must strive from the beginning to make a good impression” (1.16; 24). Indeed, beside his noble birth, he would wish the Courtier “endowed by nature not only with talent and with beauty of countenance and person, but with that certain grace which we call an ‘air,’ which shall make him at first sight pleasing and lovable to all who see him . . . giving the promise outwardly that such a one is worth of the company and the favor of every great lord” (1.14; 22). Much of the book turns on how precisely to achieve this intangible quality of graceful style.

Castiglione elides the question of riches entirely. He has no need to discuss them as a condition of nobility. The text has moved on – to a different form of capital entirely. The ideal courtier should be fully aware of the fact that he will be judged on the basis of his external appearance, by the impression he creates. Not only will his clothes speak volumes, his “ways and manners, as well as deeds and words, are all an indication of the qualities of the man in whom they are seen” (2.28; 90). Indeed, his very gestures and habits of “walking, laughing, looking, or the like” are an index of his worth. To be sure, his ultimate purpose is to serve his prince, but in order to win the favour of the prince and steer him onto the path of virtue, it was imperative that the courtier charm him with his accomplishments and graceful conduct.

Several centuries before Bourdieu, Castiglione offered a theory of social distinction based on *habitus*, the often trivial forms of manners and behaviour that demonstrate one's membership in a certain social class. Material wealth needed to be turned into cultural capital to signify nobility. The elite justified its position at the apex of society on the grounds of its superior taste, its command of a body of knowledge that, amongst other things, encompassed how to behave, how to dress, how to converse, how to jest, and how to make love. Carefully cultivated style and taste were the new key to status and needed to be perpetually displayed to a world of peers in competition for precisely the same goods and qualities. One might argue that Castiglione undermined the idea of essential nobility far more decisively than did Nenna – but so elegantly that very few noticed. For if nobility was a matter of performance, a quality that needed to be ceaselessly demonstrated to the world in one's taste and lifestyle, how could it be innate? Perhaps the mystique surrounding the nobility was precisely that, a shimmering mirage that disappeared at a closer look.

At the end of *Nennio*, the eponymous arbiter needs to bestow the prize for greater nobility on one of the two contestants. With a passing nod to the rich boy, Possidonio, Nennio awards the ring to Fabricio, whose claims to nobility on the basis of virtue rather than birth are deemed to be more convincing. For his part, Fabricio makes a gift of the prize to his opponent, which the latter attempts to refuse, but in the face of overwhelming pressure from the surrounding company, reluctantly accepts. With his graceful gesture, the social upstart Fabricio demonstrates his skill in the discipline Castiglione defines as the true mark of the gentleman: *sprezzatura*, a nonchalant ease in concealing the effort one invests in any act or form of behaviour. Style and manners in the arena of cultural consumption defined you as noble. *Sprezzatura*, however, was premised on having the material means to acquire the requisite skills.

As numerous writers point out, the preserve of the nobility was increasingly being encroached upon by social climbers. In 1568 in the anonymous English treatise, *Institucion of a Gentleman*, the author laments the large numbers of upstarts creeping into the strongholds of the gentry. His manual is a self-proclaimed attempt to shore up the position of the gentry and rebuild the house of nobility, which is threatened by invasion: “these base sorte of men have easelye entred therin, & at this day do beare those armes which wer geven unto old gentry” (sig. *iii^r). Admittedly, the nobility themselves are to blame, and he blames their crumbling conditions upon their decadence: “such corruption of maners

hath taken place, that almost the name of gentry is quenched, and handycraft men have obtayned the tittle of honour, though (in dede) of themselves they can chalenge no greater worthynes then the spade brought unto their late fathers” (sig. *ii^v-iii^r). Nevertheless, as he stresses, noble status cannot be bought (sig. B6^v). Half a century later Henry Peacham published *The Complete Gentleman* (1622), one of the best known courtesy books written by an Englishman. Peacham rehearses the standard ideas about nobility circulating in the early modern period, and grounds his argument firmly in the idea of a universal, hierarchical order. With regard to riches, he reiterates the standard line that money alone cannot buy nobility. Peacham even begrudges the leading families of cities like Venice, Genoa, and Florence the rank of aristocracy, and sniffs that what foreigners agree to accept in their native countries is all very well, but in England other rules would apply (22). Unfortunately, he concedes, England, and indeed, the entire continent, is in the grip of a pandemic: “every undeserving and base peasant aiming at nobility” (25). Above all, what he roundly condemns is the sordid reality outside the magic circle of social theory: “the most common and worst of all is in all places the purchasing of arms and honors for money” (26). In truth, as the writers of courtesy books knew all too well, money was the main agent of social mobility. It was the chief means to buy status. Money and nobility were so closely entwined that they were impossible to untangle. As Robert Greene scoffs in his pamphlet, *Greenes Groats-Worth of witte* (1592), “what is gentry if welth be wanting, but bace servile beggerie” (sig. B2^r).

Ironically, courtesy literature itself was inextricably bound up with money. Originally written to shore up the precarious position of the aristocracy, the books were avidly read as how-to manuals by those segments of society aspiring to rise in status (Whigham). The texts became highly marketable and cornered a significant section of the print market, which it shared with other “self-help texts” ranging from epistolary guides to books of compliments, purporting to teach their readers polite discourse. Courtesy itself was purveyed in a variety of forms: in manuals, in the academies for manners that burgeoned in the early seventeenth century, and in the theatre, where plays afforded their spectators a glimpse of a world of gentility, sophistication, and wealth, peopled with well-born characters as glamorous and elegant as in the golden world conjured up by Castiglione. And yet: not everybody was hoodwinked by Castiglione’s dazzling performance of nobility. Lord Burghley, in his own conduct book, a set of precepts intended for his son, drily notes, “Gentilitie is nothing but auncient Riches” (10), dropping

the Aristotelian reference to virtue entirely. Hemingway, in his riposte to F. Scott Fitzgerald, put it more drastically. In response to the statement that the rich are different, he remarked laconically, “Yes, they have more money” (Trilling 183).

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