

# PRIMARY SOURCE

## *The Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione

*Baldassare Castiglione was a well-known Venetian diplomat who served under the Duke of Urbino. Inspired by debates that occurred in Urbino on what makes a well-rounded person and frequent trips to foreign courts, The Courtier is the finest Renaissance example of a self-improvement, self help manual. Published in 1528, the advice given by his book of manners and polite society was diligently followed by a whole generation of young courtiers. As you read this excerpt from his book, consider what characteristics the perfect courtier should possess.*

**Directions:** Read, ANNOTATE, and answer the questions at the end of the reading. Additionally, choose and define 5 words that are unfamiliar to you.

I am of the opinion that the principal and true profession of the Courtier ought to be that of arms; which I would have him follow actively above all else, and be known among others as bold and strong, and loyal to whomsoever he serves. And he will win a reputation for these good qualities by exercising them at all times and in all places, since one may never fail in this without severest censure.... And....I would have him well built and shapely of limb, and would have him show strength and lightness and suppleness, and know all bodily exercises that befit a man of war: whereof I think the first should be to handle every sort of weapon well on foot and on horse, to understand the advantages of each, and especially to be familiar with those weapons that are ordinarily used among gentlemen.... [The Courtier should] avoid affectation to the uttermost....and, to use possible a new word, to practice in everything a certain non-challance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought.... Our Courtier then will be esteemed excellent and will attain grace in everything, particularly in speaking, if he avoids affectation; into which fault many fall, and often more than others, some of us Lombards, who, if they have been a year away from home, on their return at once begin to speak Roman, sometimes Spanish or French, and God know how. And all this comes from overzeal to appear widely informed.... I think that what is chiefly important and necessary for the Courtier in order to speak and write well is knowledge.... Nor would I have him speak always of grave matters, but of amusing things, of games, jests, and waggery, according to the occasion; but sensibility of everything, and with readiness and lucid fullness; and in no place let him show vanity or childish folly.... I would have him more than passably accomplished in letters, at least in those studies that are called the humanities, and conversant not only with the Latin language but with the Greek, for the sake of the many different things that have been admirably written therein. Let him be well versed in the poets, and not less in the orators and historians, and also proficient in writing verse and prose, especially in this vulgar [vernacular] tongue of ours.... You must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he be also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read notes, he can play upon diverse instruments. For if we consider rightly, there is to be found no rest from toil or medicine for the troubled spirit more becoming and praiseworthy in time of leisure than this....

I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore think our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting. And do not marvel that I desire this art, which today may seem to savor of the artisan and little to befit a gentleman; for I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honorable and necessary thing.... The game of tennis....is nearly always played in public, and is one of those sports to which a crown lends much distinction. Therefore I would have our Courtier practice this, and all the others except the handling of arms, as something that is not his profession, and let him show that he does not seek or expect praise for it, nor let him seem to devote much care or time to it, although he may do it admirably.... There are certain other exercises that can be practiced in public and in private, like dancing; and in this I think the Courtier ought to have a care, for when dancing in the presence of

many and in a place full of people, it seems to me that he should preserve a certain dignity.... Besides daily showing everyone that he possesses the worth we have already described, I would have the Courtier strive, with all the thoughts and forces of his mind, to love and almost to adore the prince whom he serves, above every other thing, and mold his wishes, habits, and all his ways to his prince's liking.... Our Courtier....will not be a bearer of evil tidings; he will not be thoughtless in sometimes saying things that offend instead of pleasing as he intends. He will not be obstinate and disputatious, as some are who seem to delight in nothing but to be troublesome, and disagreeable like flies, and who make a point of spitefully contradicting everyone.... Let him above all take care not to weary his lord, and let him wait for favors to be offered him rather than angle for them so openly as many do, who are so greedy that it seems as if they must die if they do not get what they seek.... I would that our Courtier....might love, honor, and respect others according to their worth and merits, and always contrive to consort [mingle] more with such as are in high esteem and noble and of known virtue, than with the ignoble and those of little worth; in such ways that he may be loved and honored by them also. And he will accomplish this if he be courteous, kind, generous, affable, and mild with others, zealous and active to serve and guard his friends' welfare and honor both absent and present, enduring such of their natural defects as are endurable without breaking with them for slight cause, and correcting in himself those that are kindly pointed out.... I do not care at present to go more into detail in speaking of things that are too well known, such as that our Courtier ought not to avow himself a great eater or drinker, or given to excess in any evil habit,...because a man of this kind not only may not hope to become a good Courtier, but can be set to no more fitting business than feeding sheep.... If our Courtier excels in anything besides arms, I would have him get profit and esteem from it in fine fashion; and I would have him so discreet and sensible as to be able with skill and address to attract men to see and hear what wherein he thinks he excels, always appearing not to do it from ostentation, but by chance and at others' request rather than by his own wish....Then, in that of which he knows he is wholly ignorant, I would never have him make any pretense or seek to win any fame; nay if need be, let him frankly confess his ignorance.... I wish our Courtier to guard against getting the name of a liar or a boaster, which sometimes befalls even those who do not deserve it.... Let it suffice to say, besides the things already said, that he should be of such sort as never to be without something to say that is good and well suited to those with whom he is speaking, and that he should know how to refresh the minds of his hearers with a certain sweetness, and by his amusing witticisms and pleasantries to move them cleverly to mirth and laughter....

Many faculties of the mind are as necessary to woman as to man; likewise gentle birth, to avoid affectation, to be naturally graceful in all her doings, to be mannerly, clever, prudent, not arrogant, not envious, not slanderous, not vain, not quarrelsome, not silly, to know how to win and keep the favor of her mistress and of all others, to practice well and gracefully the exercises that befit women....Beauty is more necessary to her than to the courtier, for in truth that woman lacks much who lacks beauty. Then, too, she ought to be more circumspect and take greater care not to give occasion for evil being said of her.... Let her obey, please and honor his lady with all reverence, and hold her dearer than himself, and prefer her convenience and pleasures to his own, and love in her not less the beauty of mind than of body. Therefore, let her take care not to leave her to fall into any kind of error, but by admonition and good advice let her always seek to lead her on to modesty, to temperance, to true chastity.... In such fashion will our courtier be most acceptable to his lady, and she will always show herself obedient, sweet and affable to him, and as desirous of pleasing him as of being loved by him.

From: Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Leonard Opdycke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903)

**Please answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper. Your response should be no less than 3 complete sentences for each question.**

- 1. According to Castiglione, what are the basic attributes of the ideal Renaissance courtier?**
- 2. According to Castiglione, what are the basic attributes of an ideal Renaissance lady?**
- 3. Describe the code of behavior and necessary skills of a modern day renaissance man/woman? Think about how these qualities are different from the 1500s.**
- 4. How do/have the values of "Renaissance thinking" influenced and continue to impact the development of history?**