Courts and Courtiers in the Renaissance

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Abstract
Courts were the center of political and cultural life in the Renaissance. A longstanding sociological theory sets the origins of our modern concept of civilized behavior in the Renaissance courts. Differentiating themselves from medieval courts by abandoning itinerancy and becoming more and more stable, Renaissance courts assumed a fixed, enclosed, and elitist structure, with the prince or lord at its center and a complex entourage of courtiers employed in different tasks surrounding him. At the same time, courts were places of unprecedented social mobility, where men of humble origins and great ambition could strive to obtain success and fame. In addition, they were important venues for the distribution of patronage: princes invested in writers and artists who could bring prestige to their court and make it outshine any rivals. Renaissance courts are also of paramount importance for gender studies. The courtly environment saw examples of powerful and influential females, who challenged the still existing stereotypes of women’s weakness and inferiority to men. Finally, the court was one of the main topics of Renaissance satiric writings, which offered a completely different picture from the image of splendor and magnificence that the courtly environment tried to present, depicting courts as overrun by hideous vices such as envy, flattery, and ruthless competition for success.

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

The Renaissance Court: Meaning and Myth
A well-known theory originating with the sociologist Norbert Elias’s groundbreaking work *The Civilizing Process* (first published in 1939) states that what we nowadays recognize as manners, polite behavior, and control over one’s body – in short, what we define as “civilized” behavior – first developed in the courts of the Renaissance (Elias 1978, 1982). Although Elias’s theory has been the object of criticism and revision through the years, it remains a pivotal piece of scholarship thanks to its highlighting of the important changes that courts and the culture which originated within them brought to the mentality and to the organization of civic life in Europe.

The court was not a Renaissance innovation: it had existed in ancient and medieval societies. Yet in the Renaissance the court assumed entirely new characteristics and an unprecedented importance that together allow us to define it as a peculiarly Renaissance phenomenon. The term
“court” encompassed a multiplicity of areas of meaning, denoting at the same time a physical place, a political institution, and the many different of people living and working within it. The third meaning – the court as an entourage – is the most important connotation of the term in the early modern period, while the related Latin terms aula and curia designated the physical place alone.

The notion of the physical presence of the court in a specific place is also an important aspect that sets Renaissance courts apart from medieval ones. In the Middle Ages, the courts were itinerant: the prince and his entourage moved throughout the kingdom, and the court was located whenever the prince was at a given time. In the Renaissance, however, as the princely staff grew, the court became more and more settled in a precise location. The term court thus began to indicate a fixed and enclosed space entrance to which was reserved for those who belonged to a very restricted group. The Renaissance court was strictly elitist in nature. It was separated from the rest of the city by physical boundaries and by its rigid codes of conduct. The courtly code of conduct dictated every aspect of life at court, from dress to social etiquette, reinforcing the notion of the courtly space as belonging only to a select few (Mateer 2000).

Scholarship has often recognized the importance of Renaissance courts and of the culture that they developed and promoted for the history of Western civilization. Defined as “laboratories of modernity” (Muchembled 2002), their concentration of culture, power, and manners made them into places where many of the behavioral norms and the customs of living that were to influence European societies in the centuries to come were first created and put into practice.

In analyzing the court as a political and social subject that shaped the reality of early modern Europe, it is important to point out that the term court also came to designate a mythical place (both utopian and dystopian) that existed not so much in reality as in the imagination of those who depicted it. The court as a “place of mind” gave birth to two antithetical representations of courtly life. There was an entirely positive representation of a courtly utopia, according to which the court was the breeding ground of the noblest virtues and the most exquisite manners, inhabited by men and women who devoted their life to honest behavior and to the most refined pursuits. This courtly utopia, interestingly, was often presented as belonging to the past and now lost in the decay and corruption of contemporary courts. The second representation of the court was a foil to the courtly utopia, a dystopian picture where anything associated with the court becomes tainted, morally depraved, and damaged beyond repair.

The Origins of Renaissance Courtliness

An important distinction between Renaissance courts and their predecessors is that medieval courts were not places devoted to cultured pastimes and elegant manners, as in their Renaissance incarnation, and were instead more associated with warlike behavior (Muchembled 2002). According to Aldo Scaglione, the history of courtliness began in tenth-century Germany, when the emperor Otto I started attracting talented men into his entourage, investing them with the office of bishop, while at the same time employing them in administrative positions for the empire (Scaglione 1991; Jaeger 1985). In the same period, there was a shift in cathedral schools, which no longer focused on producing teachers of the Bible and became more oriented towards training religious leaders and public administrators. Courtier-bishops and cathedral schools started laying the foundations for the development of courtly culture and of courtly manners, and the German episcopate became “a training ground for manners.” Courtliness, however, abandoned its association with cathedral schools during the twelfth century, when it shifted to secular courts (Scaglione 1991).

After the initial development of courtliness in Germany, Renaissance Italy was the place where the court came to assume a unique role as the foundation of cultural and social life. In Italy as well, courtly manners were developed and systematized to their highest standard, thanks to Baldassar Castiglione’s extremely influential manual for conduct at court, Il libro del cortegiano (Castiglione 2000) (The Book of the Courtier).
The predominance of the court structure throughout the Italian peninsula was also a Renaissance innovation. During the Middle Ages, only the south of Italy was structured as a princely court, due to the presence of the kingdom of Naples. The papal court had been in exile in Avignon for the greater part of the fourteenth century, but had returned to Rome at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The main form of government in the northern and central parts of Italian peninsula in the Middle Ages was represented by city-states with a republican government. Yet the situation of these republics had begun to change over the course of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, a time when Italian Renaissance courts were still small structures, whose claim to power often rested on shaky foundations. It was only during the course of the Renaissance that they were able to expand, to consolidate their power, and to become the cultural centers of the period.

Finally, it is necessary to underline that the history of Renaissance courts is also complicated by the fact that major courts (ruled by a prince, a duke, or the pope) coexisted with various “satellites” represented by minor courts or households. Members of the minor nobility, powerful members of the clergy such as cardinals, the female consorts of rulers, and, in some cases, even rich and influential private citizens were holding their own courts. This multiplicity of courts created a particularly fertile, but also hectic and extremely competitive, environment. It was an environment in which, furthermore, the most ambitious men of the time could decide to try their luck and work their way towards social advancement.

Innovative and Original Aspects

The Structure of Renaissance Courts

Renaissance courts, both large and small, tended to share some general characteristics. Courts usually had a rigid structure, centered on a prince who in the course of the early modern period would become more and more powerful, often to the point of being represented as a God-like figure. Even in the less absolutistic models of court, the prince stood at the center of the complex structure of the court, providing its order. The prince’s favor or disfavor could determine a courtier’s fate: he was therefore respected and feared, and contemporary writings on courts advised courtiers never let down their defenses when in the presence of the prince. Instead, they should always behave as if they were in the presence of a ferocious and unpredictable lion.

The facility with which one could rise or fall in the favor of a prince made the court an extremely competitive environment. Courtiers knew very well that they could never consider any position, even the most successful one, as permanent and safe; and they were also very aware that the misfortune of another courtier could result in their own good fortune. At court, that is to say, one needed to guard oneself not only against the fickleness of princely favor, but also against the potential attacks of fellow courtiers.

At the same time, the competitiveness of the courtly environment also presented men of talent born into the lower social strata of society with an unparalleled opportunity to climb the social ladder. This opportunity for social advancement was, however, paired with a constant anxiety both on the personal level – due to the constant instability of a courtier’s position – and on the class level, since individuals belonging to the higher levels of society could feel at risk of being superseded by ambitious and talented ones from below.

The court was also a place where constant performance was a necessity. This theatrical aspect was typical of the Renaissance court and is another feature that distinguishes it from its medieval counterpart. The necessity of constantly reaffirming one’s talents and accomplishments in front of the prince, of making oneself noticed in order to avoid being neglected in the distribution of rewards or falling from grace, meant continuously engaging in performative behavior. In addition, the main function of the court was also to showcase the power of its prince: a function that was especially critical in Italian courts, which were relatively new and therefore in need of persistent assertion of their power. As a consequence, it was imperative that the court publicly displayed the power of its prince. No one – neither the
courtiers, nor the prince – was exempt from the pressure to enact their power, talent, refined manners, and intellectual sophistication.

Renaissance courts also offered new opportunities to women. Though still far from being considered equal to men, Renaissance women, in some cases, experienced an unprecedented degree of power and influence at court. This feature of Renaissance court is of paramount importance for the history of women.

Court Culture, Patronage, and Status
As cultural centers of the Renaissance, the courts worked to sustain the ideology on which the courtly system was based. Court culture created tales, beliefs, and symbols to establish its set of values and to reinforce its own existence. Renaissance courts represented a distinctive combination of power and elite culture. In order to support a fitting image of themselves, courts created what has been called a “marriage of power and imagination” (Martines 1979).

Courtly patronage, by offering support to some of the most gifted writers, artists, and musicians of the time, worked precisely towards the goal of creating and sustaining the best possible image of courtly power. The talents that were attracted to the court brought prestige to it, celebrated courtly power in their works, and created an aura of grandeur around the prince and his entourage. Renaissance courts also rivaled each other in influence and splendor, and a court’s ability to attract the most highly reputed artists and literati was the equivalent of a publicity move aimed at asserting its superiority over any potential competitors.

This resulted in an unprecedented alliance between art and power. Works of art were created not for a market, but directly for patrons, who regarded them as tokens of their influence and refinement. Patronage was also of great benefit to the artists, who could count on demand for their work and on a secure income. This bargain, in turn, gave patrons considerable influence over the artist’s creations, limiting the freedom of court artists (Martines 1979).

Patronage of the arts and the consumption of refined goods should be seen in connection with the need of the Renaissance court culture to display luxury and power. The same desire motivated the construction of buildings, a practice that allowed princes to make statements of power for the entire city and for visitors from rival courts. This continuous display of power and luxury has been seen as a way to support the princes’ claim to power and to assert their role as leaders (Martines 1979). It was particularly important for the signori who ruled Italian courts, since their position was often new and relatively unstable, and therefore in need of continuous reinforcement.

The consumption and the display of Renaissance courts almost inevitably resulted in a dramatic shortage of money. Princes often overspent their budgets and eventually found themselves in dire straits. In addition to the expenses for buildings and for works of art, they often squandered vast amounts of money on ephemeral matters such as celebrations, feasts, and banquets, which can appear puzzling to the modern eye. In order to explain the courtly vogue for squandering money on such events, we need to take into account that occasions like these revolved around fundamental issues of status. In a society where everyone was competing to affirm their status, lavishing large sums on luxury and in feasts brought a return in prestige. In addition, liberality was regarded as a core virtue of a good prince, while one who leaned towards parsimony risked alienating his subjects. Similarly, magnificence, the act of spending money on luxurious objects, of sponsoring building projects, and of offering patronage to artists, was considered a pivotal virtue in the Renaissance mentality.

It was not only princes who incurred great expense in order to achieve and maintain status, but also many of their subjects. Renaissance courtiers needed to invest in statements of prestige such as clothes, jewelry, and horses before trying their luck at court – with potentially ruinous consequences, in the event that they eventually were not able to gain the favor of the prince.

The Prince and His Power
Securing the prince’s favor – his grace, as it was referred to in Renaissance writings on courts – was the primary aim of every courtier. The prince
was the fulcrum of the court and the embodiment of power that was seen as radiating directly from him. Everything at court centered around the prince, and energies of his entourage converged on serving and pleasing him. In some cases, such as at the court of Elizabeth I, the monarch also became the incarnation of moral virtues (specifically, in her case, those of Protestant morality). From the Renaissance period to the Baroque, the power of the prince became more autocratic, rendering him increasingly distant even from those among his courtiers who could claim the highest ranks among the nobility.

Yet for all his influence, the prince’s power needed to be carefully constructed and constantly maintained. Renaissance texts often convey the notion that the power of the prince was in need of ornamentation and continuous embellishment. In addition, recent scholarship has pointed out that even the prince was not immune from the necessity of mastering the courtly code of comportment and engaging in constant performance at court, since it was precisely on such mastery and performance that the display and the retention of power at court was based (Snyder 2009).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the ability of the prince either to concede or deny his grace was the source of great apprehension among his courtiers. Since the fate of any courtier depended on the will of the prince, and since his will could change on the spur of the moment, he was often also represented as the personification of the Wheel of Fortune, who could suddenly raise a man to the highest honor or cause him to lose everything he had ever achieved.

In order to gain and to maintain the prince’s favor, courtiers needed first of all to make themselves visible to him, putting on show their virtues and talents for his eyes. In addition, to win his grace courtiers employed obedience and also, very often, flattery. A courtier was expected to obey all the prince’s commands and to fulfill all his desires— or, if he really wanted to succeed, to foresee them before they were even spoken. Courtiers were also supposed to like whatever their prince liked and to despise whatever he despised, in order to please him as much as possible. The obedience required from courtiers in some cases raised ethical dilemmas, such as what they should do when the orders received from their prince conflicted with their own moral code.

It would be simplistic, however, to view courtiers as completely subject to the prince. Through their display of courtly arts, courtiers aimed to influence the prince in order to receive rewards or privileges. The most favored and esteemed among courtiers, in addition, were often able to have an impact on the prince’s decisions. The possibility of becoming a respected counselor to a prince, one who could assist and guide him, was, indeed, the highest aspiration of many Renaissance courtiers.

The Figure of the Courtier and His Role at Court

The court was composed of a wide array of subjects who differed both in their social origins and their role at court. Some courtiers belonged to the minor nobility: they were often the rulers of small estates located within the prince’s domain. Such noble-born courtiers, whose aristocratic titles rendered them worthy of acting in lieu of the prince, usually held the most prestigious roles, such as leading the prince’s armies, governing territories under his jurisdiction, or going on diplomatic missions. Many high ranking courtiers, because of their strong humanist education, were also prominent figures in the cultural life of the court, in some cases writing literary works (such as chivalric poems) that brought fame to it. Courtiers who did not come from a noble background were instead assigned more lowly tasks, such as working as stable masters, attendants, and service staff. For a long time, the distance separating noble-born courtiers from their non-noble counterparts was apparent, with higher-ranking courtiers traditionally seen as closer to the prince and often styled as his companions. By the sixteenth century, however, the distance between the prince and his noble-born courtiers had widened significantly, separating even elite courtiers from their ruler (Cox 2016). Noble-born courtiers were often suspicious of their lower-ranking counterparts, whom they saw as a threat to their status. The unflattering portraits of those who rose too quickly at court and the discontent of others who
considered themselves unjustly neglected that we find in some in early modern writings on courts can be partially explained by the uneasiness of elite courtiers forced to compete with ambitious social climbers.

The Book of the Courtier and the Definition of Courtliness

Despite the importance of the courtier for Renaissance culture, for a very long time there were no depictions of his ideal features nor definitions of his role at court. He was a figure who was almost always depicted in an unflattering light, with negative representations appearing in satirical writings against courts and courtiers (Anglo in Dickens 1977).

One of the earliest positive depictions of courtiers is offered by Diomede Carafa’s 1479 treatise Dello optimo cortesano (On the Excellent Courtier), an early example of a genre – manuals offering advice to prospective courtiers – destined to enjoy a vast success in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A positive image of the courtier was finally produced at the end of the 1520s, with the publication of the most influential work on courts and courtiers, followed by a steady stream of reprints, imitations, and even parodies: Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier. Castiglione belonged to the class of the elite courtiers: both his paternal and maternal ancestors were descended from the northern-Italian nobility, and he was directly related to the ruling family of Mantua on his mother’s side. He began his career as a courtier in his native Mantua and later moved to the court of Urbino, at the time one of the most culturally refined and influential courts of the Italian peninsula. Like many noble-born courtiers, Castiglione acted as a diplomat and an ambassador, in his case for both the duke of Urbino and the pope.

Structured as a dialogue, the Book of the Courtier is divided into four books, each dealing with a specific topic concerning the courtier and his life at court. The dialogue is set in the Urbino court (ruled by the Montefeltro dynasty) where Castiglione was a courtier and casts some of his closest acquaintances as speakers. The text was first printed in 1528, but it had been circulating previously in manuscript form and appears to have attracted considerable attention before its publication. The main novelty of the Book of the Courtier resides in featuring, for the first time, a group of courtiers who take themselves and their role and function at court as a topic for reflection and discussion: the goal of the speakers is to define the qualities of the ideal courtier and of his natural companion, the perfect court lady. The dialogue structure of the text allows Castiglione to portray the courtiers and their culture in action. It is also worth noting that the occasion for the discussion of the perfect courtier is described as a game; so, the dialogue portrays one of the sophisticated and erudite pastimes that were common practice among Renaissance courtly elites. Over the course of four evenings, under the supervision of Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga and her lady-in-waiting Emilia Pia, the courtiers of Urbino engage in an elegant battle of wits aimed at “forming in words” the perfect courtier.

On the first day of the dialogue, the Book of the Courtier introduces its key term. The ideal courtier should be able to employ in all of his actions something defined, with a neologism, as sprezzatura, an almost untranslatable word that conveys the notion of a carefully constructed nonchalance, while being semantically related to the word sprezzare, disdain. Sprezzatura is also defined in the Book of the Courtier as “the art of concealing art”: the courtier always needs to style his behavior with extreme care and yet make it appear as if it were entirely natural. The ideal courtier will excel at all the activities considered important in court culture, from the more military ones, such as jousting and fencing, to more social and artistic activities, such as engaging in polite conversation and dancing or playing music, but he will always hide any effort behind such accomplishments. Only through the attentive practice of sprezzatura will the courtier be able to gain his prince’s attention and finally to be granted his “grace” or favor.

The Goal of Courtliness

Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier offers a portrait of courtliness as the way in which court nobility engage in refined activities. The depiction of the court and its inhabitants presented in the dialogue,
the interaction between the protagonists, the topic of the discussion, and the very nature of “game” surrounding the formation of the ideal courtier may reinforce the stereotype of Renaissance courts as sites where an idle elite spent their days in elegant but ultimately useless pastimes.

The apparent idyll of courtly pastimes, however, hides a much harsher reality. Courtliness, intellectual refinement, and elegant manners often concealed violence and conflict. Courts, by stimulating competition for princely favor, and with their frequent and sudden upheavals of fortune, were the perfect environment for the development of cut-throat rivalry among peers. The ritualization of relations demanded by courtly manners was also therefore a way to contain potential outbreaks of violence (Muchembled 2002).

According to the theory originating with Norbert Elias, courtliness was a means of domesticating a previously independent class of warriors and subjecting them to the authority of the prince (Elias 1978). The discontent expressed by court writers in texts criticizing courtly life has been interpreted as a lament for this lost independence. Elias’s theory has been called into question on the grounds that it is too general to provide a thorough explanation of the reality of different courts. At the same time, however, the pages of the Book of the Courtier offer testimony to issues such as fear of disempowerment, of triviality, and of effeminacy that were a source of anxiety for Renaissance courtiers.

While the first book of the Book of the Courtier is devoted to defining the qualities of the perfect courtier, in the second book the participants in the dialogue debate how the courtier is supposed to put his virtues into practice. The second book shows significant signs of uneasiness concerning the role of the courtier and the aim of courtly manners by evoking the virtuous courts of the past, while lamenting the decay of most present-day courts, and by implying that, despite all of his accomplishments, the courtier’s relationship to his prince could easily be a troublesome one.

The problem of the potential triviality of courtly arts and of the complex rapport between the courtier and his prince is confronted in the fourth book of the dialogue. In this part of the text, furthermore, a courageous attempt is made to carve out for the courtier a prominent role at the side of his prince. The courtly arts that have been outlined in the previous books are justified as ways to capture the attention of the prince and almost enchant him, with the aim of gaining his confidence and trust, in order to become his wise, moral counselor. In a society where princes were depicted as over-powerful, childishly whimsical, often prone to fall prey to vice and under the bad influence of devious flatterers, the perfect courtier’s role was to guide him along the path of virtue instead. Courtly arts, therefore, become a “salutary deception” practiced by the courtier with a concrete and moral end in mind. Assigning the role of counselor to the courtier also solved the problem of his disempowerment, establishing an influential position for him. Yet the growing absolutism of early modern courts rendered this role very difficult to exercise in reality.

Impact and Legacy
The Legacy of the Book of the Courtier and the Evolution of Manuals of Court Conduct

The Book of the Courtier enjoyed a remarkable success. After the first edition in 1528, the book was soon reprinted, for a total of 62 editions in Italy over the course of the sixteenth and of the seventeenth centuries; publishers also appear to have competed to produce more attractive versions of the text, with new prefaces and notes added to the editions. The popularity of the Book of the Courtier was not restricted to Italy alone. Around 60 translated editions of the text were published in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, in languages that included French, English, Spanish, German, and Polish. It was not until the 1650s that a significant decline of interest took place.

In addition to translations, the popularity of Castiglione’s work led to a number of imitations, with over a thousand books offering advice to courtiers being published in Europe in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century (Burke 1995). There is, however, an important difference
between Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* and the works that followed it, a difference that is perceivable even in the space of a few years. As princely power became more detached from courtly elites, the already problematic model of the courtier-counselor set out in the last book of the dialogue became even less likely to find a counterpart in reality. As courts became increasingly bureaucratized, each member of court began to have his own specialized position. This resulted in court intellectuals experiencing a reduction in their autonomy, which in turn led to a decrease in the possibility of exerting any significant influence on the prince. This change is reflected in the development of manuals for the instruction of the secretary, a specialized figure who was in charge of assisting his lord, but not of advising him. In addition, mastery of the courtly code of conduct and the performative aspect of courtliness became more important for gaining and for maintaining power at court (Snyder 2009).

The most important writings on courtliness produced after the *Book of the Courtier* reflect this turn of events by moving away from Castiglione’s emphasis on the courtly arts and insisting instead on providing useful, down-to-earth, and practical advice for ambitious courtiers whose main intent was to climb the social ladder at court. Or in other less cynical and more pessimistic cases, manuals of conduct at court presented themselves as sets of recommendations for surviving the increasingly merciless competition among peers at court.

Some of the most interesting writings on courts that emerged in the wake of Castiglione’s *Civile conversazione* (Civil Conversation, 1574), Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio’s *Discorso intorno a quello che si conviene a giovane e nobile e ben creato nel servire un gran principe* (Discourse on What Benefits a Young Well-Mannered Nobleman in Serving a Prince, 1569), and Torquato Tasso’s *Malpiglio, overo de la corte* (Malpiglio, or on the Court, 1585; Tasso 1973) – offer very different pictures of courtly life and models of conduct at court from the *Book of the Courtier*. All of these works prescribe less zealous conduct on the part of the courtier than the one proposed by Castiglione, moving away from the active pursuit of virtue at court to passive contentment with the mere avoidance of vice. These models of conduct were more feasible to attain in the grim reality of contemporary courts than the high-minded portrait painted in the *Book of the Courtier*. The ideal of the courtier-counselor was left aside, and the courtier was advised instead to concentrate on surviving the threat of cut-throat competition and the risk of sudden fall from grace that are a constant of life at court. Both Giraldi’s *Discourse* and Tasso’s *Malpiglio*, in addition, present an idea of courtliness as a set of precepts for self-defense against the dangers of courtly life. The courtier is advised not to make too much of a display of his talents in order to avoid the danger of provoking the envy of his fellow courtiers or even of the prince. Prudence, as a result, becomes the most important virtue for the courtier, while dissimulation is recommended as the only way to protect oneself from the omnipresent menace of envy.

The endorsement of prudence, dissimulation, and simulation paves the way for the morally ambiguous practices set out in seventeenth-century manuals of conduct, exemplified by the “chilling cynicism” (Anglo 2005) found in a text such as Lorenzo Ducci’s *Arte aulica* (The Courtly Art, 1601). This new notion of the courtly code of conduct created the basis for the disenchantment with courtliness and with life in general that one sees in Baroque writings on courts.

Courtliness and the Renaissance Self

Court culture, with its rigorous code of conduct and its performative structure, compounded by the attention devoted to secrecy, prudence, and dissimulation, also had a profound influence on notion of the Renaissance self. For a long time, the dominant scholarly theory concerning issues of selfhood and individuality in the Renaissance was the one proposed by Jacob Burckhardt in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). According to Burckhardt, the Renaissance witnessed for the first time in history the “birth of the individual” in the modern sense. In the Middle Ages, men and women’s identities depended on their belonging to a group or collectivity. In the Renaissance, by contrast, people began to strive to
affirm their unique identities and to differentiate themselves from their peers as much as possible. The desire to excel that Burckhardt sees as typical of Renaissance individuals played the leading role in this process, as did the centralized power structure of the court and distinctive kind of competitiveness that court culture promoted. In Burckhardt’s opinion, the power structure of the courts fostered the individuality, not only of the prince, but also of all those who were part of his entourage: all members of the court “were forced to know all the inward resources of their own nature, passing or permanent; and their enjoyment of life was enhanced and concentrated by the desire to obtain the greatest satisfaction from a possibly very brief period of power and influence” (Burckhardt 1990).

Burckhardt’s notion of the birth of the individual in the Renaissance has met with increasing skepticism in recent times, and scholars are now stressing that collective identities remained strong during the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the influence that court culture had on shaping particular aspects of selfhood in the Renaissance is still an important factor. In his monograph Myths of Renaissance Individualism, John Jeffries Martin has identified different forms of identity in the Renaissance. Among the forms of identity, he emphasizes the prudential self and the performative self, the structure of both he sees as directly related to features of life at court. The pressure to perform that courtly life entailed, along with the strict codes that operated in this environment and were described in books of conduct, created a need to distinguish between what should revealed and what should be kept hidden. Dissimulation was key in navigating potentially dangerous situations. Such issues (together with the even more powerful need to hide one’s beliefs from the Inquisition) strongly influenced the formation of the prudential self. The performative self is described by Martin as the direct opposite of the prudential self: while the prudential self was reserved and carefully chose what to display, the performative self was concerned with acting and with calling attention to its performance. Martin underlines how courtesy books had an important impact on the evolution of the performative self. These books encouraged readers to reinvent themselves and taught them to play the right role at the right time. Courtiers, as a result, had to figure out how to be at the same time prudential and reserved, on the one hand, and avid performers, on the other (Martin 2004).

The dynamics of court culture also resulted in dissimulation becoming more and more significant in a courtier’s life. According to Jon Snyder, in the period from the early sixteenth to the seventeenth century, dissimulation became a constituent part of courtliness, to such an extent that it was regarded as an unwritten rule of the courtly code of conduct. In texts complaining about life at court, however, dissimulation was more of a defensive practice and the sign of an “insuperable split” between the courtier’s public and private persona. Court culture, in the end, was a system designed to ensure that appearance and reality never coincided (Snyder 2009). The courtier, in addition, needed to become skilled in observing his peers’ behavior, knowing that they would, in turn, try to investigate his conduct. Interactions between courtiers were therefore based on a dynamics of mutual psychological scrutiny, and the court, in Snyder’s opinion, became not only a place of cultural production and a political center of power, but also a system of communication. All of these issues had a profound influence on the development of the modern notion of the self as divided between a public persona and the privacy of one’s inner thoughts.

Women at Court
It is important to underline that the impact that court culture had on the identity of its members concerned women as well as men. One of the major novelties of court culture was, in fact, that it applied to both sexes. It could even be argued that Renaissance courts and their cultural environment had a more significant impact on women than on men.

First of all, court culture allowed a new, close interaction between its male and female members that profoundly shaped Renaissance gender dynamics. Moreover, Renaissance courts allowed women to experience a significant amount of influence and power. In the opinion of some
scholars, it was precisely thanks to such changes in court culture that the notion of women as inferior to men began to be challenged (Cox 2016).

In the past, scholarly readings of the relationship between court culture and women tended to underscore their subjection to male power. This view dates back to an influential essay by Joan Kelly-Gadol, provocatively entitled *Did women have a Renaissance?* (Kelly-Gadol in Castiglione 2000). According to her interpretation, Renaissance noblewomen were little more than aesthetic objects. Kelly-Gadol saw a reduction of female autonomy in the Renaissance in comparison with the Middle Ages and attributed this phenomenon to the increased control of the state or the court over the feudal power of the nobility. In her view, feudal noblewomen of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were able to engage directly in cultural activity and even in some cases to exercise political power. By contrast, she considered women’s access to power in the Renaissance as only indirect and provisional. Kelly-Gadol referred to the *Book of the Courtier* in order to show the purely aesthetic role of women in Renaissance court culture, underlining how in Castiglione’s dialogue only four women are admitted to the conversation, and of the four, only two are participants, but even they do not actively contribute to the discussion. Kelly-Gadol also underscored the role of the humanist education that elite Renaissance women received, noting that it required women to be placed under male cultural authority.

In recent years, scholarship has begun revising the notion of Renaissance women’s subjugation to male authority both in the social and in the cultural sphere, focusing instead on the many possibilities for influence and autonomy that Renaissance court culture offered to women. Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* is still adduced as evidence, but now to stress that the very presence of women among the interlocutors of the dialogue was a significant novelty.

The theatrical and performative character of Renaissance courts demanded that everyone associated with the court should be educated and able to behave publicly according to its complex and culturally refined code of conduct, and court ladies were part of courtly performances as well as men. As a consequence, they had to possess the manners, the education, and the conversational skills deemed necessary within court culture, especially during occasions, such as ceremonies or visits from foreign officials, when the image of the court itself was at stake (Cox 2016). In order to comply with these necessities, girls belonging to elite families received a rigorous education from childhood aimed at preparing them for the numerous responsibilities that they would have to face as court ladies and as wives of influential members of the court.

Manuals of conduct at court specifically designed for court ladies began to be produced and circulated in different European countries. The first attempt at creating a manual of court conduct specifically addressed to a female readership is generally considered to be Anne de France’s *Les enseignements d’Anne de France, duchesse de Bourbonnais et d’Auvergne, à sa fille Susanne de Bourbon* (*The Teachings of Anne of France, Duchess of Bourbonnais and Auvergne, to Her Daughter Susanne de Bourbon*), written around 1505, and published between 1517 and 1521. Other manuals for court ladies soon followed, such as Lodovico Domenichi’s *La donna di corte* (*The Court Lady*, 1564). An intriguing and original example in this genre is Annibal Guasco’s *Ragionamento a D. Lavinia sua figliuola, della maniera del governarsi ella in corte, andando per Dama alla Serenissima Infante D. Caterina, Duchessa di Savoia* (*Discourse to Lady Lavinia His Daughter Concerning the Manner in Which She Should Conduct Herself When Going to Court as Lady-in-Waiting to the Most Serene Infanta, Lady Caterina, Duchess of Savoy*, 1586) (Guasco 2010). The text is presented as a vade mecum for the author’s talented daughter, who since her early years had been provided with an elite education, preparing her to become a lady-in-waiting worthy of a princess, and the work was given to her at the moment when she was about to begin this career.

A ruler’s consort had to possess even more sensitive skills than those required for a lady-in-waiting. She might be expected to cooperate with her husband in the management of the state, and, most importantly, she would often be called on to
fill in for him when he was absent at war or, if he died prematurely, to act as a regent while waiting his heir to come of age. This happened fairly frequently in Renaissance courts and resulted in court ladies acquiring more autonomy, influence, and visibility. A ruler’s consort also had her own courtly entourage, distinct from that of her husband, and surrounded herself with cultured and talented ladies who – as in the case of Annibal Guasco’s daughter mentioned above – were often carefully raised by parents with the aim of providing them with the best instruction that they could afford in the hope that their skills and education would enable them to participate in prestigious courts. Female artists and performers, such as musicians and singers, were also increasingly sought after in Renaissance courts.

Moreover, like their male counterparts, powerful and affluent court ladies were active patrons of artists and writers. Artistic patronage allowed female rulers to stress the legitimacy of their rule in a society that still generally regarded women as unfit for positions of power. Giving their financial support to church building or commissioning religious works of art could, in addition, help women rulers to present an image of themselves as chaste and God-fearing, and therefore alien from the stereotype of female lasciviousness that continued to pervade Renaissance culture.

The rise of women within court culture contrasted with persisting notions of female inferiority, weakness, and sexual wantonness. According to the Aristotelian interpretation of female biology that had been influential in Europe since the thirteenth century, women were an imperfect, lesser version of men. A female occurred whenever hostile circumstances prevented the creation of the perfect human being, that is, a male. A female human being, according to this view, was a nonfully formed male. As a consequence of their imperfection, females were considered to be weak and emotionally unstable – in short, almost child-like in their physical and intellectual development and therefore unsuited for any roles requiring responsibility and physical and intellectual strength. Women’s immaturity also made them more likely to fall prey to their instincts, and as a result, they were regarded as more prone than men to sexual promiscuousness. Recent scholarship has underlined that the Aristotelian view of women’s inferiority became more and more at odds with the reality of the Renaissance courts all over Europe, and court culture has been credited with producing notions of womanhood that could challenge Aristotelian theories (Cox 2016).

The Book of the Courtier provides a valuable testimony to the popular Renaissance debates on the nature of women and their role in society. The third day of the dialogue, in fact, is devoted to the construction of the perfect court lady (the ideal companion of the courtier depicted in the first two books) and features a debate between speakers who present progressive and conservative visions of womanhood. The speaker supporting the cause of women rejects the Aristotelian notion of their inferiority and proceeds to sketch a picture of the court lady with the same accomplishments and – most importantly – the same moral virtues as the courtier. Yet despite having the same qualities and despite being expected to engage in similar activities at court (including conversation, music, and dancing), there are some fundamental differences between the courtier and the court lady. The courtier focuses on traditional masculine traits, such as robustness and vigor, while the court lady concentrates on being graceful and avoiding the kind of physical activity that might make her look too masculine.

Castiglione’s preoccupation with defining the masculine qualities required in the courtier is related to the anxieties that surrounded the courtier’s masculinity. These anxieties, in turn, have been explained as related to the presence of women, especially, influential and powerful ones, at court. The role of women at court can also be explored in terms of the relationship of court ladies to male performances of courtliness. Within the theatrical dynamics of court life, court ladies were often intended to have the role of evaluating men’s performance of courtly manners. Elias’s notion of the civilizing process enacted by court culture on a previously untamed nobility can also prompt a reading of court women as pivotal in enforcing the domestication of warrior aristocrats and their transformation into
refined courtiers. According to this reading, the discontent expressed in writings lamenting the conditions of life at court can be interpreted as reflecting the unhappiness of former warriors who saw themselves tamed by a female-dominated court.

The role of court ladies as judges of men’s performance of refined manners is related to the importance of courtly love among the European elites of the time. In courtly love, the male lover declares his inferiority to his beloved and strives to behave in a brave and honorable way in order to prove that he is worthy of her favor. David Quint has underlined how the dynamics of courtly love—an adoring subject who longs for the favor of his superior—recalls the relationship between the courtier and the prince. As a consequence, Quint interprets the misogynistic outbursts found in writings on courts (such as the Book of the Courtier) as actually directed towards the prince. It was easier and safer for courtiers to vent their anger on court ladies, already the object of a long tradition of misogyny, than to challenge directly a system that they often saw as neglecting the virtuous (Quint in Castiglione 2002).

Anticourt and Anticourtier Writings

Renaissance writings on courts and courtiers not only provided advice to prospective courtiers. They also offered testimonies which belied both the image of the court as a place of cultural refinement and the notion of courtiers as the embodiment of good manners that are still part of the modern representation of Renaissance society. Negative depictions of courts and courtiers were widely disseminated throughout Renaissance literature, in a variety of different genres. One of the most popular examples is Enea Sivlio Piccolomini’s De curialium miseriis (On the Miseries of Courtiers), written in the form of a letter to a friend and dated 30 November 1444 (Piccolomini 1928). Piccolomini’s text gathers together all the most common clichés concerning the evils of court life that were later developed by sixteenth-century anticourt satires: the courtiers’ flattery of the prince, the cold-blooded competition among courtiers, the envy of those who benefitted from the prince’s favor, and most of all, the lack of liberty suffered by those who voluntarily submitted themselves to the yoke of service to the prince. Texts like Piccolomini’s were the legacy of a preexisting medieval tradition—represented, for example, by writings such as Walter Map’s twelfth-century work De nugis curialium (Courtier’s Trifles)—that portrayed the court as the antithesis to Christian virtue because of its mundane nature and focus on material gains. Renaissance anticourt texts perpetuated the vision of the court as a place where virtue could not exist, and yet they moved away from the medieval Christian perspective by focusing instead on the earthly shortcomings of the court. The De curialium miseriis is based on Piccolomini’s own experience as a courtier and features a portrait of its narrator as an ambitious young man who begins his career as a courtier confident of his own talents and determined to acquire fame and wealth in the service of his prince. The image of the gifted and motivated young courtier with aspirations to success is a common feature of writings hostile to the court, as are representations of the disillusionments and the failed hopes that inevitably accompanied his life at court. Piccolomini presents the desires—for honor, power, riches, and pleasure—that can lead a man to become a courtier and then proceeds to explain in detail how the court is the negation of each and every one of these desires. At court, he explains, life is unpleasant, and all delights of the senses are denied. In addition, only sycophants are rewarded by the prince, and, as a consequence, recognition and riches remain only a mirage. Yet Piccolomini’s anticourt lament also highlights how, in spite of all of the court’s shortcomings, many men of talent continue to be attracted to it and to invest in it their highest hopes of success.

Writings against courts and courtiers rose in popularity during the sixteenth century, encompassing different literary modes. In collections of verse satires, it is common to find at least one piece of work bemoaning the many afflictions of courtly life.

Among the famous examples of this genre, which would become models for later negative depictions of courts and courtiers in various European literatures, are Ludovico Ariosto’s
verse satires. In the first of these satires, Ariosto describes the events that led him to quarrel with his patron, Cardinal Ippolito d’Este, and his dissatisfaction over the treatment he received at court. Another satire recounts his life under a new patron, Ippolito’s brother, Alfonso d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, and paints a picture of the difficult conditions of early modern court intellectuals.

Anticourt writings in prose often took the form of a dialogue in which one of the speakers states his intention to join the court, but is eventually persuaded against his decision by interlocutors who express disappointment over their own careers at court and enumerate the physical and psychological discomforts that courtiers are forced to tolerate.

Invectives against the court are also frequent in pastoral plays, where one can find the character of the disillusioned ex-courtier who explains how the luxurious appearance of the court hides a reality of squalor and treachery and who praises instead the happiness of the shepherds’ simple lifestyle.

The themes and the subjects featured in anticourt writings are strikingly similar even in works belonging to different genres and to different national literatures, to the extent that they can be seen as recurrent sets of *topoi* of anticourtliness. These *topoi* involve both the representation of the court, the dynamics of courtly life, and the figures of the courtier and the court lady.

Courts are described as the cradle of the most hideous vices: flattery, envy, deceit, cut-throat competition among peers, and moral depravity. Echoing the motto of the Roman poet Lucan, “exeat aula, qui vult esse pius” (“leave the court, whoever wants to be virtuous”), anticourt writings present the court as a place that fosters only immorality, so that no virtuous man can enter it and leave uncorrupted. Courts are also defined as the place of fallen hopes, where only the worthless are rewarded, while the worthy and virtuous are denied well-deserved honors and rewards. Princes are depicted as vain and fickle, an easy prey for sycophants, whom they reward, while disregarding their loyal and deserving servants. Courtiers, on their part, are well versed in the art of duplicity, and they will stop at nothing to obtain material gains. There is no honesty at court, and no friendship is possible between courtiers, intent as they are at putting each other down in order to make themselves more pleasing to their lord. Court ladies are depicted as supercilious, self-obsessed, and preoccupied with futile activities. Daily life at court is a constant source of pain. The courtier must be aware at all times that each of his peers is constantly scheming behind his back. In addition, every sort of material comfort is denied at court. Courtiers are forced to reside in squalid rooms and often also to share unclean, shabby beds. Anticourt satires devote a good deal of space to the depiction of the horrible dinners eaten by courtiers in the servants’ quarters, with dirty tableware, rotten food, and acidic wine, while the prince and his closest associates enjoy a superb meal. Courtiers always squander their money on the expenses needed to sustain their lifestyle, and poverty and a lonely death are the destiny that awaits anyone who enters the court.

Satirical depictions of courts and courtiers such as those offered by Piccolomini and Ariosto influenced generations of satirists to come, and the court remained a popular topic in satirical writings well beyond the sixteenth century. The legacy of anticourt satires is still, in fact, evident nowadays, with the word “courtier” often employed in modern languages as a synonym for an obsequious yes-man.

Cross-References
▶ Bembo, Pietro
▶ Carafa, Diomede
▶ Fortune
▶ Satire

References

Primary Literature


**Secondary Literature**


Seminar Questions. How important were the central and northern Italian princely courts as centres of cultural patronage? What does The Book of the Courtier tell us about the nature of the Italian princely court? Learn and apply the laws of courtiership and there will be no limit to how far you can rise in the court. In the past the court garnered around the ruler, and had many functions: Besides keeping the ruler amused, it was a way to solidify the hierarchy of royalty, nobility, and the upper classes, and to keep the nobility both subordinate and close to the ruler, so that he could keep an eye on them. The court serves power in many ways, but most of all it glorifies the ruler, providing him with a microcosmic world that must struggle to please him. Save your energy for time outside the court. Fra Filippo Lippi, the Italian Renaissance painter, sailing for amusement in a small boat, was captured by pirates who sold him and his friends into slavery.