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Donne and the Uses of Courtliness: Trained to Lie?

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Peter DeSa Wiggins. *Donne, Castiglione, and the Poetry of Courtliness.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. Pp. viii, 174. Index.

A critic and editor of Ludovico Ariosto, Peter DeSa Wiggins, turns his attention here to John Donne, arguing that Donne's poems enact tropes set forth as guides to courtly conduct in Sir Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation of Baldassare Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*. Four chapters explicating the Satyres, several Elegies, and some of the usual suspects among Songs and Sonets—poems all read in accord with received biographical opinion—follow an introduction in which the author situates himself rather awkwardly amidst conflicting Donne scholars: between one incongruous "camp" consisting of Earl Miner, Arnold Stein, Anthony Low, and Richard Strier; and another of R. C. Bald, John Carey, Arthur Marotti, Jonathan Goldberg, and, oddly, Low again, his name turning up in both "camps." The expressed purpose of Wiggins's book is to show that Donne, in an ambitious if commonplace quest for advancement, used Hoby's translation to "produce poetic performances of subtlety and originality." Wiggins cites evidence that Castiglione's ideal courtier was promoted, at the Elizabethan Court, as practically an official paradigm to which all comers needed to conform. Wiggins sees Donne's poems primarily as stratagems by one in the crowd of what Wallace MacCaffrey calls "daring aspirers" at the Elizabethan Court. In this reading of Donne's poems, derived from a more general theory by Daniel Javitch, Donne designed his poems to demonstrate his

mastery of skills valued at Court, because he wanted to enjoy the status of a courtier.

Castiglione's *Cortegiano* is a dialogic threnody for his lost Court of Urbino. It revives a precarious moment in Italian history, early in Castiglione's career, a fragile moment in which his well-loved companions could talk nights on end about their own ethos. Nostalgically recalling this moment, he produced a masterpiece in which the marvelous social skills of his friends are on display for the edification and delight of posterity. Although he makes his friends speak of the qualities of the "perfect courtier," he never intended the book to be used as a conduct manual by "daring aspirers." As Wiggins observes, Hoby's subtitle—"very necessary and profitable for yonge gentilmen and gentilwomen abiding in court, palaice, or place"—was not part of the book's original design.

Castiglione himself was not an ambitious man. Except for his brief period at Urbino, life as a courtier never appealed to him, especially not the tortured years he later spent as Urbino's ambassador to the papal Court under Leo X, years resulting ultimately in expropriation of Urbino's dukedom by Lorenzo de'Medici. Having retired to his ancestral country home, the erstwhile ambassador finished writing *Il Libro del Cortegiano* as one would in retirement write an affectionate memoir about one's own family. Castiglione's dedicatory letter presents his book in just this way; and it seems doubtful that he would have approved Hoby's use of the book at such a Court as Elizabeth's, a center of intrigue and power politics much more like the papal Court than the Court of Urbino.

Donne clearly read Castiglione, probably in the original Italian, and just as clearly manifests in his life and writings many of the social virtues enshrined in *Il Cortegiano*. Tolerance, playfulness, nonchalance, and casuistical detachment are the familiar ones Wiggins points to, using Castiglione as an apparatus for displaying some of the most characteristic qualities of Donne's poetry. But finding these qualities in Donne's poems does not require that we adopt the line taken by Bald, Carey, Marotti, and now Wiggins, about Donne's having been motivated to write them mainly by his ambition. For despite the author's protest against the "methodology" of Carey and Marotti (both of whom, Wiggins complains, fail to list Castiglione in their indexes), the Donne described here (like the Donne of Carey and Marotti)

wrote "a poetry of ambition designed to advance his political interests" and in so doing "felt the same hopes and anxieties as other place seekers of his time." Wiggins maintains unconvincingly that Donne was among those at the Elizabethan Court who were inclined so to abuse Castiglione's masterpiece.

The methodological quibble of *Donne, Castiglione, and the Poetry of Courtliness* is over the "positivism" of writers who explain Donne's writing by contextualizing it. The force of Donne's poems, Wiggins insists, "is not to be captured by biographical particularization, no matter how minute," and "the attempt to postulate circumstances of composition for Donne's poems is doomed." Wiggins himself pretends to contextualize only so far as to accept one "unsettling truth with which R. C. Bald confronted Donne scholarship." This "truth" is the supposition that Donne was an ambitious aspirer at the Elizabethan Court. Readers dubious about this way of contextualizing Donne's poems will find no alternative here.

Apart from Wiggins's admitting this supposition, his purposeful ignoring of context leads the author into several unhistorical blunders, such as his blithe alignment of Donne with Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst (who commissioned Hoby's translation), in "enthusiastic appreciation" of Castiglione. In fact, Sackville was a principal ally of the Cecils in the Privy Council, not someone Donne was likely to agree with about the Tudor Court. Wiggins amalgamates Sackville and his secretary Bartholomew Clerke with Lord Keeper Sir Thomas Egerton and Donne. But the similitude rings false to anyone particularly aware of the inflexible discretion with which both Egerton and Donne avoided factional involvement at Court. Similarly false is Wiggins's uncritical acceptance of Bald's view that Donne had "a history of involvement with the Essex faction"; another error is the notion that Donne "idolized Sir Christopher Hatton." These biographical mistakes, accepted or originated by Wiggins, are insufficiently "particularized" and lead to errant readings of Donne's poems.

Outstanding here is misinterpretation of Donne's Satyres, especially "Satyre V," a poem that begins by alluding specifically to Castiglione as "He which did lay Rules to make Courtiers." In *Kinde Pitty and Brave Scorn* (in a chapter on "Satyre V" that Wiggins ought to re-read), M. Thomas Hester accurately characterizes, as "ironic

deflation," Donne's treatment of the way the Elizabethan Court used Castiglione. Certainly one can argue that in a sense Donne placed Castiglione's manual of courtliness at the center of his attention to the Court. However, it is misleading to state that Donne "shared Sackville's opinion" of the book, or indeed that he was in sympathy with any use of Castiglione that put a positive spin on the evil of the Court. On the contrary, Donne's attitude toward Sackville's use of *Il Cortegiano* is obviously negative, a dissent most immediately and bluntly expressed by his rhetorical question about Castiglione in "Satyre V": "hee being understood May make good Courtiers, but who Courtiers good?" What the satirist clearly implies is that neither Castiglione nor anyone else can make them good; in other words, generally speaking, courtiers are not good. The unremitting severity in Donne's moral judgment of courtiers is something Wiggins strains to dismiss.

For example, he offers a reader this palliative: that "certain scornful references to courtiers scattered throughout Donne's secular poems—but concentrated in Satyre IV—may have induced some readers to conclude that Donne scorned the Court." As a matter of fact, these "scattered" scornings are quite simply the only mode of reference to the Elizabethan Court one can find in Donne's writings. Scornful reference to the Court cannot accurately be described as "concentrated" in any one poem; indeed it is general and consistent. Scorn characterizes every single reference to the Court not only in Donne's poems but in his other writings while in Egerton's employ. Moreover, during this period Donne actually wrote a little book, *The Courtier's Library,* expressing his scorn of the Court and courtiers (a book to which, remarkably, Wiggins makes no reference anywhere in the index or in the text of his book on Donne and courtliness). In order to conclude that Donne did not scorn the Court, Wiggins has to argue (again with Carey and Marotti) that all Donne's unrelievedly baleful judgments about the Elizabethan Court really say the opposite of what they mean.

A greater indulgence in historical "particularization" might have helped Wiggins to appreciate that Donne's attitude toward Castiglione at the Elizabethan Court was satirical, related to the attitude of Pietro Aretino, Castiglione's contemporary at the papal Court. Aretino's comedy *La Cortigiana* (1525) appears to have been in

part a response to cynical use of Castiglione's manuscript, circulated at the Roman Court as early as 1516. Donne's familiarity with the (then as yet untranslated) writings of Aretino (another topic unmentioned in Wiggins's text or index) is a matter of record. He thought Aretino's notoriety had proceeded more from his books' having been banned by the Catholic church than from the quality of the writing. But Donne expressly admired something about Aretino's published letters in Italian, the first volumes of letters ever published in a vernacular language. In these letters, Aretino amply justified the title attributed to him by Ariosto in *Orlando Furioso*: "the scourge of princes." In common with Aretino, Donne expressed a subversive contempt for the realities of Courts and courtiers, notwithstanding his obvious attraction to the ideals of Castiglione's Urbino.

The attitudes of both writers in this regard were influenced by the attitude of Erasmus, who probably also had read Castiglione's book and, in a letter of practical advice addressed to a young aspirer, expressed his own unsentimental reply to puffery of the Court:

> Trust no one who pretends to be your friend, let him smile, promise, embrace, swear as many oaths as he will. Do not believe that anyone is really attached to you, and do not be hasty in giving your own confidence. Be civil to all. Politeness costs nothing. Salute, give the road, and do not forget to give men their titles. Praise warmly, promise freely. Choose the part which you mean to play, and never betray your real feelings. Fit your features to your words, and your words to your features. This is the philosophy of court life, for which none are qualified till they have put away shame and trained themselves to lie.

Like Erasmus and Aretino, Donne scorned the nostalgic veneer of gentility used to cover the Court's cynical perversion of Castiglione. The nostalgically idealized lords and ladies of Urbino portrayed by Castiglione sat around on cushions in rush-strewn marble rooms or well-manured gardens, conversing about literature, love, etiquette, art, and music until dawn colored the distant hills. Autocratic repression, violence, and exploitation were never mentioned in their conversations; but Donne, like Aretino, Erasmus, and Castiglione himself, had suffered these by-products of courtliness as practiced

away from hallowed Urbino. Donne never hesitated to treat the Court accordingly.

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