

PRIMARY SOURCE ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

THE BOOK OF THE COURTIER 1528

COUNT BALDESAR CASTIGLIONE

During the Renaissance, the proper behavior of people of certain classes became an important part of defining those classes. A courtier, or attendant of royals, was required to follow certain manners and understand certain ideas in order to entertain the royals. One count, Baldesar Castiglione, wrote a handbook that described this knowledge.

Reading Focus:

What kind of knowledge does the count include in his book?

"If I remember rightly, Sir Count, I think you have repeated several times this evening that the Courtier must accompany his actions, gestures, habits, in short his every movement, with grace; and this you seem to regard as an universal seasoning, without which all other properties and good qualities are of little worth. And indeed I think that in this everyone would allow himself to be persuaded easily, since from the very force of the word, it may be said that he who has grace finds grace. But since you said that this oftentimes the gift of nature and of heaven and, even when not thus perfect, can with care and pains be made much greater—those men who are born so fortunate and so rich in this treasure as are some we see, seem to me in this to have little need of other master; because that benign favour of heaven almost in despite of themselves leads them higher than they will, and makes them not only pleasing but admirable to all the world. Therefore I do not discuss this, it not being in our power to acquire it of ourselves. But they who have received from nature only so much, that they are capable of becoming graceful by pains, industry grace, as well in bodily exercises (in which you esteem it to be so necessary) as also in everything else that they may do or say. Therefore, since by much praise of this quality you have aroused in all of us, I think, an ardent thirst to pursue it, you are further bound, by the charge that my lady Emilia laid upon you, to satisfy that thirst by teaching us to attain it."

"I am not bound," said the Count, "to teach you how to become graceful, or anything else; but only to show you what manner of man a perfect Courtier ought to be. Nor would I in any case undertake the task of teaching you this perfection; especially having said a little while ago that the Courtier must know how to wrestle, vault, and do many other things, which I am sure you all know quite well as if I, who have never learned them, were to teach you. For just as a good soldier knows how to tell the smith what fashion, shape and quality his armour ought to have, but cannot show how it is to be made or forged or tempered; so I perhaps may be able to tell you what manner of man a perfect courtier ought to be, but cannot teach you what you must do to become one."

“Yet to comply with your request as far as is within my power—although it is almost a proverb that grace is not to be learned—I say that whoever would acquire grace in bodily exercises (assuming first that he be by nature not incapable), ought to begin early and learn the rudiments from the best masters. And how important this seemed to King Philip of Macedon, may be seen from the fact that he chose Aristotle, the famous philosopher and perhaps the greatest that has ever been in the world, to teach his son Alexander the first elements of letters. And of the men who we know at the present day, consider how well and how gracefully my lord Galeazzo Sanserverino, Grand Equerry of France, performs all bodily exercises; and this because in addition to the natural aptitude of person that he possesses, he has taken the utmost pains to study with good master, and always to have about him men who excel and to select from each the best of what they know: for just as in wrestling, vaulting and in the use of many sorts of weapons, he has taken for his guide our friend messer Pietro Monte, who (as you know) is the true and only master of every form of trained strength and agility—so in riding, jousting, and all else, he has ever had before his eyes the most proficient men that were known in those matters. Excerpt from *The Book of the Courtier*.

Analysis Questions:

- 1 What does Castiglione claim must attend every action of a courtier?
- 2 What evidence does Castiglione give that kings admire knowledge?

