

Chapter Title: Courtier

Book Title: Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England

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Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1t8q92s.12>

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Courtier

Derived from the Anglo-Norman 'corteiour' and the Old French 'cortoyeur', the word 'courtier' identified those who frequented a sovereign's court, princely residence, or household.¹ Although the seat of English political power and national sovereignty, the court was often perceived as a separate space from the rest of the country.² As a governmental, scholarly and artistic centre, as well as a hub of conspicuous consumption, the court functioned as a contact zone, a meeting point which fomented a regular interaction between different English and foreign political and cultural actors.³ These included not only foreign ambassadors, but also the entourages of foreign queens such as Anne of Denmark, Henrietta Maria, and Catherine of Braganza, as well as the foreign artists and scholars serving at the court.⁴ All these actors tended to share similar cultural and intellectual references, as well as an aristocratic or courtly habitus which reinforced the links between the English court and other European courtly centres.

These connections are well patent in the influence of continental books of courtly manners such as Baldassare Castiglione's seminal *Il Cortegiano* (1528), translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561. One of the aims of *Il Cortegiano* and other influential Italian works like Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo* (1558), 'English'd' by Robert Peterson in 1576, was to establish a code of civil conduct that could be shared by the variety of individuals who frequented the court, and smooth the often vicious behaviour caused by the competition for posts, prestige and notoriety between courtiers. At the same time, it helped to establish, at least in theory, a shared pan-European perception of certain frameworks of courtly

1 'Courtier, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary*.

2 Malcolm Smuts, *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 2.

3 On the role of courts as contact zones see, for example, Jeroen Duindam, 'The Court as a Meeting Point: Cohesion, Competition, Control', in *Prince, Pen, and Sword: Eurasian Perspectives*, ed. by Maaïke van Berkel and Jeroen Duindam (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 32–128.

4 See for example, Anna-Marie Linnell, 'Greeting the Stuart Queens Consort: Cultural Exchange and the Nuptial Texts for Henrietta Maria of France and Catherine of Braganza, Queens of Britain', in *Queens Consort, Cultural Transfer and European Politics, c. 1500–1800*, ed. by Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly and Adam Morton (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 153–171; and Adam Morton, 'Sanctity and Suspicion: Catholicism, Conspiracy and the Representation of Henrietta Maria of France and Catherine of Braganza, Queens of Britain', in *Queens Consort, Cultural Transfer and European Politics*, pp. 172–201.

behaviour that were communicated and emulated across national and linguistic boundaries.

Essential for the archetypal courtier proposed by Castiglione was the concept of *sprezzatura*, the ability of making graceful, sophisticated conduct look effortless. In Hoby's translation, *sprezzatura* consisted in an '[a]ffectation or curiosity & (to speak a new word) to use in every thyng a certain *Reckelesness*, to cover art withall, & seeme whatsoever he doth & sayeth to do it without pain, & (as it were) not minding it'.⁵ Translated by Hoby as 'recklessness', *sprezzatura* was a skill that all courtiers were expected to develop in order to achieve their aims and become recognised members of a courtly elite.⁶ That characteristic mediation between calculated effort and effortless style required both a good deal of cultural sophistication and political shrewdness. To gain the prince's favour and the admiration and respect of the rest of the court, Castiglione's ideal courtier needed to be adept at dissimulation and construct a specific identity that would made him able to act according to different circumstances without breaching the limits imposed by relations of power and cultural norms.⁷ An accomplished courtier never revealed his intentions or feelings, and always behaved in a polite and cautious way so as not to undermine his prospects at the court. This required the courtier to develop a specific persona and invest in a process of 'self-fashioning' based on elements from the political, literary, visual, and material culture that influenced the court.⁸ It also inevitably resulted in the figure of the courtier being associated increasingly with political corruption and amoral or artificial behaviour. In *A discourse of civil life* (1606), the poet Lodowick Bryskett, who read Castiglione and was well acquainted with Italian courtly literature, criticised the means used by ambitious men 'to purchase reputation and credit, or profit' which made them 'plaine hypocrites'.⁹ From Shakespeare's history plays to Tudor and Jacobean revenge tragedies, English drama demonstrates the continuing influence that such anxieties had on cultural perceptions of courtly life. Thomas

5 Ibid.

6 Baldassare Castiglione and Thomas Hoby, *The courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio* (London, 1561; STC 4778), sig. E2r.

7 Jon Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 70–81; Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 48–55; Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

8 The term 'self-fashioning' first appeared in Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Greenblatt* (Berkeley, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980).

9 Lodowick Bryskett, *A discourse of civill life* (London, 1606; STC 3958), p. 242.

Dekker's *The pleasant comedie of old Fortunatus* (1600), for example, mocked the efforts of the '[s]pruce silken faced Courtier, that stands every morning two or three hours learning how to look by his Glasse, how to speak by his Glasse, how to sigh by his glasse, how to court his Mistress by his Glasse'.¹⁰

In their pursuit of *sprezzatura*, English courtiers developed different strategies of social distinction that often involved the adoption of elements from foreign material and intellectual cultures. The intensification of English trade and diplomatic exchanges with continental Europe facilitated the dissemination of new literary and artistic styles, as well as consumption habits and fashions. Patronage of Elizabethan courtiers such as William Cecil, Thomas Sackville, or Francis Walsingham helped to further courtly and intellectual models inspired by the models of conduct proposed by Italian humanism, which in turn had been influenced by Greco-Roman ideals of virtue, scholarly excellence, and public service.¹¹ Sackville, for example, wrote a commendation for Hoby's translations of *Il Cortegiano*, praising the book and the translation for explaining 'what in Court a Courtier ought to be'.¹²

Genealogy was another key element. Besides the Renaissance interest in antiquarianism, genealogy was an instrument to validate an aristocratic pedigree or corroborate one's suitability to courtly status. The courtly and political career of Robert Devereaux, second Earl of Essex, for example, relied on the investment of a public image which highlighted, as William Camden put it, a 'Genealogy ancient and very noble'. A long and impeccable aristocratic lineage suggested the possession or inheritance of innate virtuous qualities that made one naturally distinct and apt to be a part of the upper echelons of the social order. The capacity to exhibit a solid and long ancestry was an important marker of distinction. Indeed, genealogy was often a weapon used by courtiers in the competition for the posts and rewards (symbolic and material) distributed by the Crown. Lord Burghley's interest in the genealogical past of his and other English and European aristocratic families, more than an exercise of Renaissance antiquarianism, was part of a strategy to cement his status within the English elite.¹³ Genealogy, as Jean Feerick has noted, was a key instrument which structured

10 Thomas Dekker, *The pleasant comedie of old Fortunatus* (London, 1600; STC 6517), sig. F3r.

11 Mary Partridge, 'Lord Burghley and *Il Cortegiano*: Civil and Martial Models of Courtliness in Elizabethan England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 19 (2009), 95–116 (p. 115).

12 Castiglione and Hoby, *The courtier*, sigs. Aiiir–v.

13 Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 23–24.

a social hierarchy defined by blood lineages.¹⁴ This articulation between lineage and rank in early modern English usage became, as it happened with similar coeval Iberian or French notions of purity of blood, an integral part of emerging racial discourses which resorted to notions of genealogical impurity to restrict the political, economic, and religious agency of domestic minorities or colonial populations.¹⁵ The pursuit or willingness to present an impeccable or solid genealogy sought thus to certify that the members of the English aristocracy were fully embedded in an English familial and social nexus, untainted by potentially corrupt or foreign elements.

Indeed, the perception of the court as space that stood apart from the rest of the country's social fabric often prompted questions about the Englishness of courtiers. Around 1612, the poet Josuah Sylvester expressed the commonplace belief that lavishness of the court and the increasing influence of continental fashion posed a risk to the character of national governance: 'Wee Courtiers next, who French-Italianate, / Fashion our Faith after the forme of State'.¹⁶ Two years later, in 1614, Sylvester revisited these lines and associated the regular adoptions of new fashions at the court with the inconstancy of the character of the courtier: 'Wee Courtiers, next, who French-Italianate, Change (with the Moon) our Fashion, Faith, & Fate'.¹⁷ This association between the changes of the moon and the character of the courtier suggested a moral ambiguity that other authors also evoked. John Donne perceived the court as a place for intrigue and opportunism, so that 'vertue in Courtiers hearts / Suffers an Ostracisme, and departs'.¹⁸

The changing fashions and the competition between different factions made the English court, as Henry Wotton observed, a 'market of noise and novelties'.¹⁹ Wotton's witty remark expresses a perception of the English courtly milieu as a space which received and produced new social and

14 Jean E. Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

15 For an overview of the evolution of the usage of the Iberian notions of purity of blood in the Iberian monarchies and their colonial systems see, for example, *Race and Blood in the Iberian World*, ed. by Max S. Hering Torres, María Elena Martínez and David Nirenberg (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2012); on the French case, see, for example, Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of France': Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 61: 3 (2004), 439–478.

16 Josuah Sylvester, *Lachrimae lachrimarum* (London, 1612; STC 23576), sig. B1r.

17 Josuah Sylvester, *The parliament of vertues royal* (London, 1614; STC 23581), sig. X4v.

18 John Donne, *Poems* (London, 1633; STC 7045), p. 85.

19 To Sir Thomas Edmondes, 28 March 1612, in *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton*, Vol. 2 (London: Clarendon Press, 1907), p. 1.

cultural trends. Throughout the seventeenth century, efforts made by James I and his successors, Charles I and Charles II, to restore diplomatic relations with Catholic Europe further exposed Stuart courtiers to foreign tastes and practices that had a profound impact on the English cultural landscape. Lady Anne Clifford, for example, commented that during the early days of the Jacobean court there was 'a great change between the fashion of the Court as it is now and of that in the queen's time', alluding to James's adhesion to foreign cultural models and fashions, as well as the rapid promotion of a group of the king's Scottish favourites.²⁰

Royal consorts often offered the natural centre for the development of such courtly coteries. Tudor and Stuart queens from Spain, France, Denmark, and Portugal brought with them their own servants, advisors, tailors, priests, and clergymen who altered the social fabric of daily life in the heart of the political realm. Anne of Denmark showed herself to be politically savvy at the Scottish court ('always the Queen knows all', Robert Cecil commented in 1598), and after her arrival in England set up her own courts at Somerset House and Greenwich, where she oversaw major building works and played an important role in bringing court masques and Italian fashions to the English court.²¹ Charles I's French wife, Henrietta Maria, commissioned masques that celebrated the Marian cult of devotion she fostered at the court. The queen's Catholicism and harbouring of Jesuits came under attack in the parliamentary publication, *The King's cabinet opened* (1644), which also condemned the queen for the political advice she regularly gave the king.²²

Foreign embassies were another important channel for the diffusion of continental novelties. Indeed, the presence of Spanish, French and Italian ambassadors and their regular – and at times intimate – contacts with royal officials and courtiers generated a new interest in the cultural and

20 Lady Anne Clifford, *Countess of Dorset, Pembroke & Montgomery: 1590–1676. Her Life, Letters, and Works*, ed. by George Charles Williamson (Kendal: Titus Wilson & Son, 1922), p. 68.

21 Leeds Barroll, *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England: A Cultural Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 25–26; Barbara Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Susan Dunn-Hensley, *Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria: Virgins, Witches, and Catholic Queens* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017).

22 'I have received your Proclamation or Declaration, which I wish had not bin made, being extreemly disadvantagious for you, for you shew too much fear'. 'Henrietta Maria to Charles Stuart, 27 June 1643', in *The Kings cabinet opened* (London, 1645; Wing C2358), sig. Fr; see also *Women's Worlds in Seventeenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Patricia Crawford and Laura Gowing (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 251; Karen Britland, *Drama in the Courts of Queen Henrietta Maria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

intellectual life of the continental courts.²³ The musical performances offered by the chapels of the Portuguese, Spanish or French embassies, for example, often attracted courtiers interested in the musical novelties from the continent.²⁴ English embassies in European capitals such as Madrid, Venice, or Paris also served as platforms for the diffusion of foreign novelties and offered to some courtiers a rare experience of courtly access abroad.²⁵ Influential Stuart courtiers such as Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, regularly commissioned English diplomats and agents stationed in the Low Countries or the Italian peninsula to acquire artwork and ancient manuscripts to promote their own political positions at home and abroad. These practices of patronage aimed not only to enhance the status of leading courtiers, but to position the English court within international artistic and intellectual centres. This had begun with Henry VIII and the humanist statesmen at his court, such as Thomas More, who had encouraged the Augsburg-born artist Hans Holbein's endeavours in London, and who sat for portraits themselves. Writing about his experience in England in the 1630s, the artist Peter Paul Rubens commented that 'this island [...] seems to me to be a spectacle worthy of the interest of every gentleman [...] not only for the splendor of the outward culture, which seems to be extreme, as of a people rich and happy in the lap of peace, but also for the incredible quality of excellent pictures, statues and ancient inscriptions which are to be found in this court'.²⁶

The early Stuart courtier therefore became a privileged agent for the introduction of foreign novelties, increasingly associated with cosmopolitan

23 For an overview of the influence of foreign embassies in London see Roberta Anderson, 'Catholic ambassadors in a Protestant court: London, 1603–1625', in *Confessional Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Roberta Anderson and Charlotte Backerra (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 141–159; Cristina Bravo Lozano, 'Popular Protests, the Public Sphere and Court Catholicism. The Insults to the Chapel of the Spanish Embassy in London, 1685–1688', *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 6:1 (2017) <<http://cultureandhistory.revistas.csic.es/index.php/cultureandhistory/article/view/115>> [Accessed 1 February 2021].

24 See, for example, Ester Lebedinski, '"Obtained by peculiar favour, & much difficulty of the Singer": Vincenzo Albrici and the Function of Charles II's Italian Ensemble at the English Restoration Court', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 143:2 (2018), 325–359; Peter Leech, 'Musicians in the Catholic chapel of Catherine of Braganza, 1662–1692', *Early Music*, 29:4 (2001), 571–587; Margaret Mabbett, 'Italian Musicians in Restoration England (1660–1690)', *Music & Letters*, 67:3 (1986), 237–247; Ian Spink, 'The Musicians of Queen Henrietta-Maria: Some Notes and References in the English State Papers', *Acta Musicologica* 36:2–3 (1964), 177–182.

25 Smuts, *Court Culture*, p. 186.

26 Peter Paul Rubens to Pierre Dupuy, 8 August 1629, in *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, ed. by Ruth Magurn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 320; Smuts, *Court Culture*, p. 186.

sophistication. Young Jacobean and Caroline aristocrats with courtly ambitions invested in travel as part of their education, and visits to foreign courts and continental aristocratic households were considered useful for obtaining relevant posts in the royal administration or diplomatic service when they returned home. Endymion Porter spent most of his formative years at the household of Gaspar de Guzmán, Count Duke of Olivares and *valido* (favourite) of Philip IV of Spain, and the lord treasurer Francis Cottington lived for more than a decade at the Spanish royal court.²⁷ Other relevant Caroline courtiers like Kenelm Digby and Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, embarked on several 'grand tours' of Europe and were fluent in Italian and French.²⁸ The Earl of Arundel's wife, Aletheia Howard, accompanied him on his trip in the 1610s, taking part in diplomatic activity and developing her own networks with Italian doges and court painters.²⁹

The figure of the courtier became thus increasingly associated with a wider cosmopolitan arena and to the possibility of a transnational identity based on a shared social and cultural habitus that surpassed national or confessional boundaries. The openness to foreign (often Catholic) influences and cultural trends was deemed as a threat to English social and religious harmony. Puritan and parliamentary propaganda during the civil wars and Cromwell's protectorate often explored this perception, presenting courtiers as corrupted individuals who acted against the interests of the commonwealth. One anonymous pamphlet from the 1650s reminded Parliament that 'the corrupt Courtier' was to be grouped with those who 'are the taile of the Beast, and sting the poor labouring man'.³⁰

The courtier, due to his social status, proximity to political power, and access to foreign novelties, became a stereotypical figure associated with alternative values or practices that were considered to be remote from English traditions or the daily life of other English men and women. Aristocrats and courtiers seemed to share this belief that they possessed a distinct and privileged position in the English social landscape, albeit separated from

27 J. N. Hillgarth, *The Mirror of Spain, 1500–1700: The Formation of a Myth* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), pp. 26–279; José Ramón Fernández Suárez, 'Francis Cottington: su correspondencia inédita con el Conde de Gondomar (1616–1619)', *ES: Revista de filología inglesa*, 7 (1977), 69–116; Gervas Huxley, *Endymion Porter: The Life of a Courtier 1587–1649* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 24.

28 Vittorio Gabrieli, *Sir Kenelm Digby: Un inglese italianato nell'età della controriforma* (Rome: Edizione di Storia e Letteratura, 1957); Mary F. S. Hervey, *The Life, Correspondence & Collections of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), pp. 60–88.

29 See, for example, David Howarth, 'The Patronage and Collecting of Aletheia, Countess of Arundel, 1606–1654', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 10:2 (1998), 125–137.

30 J. R., *Proposals in behalfe of the poore of this nation* (London, 1653; Wing R29), p. 4.

the rest of the population. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, though with some playfulness or irony, argued under the guise of an epistle that different social groups 'should be apart by themselves, like several Commonwealths, Courtiers should only Converse with Courtiers, or Courtly Persons, and Country Gentlemen with Country Gentlemen, Citizens with Citizens, Farmers with Farmers'.³¹ Although perhaps not meant to be taken purely in earnest, such sentiments raised attention to the distinct world of the courtier, and the impossibility of understanding the rights, values, and idioms of those whose lived experiences could be so different to one's own.

Related keywords: ambassador, citizen, host, merchant, secretary

31 Margaret Cavendish, *CCXI sociable letters written by the thrice noble, illustrious, and excellent princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1664; Wing N872), p. 294.