The Play of the Courtier: Correspondences between Castiglione’s *Il libro del Cortegiano* and Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*

When Castiglione, in devising the narrative frame of the dialogues in *Il libro del Cortegiano*, chooses to distance himself from the fictional situation he is presenting and places himself in England, on a public visit to King Henry VII, he seems to anticipate figuratively the wide popularity that his work would enjoy among the men of letters and the intellectuals of the English Renaissance. Even if this is a coincidence, it is a significant one. Castiglione, as both his life and writings witness, is aware of the growing cosmopolitanism of the European courts as hegemonic centers of culture. In *Il libro del Cortegiano* he advocates the development of a transregional courtly culture in Italy—whose first and foremost sign would be a linguistic koiné—beyond the particular differences characterizing the various municipal habits and ethoi. By extension, such a unifying process is seen to affect culturally, if not politically, the life of the European courts in general, as the repeated references to the habits of non-Italian courts and courtiers, such as the French and the Spanish ones, suggest. Castiglione’s undeniable awareness of national differences, and his focus on specifically Italian cultural debates such as the so-called *questione della lingua*, must not obscure his consciousness of belonging to an emerging class, tied to the political order of the courts established all over Europe rather than in a specific place.¹ Castiglione’s concerns are symbolized in the choice of setting for his *Cortegiano*, which, as Mazzacurati notices, is “un non-luogo, un palazzo-città sorto da poco tra monti quasi disabitati, senza retroterra urbano, senza caratteri forti di territorio, quasi senza passato” (179).

Castiglione’s international orientation in *Il Cortegiano*, implicit in the initial narrative choice of placing himself in England as well as in the logic of exchange and mobility inscribed in the formal structure of multiple retellings, is reinforced, as Ossola acutely points out, by the fact that Castiglione’s only indirect presence in the dialogues refers again to England and the English court in order to reserve for it the highest, hyperbolic praise: Ottaviano Fregoso informs his fellow-courtiers that

come di là scrive il nostro Castiglione e più largamente promette di dire al suo ritorno, pare che la natura in questo signore [the future Henry VIII] abbia voluto far prova di se
stessa, collocando in un corpo solo tante eccellenzie, quante basteriano per adornarne infiniti. (Cortegiano 503; 4.38)

Ossola comments on this detail by noticing how, in the closing of “lo spazio fisico e storico delle corti italiane.” the courtier maintains alive his project by choosing to go beyond, by taking his distance and speaking from the “corti dei veri principi” (74-75).

Castiglione’s choice to pursue a path that would lead both him and his work to the European scene is at the same time an expression and a consequence of what Mazzacurati has effectively termed “the Renaissance of the modern.” Castiglione’s work articulates and advances a modernity which is intrinsically cosmopolitan, since it entails the coexistence, convergence and interweaving of diverse cultural traditions. The dialogues uphold adaptability and modelli critici as the virtues of the perfect courtier and show how the speakers practice them by mediating between different values and needs. It is this modern significance of the work that, according to Mazzacurati, accounts for its subsequent diffusion in Europe:

il modello italiano [della corte come epicentro di un processo (che è appunto tipico del ‘moderno’) di coagulo delle diversità] (esemplarmente rappresentato dal Cortegiano) anticipa il modello europeo, pur non potendolo seguire fino in fondo (fino alle estreme conseguenze di uno stato nazionale), proprio in questa centralizzazione a corte dei linguaggi e delle forme percorribili [...] una contemporaneità che aveva il proprio principale centro produttivo, di comportamenti, di linguaggi, di forme estetiche, nella corte ‘assoluta’ e nei suoi apparati di dominio: così a Parigi come a Madrid o a Londra. (185-86)

Mazzacurati’s reference to the European diffusion of the model represented in Il Cortegiano suggests that its European fortune proves the vitality of the work, which is a striking prefiguration of a society and a culture that had not yet fully come into being. Saccone advances an analogous argument in more explicit terms, when he says that

l’intero progetto del Libro del Cortegiano non si riesce a comprendere propriamente al di fuori delle coordinate storiche in cui vuole inserirsi, formando una risposta a certi nuovi bisogni emergenti in quegli anni: una risposta la cui rilevanza e importanza sono provate proprio dal grande successo ottenuto dal libro in Italia e nel resto d’Europa. (63-64)

The claims that connect the treatise with later moments of European history and culture invite, and in the very critical works quoted here anticipate, an exploration of the genealogy in which Il Cortegiano appears as a crucial element. Thus Mazzacurati further pursues the “percorsi dell’ideologia cortigiana” (209) in the late Italian Renaissance, and Saccone traces resonances of
Castiglione’s concerns in Italian literary texts up to a twentieth-century text such as Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *Il Gattopardo*.

And yet, it is significant that their discussion of later literary texts documents a closing of the ideological horizon, which qualifies and controls the momentum and vitality of Castiglione’s work. Emblematic is at this point Mazzacurati’s comment, which introduces his analysis of those works that can be considered later reinterpretations of *Il Cortegiano*:

Trasformazione egemonica, processo di sostituzione sinonimica che fu certo anche un appannamento di alcune sue prospettive di fondazione, di alcuni tracciati esemplari disegnati sia nell’omogenea struttura sociale che nel vivace slancio attualistico di cui si anima il progetto del Castiglione: spesso quasi irriconoscibili nelle formule essiccate, nel pragmatismo impaziente, nei destini mediocri che incontreremo anche in questo breve viaggio [...] attraverso alcuni canali collettori posti a valle del modello che là veniva fondato o meglio idealmente organizzato. (213)

The qualified tone is shared by Ossola’s subtle and detailed reconstruction of the enduring significance and visibility of *Il Cortegiano* in late sixteenth and seventeenth-century culture. Ossola’s fundamental treatment of the literary and ideological context in which *Il libro del Cortigiano* first takes shape and then becomes a generic model traces a picture that qualifies, even if it does not deny, the vital influence of Castiglione’s work in the period of the Counter-Reformation, which follows almost immediately the book’s publication in 1528 (in particular 56-59 and 75-81). Ossola points out that the later Italian elaborations of the courtier’s ideology, while maintaining a continuity with their literary model, aim to impose a normative control on social life, to fix roles and functions in a strict order, thus departing from the fluidity encouraged by Castiglione’s understanding of social life as a rhetorical act. In examining significant sixteenth-century literary productions, Ossola insists on the “divario” and “distanza” between the model and its epigones and stresses the way in which “la parabola di lettura, la ‘maniera’ e l’‘idea’ del *Cortegiano* [...] mutava semanticamente e si consumava ideologicamente all’altezza del Tridentino” (58). His comprehensive judgment on the literary fortune of the treatise during that period sounds a regretful note: “Nell’edificazione e nello stupore, nell’‘onestà ricreazione’ e nell’‘incredibile gusto’ si compendiava, nelle letture dell’ultimo Cinquecento, nei ‘triboli’ della Controriforma, il percorso editoriale ed ermeneutico del *Cortegiano*” (59).

The passages quoted above show a tension that runs through recent critical comments on *Il Cortegiano*, where the reevaluation of the future-oriented thinking of Castiglione coexists with the admission of the more conservative rewritings of later intellectuals concerned with preserving hegemony more than with exploring its dynamics. The impetus of Castiglione’s intellectual effort soon appears lost in his literary followers. In light of the critical conclu-
sions that trace a decline of Castiglione’s vital influence on Italian literature through the second half of the sixteenth century. I intend to argue that, by turning critical attention outside of Italy and following the symbolic lead to London that Castiglione himself seems to have provided, it is possible to find a more substantial and comprehensive confirmation of the cultural vitality and the intellectual depth of his modern vision. The analysis of the pervasive structural affinities and of the linguistic and rhetorical resonances that link one of Shakespeare’s early comedies, Love’s Labour’s Lost, to Castiglione’s text offers testimony of the modernity of the Italian writer’s vision, of the acuteness with which he was able to see into the cultural and social transformations of the time of uncertainty in which he lived. The themes and rhetoric which in Love’s Labour’s Lost beckon back to Il Cortegiano show how Castiglione prefigured and analyzed the essential features of an emerging (but not yet consolidated) new order, marked by the hegemony of the centralized court. In London at the end of the sixteenth century, in a situation removed from 1507 Urbino in both space and time, his reflections still inform the provocative meanings of the paradigmatic writer of Renaissance modernity, William Shakespeare. The discussion of the affinities between Il Cortegiano and a text written for a European court which was enacting the socio-political vision presupposed by the dialogue at Urbino provides evidence first of all of the non-municipal dimension implicit in Castiglione’s understanding of courtly life. Secondly, it confirms the forward-oriented social and cultural consciousness that the dialogue articulates by showing how its concerns and insights are still crucially relevant in the new social reality brought about when the court consolidates itself as the center of a whole national organization. By placing Il Cortegiano in a different context from the Italian one, where the treatise remains inscribed in a generic parabola that starts its descent, one may say its involution, soon after Castiglione’s time, an analysis of the affinities between Love’s Labour’s Lost and Castiglione’s work contributes to a confirmation of the recent historiographic interpretation that places Castiglione at the foundations of a genealogy moving away from classicist normativity and opening up, setting the coordinates of the self-reflexive cultural debate on modernity.

In England Castiglione’s Il libro del Cortegiano became a favourite text, especially after it was translated by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561 as The Book of the Courtier, and it exerted a pervasive influence upon writers such as Roger Ascham, Sir Walter Raleigh, Fulke Greville, George Puttenham, Sir Philip Sidney and John Lyly, whose work is, in turn, one of the most noteworthy influences on the early Shakespeare.\(^3\)

Even if there is no clear evidence that Shakespeare read the Courtier, the correspondences that can be traced between that work and Love’s Labour’s Lost show Shakespeare’s familiarity with the terms of Castiglione’s discussion and point to the significance of the cultural dialogue which Castiglione contributed to shape.\(^4\) With Love’s Labour’s Lost Shakespeare engages Renais-
sance discourse constructing the court and academe as exclusive, circum-
scribed spaces, separated from the urban space of mercantile society and de-
fining by a refined code of conduct meant to articulate a system of secular ide-
als. While Shakespeare complicates Castiglione’s apologetic representation of
the court, developing the implications of Castiglione’s analysis of courtly
codes, he is at the same time involved in the courtly ethos that the Italian writer
had articulated.

The underlying theme that Love’s Labour’s Lost shares with the Courtier is
the awareness of the constructed character of social life, where conventional
codes regulate all aspects of human relations, a theme that both texts convey by
foregrounding the figure of game-playing. Castiglione repeatedly mentions
that games – a metaphor of the refined codification of courtly life – are an
extremely popular activity at the court of Urbino and introduces his dialogues
by imagining that they take place as part of a game, in which courtiers of both
sexes meet every evening under the authority of the Duchess. Interestingly, in
the opening scene the game has not yet been fixed, so that, as an introduction to
his dialogue-treatise on the rules of courtly life, Castiglione’s mise en abîme
presents the process by which the rules of the dialogue itself are established.

Castiglione’s concern with the conventionality of social life, where all
meaning is mediated, and with the historical specificity of the codes is also
conveyed by the content and form of the dialogues, since through them the
courtiers construct their own social identity by defining and discussing – with
dialectical disagreements – the rules of conduct that should inspire their own
life. Thus, instead of presenting such norms as absolute, abstracted from the
historical process that has generated them, Castiglione calls attention to the
way in which they come into being by the agreement of specific individuals
and groups.

The concern with the codifications of courtly life that the Courtier conveys
at two levels, both in the frame situation and in the content of the characters’
discussion, also informs Shakespeare’s play, the first scene of which opens
with the process by which political authority fixes and enforces the law. Unlike
other plays by Shakespeare, such as The Merchant of Venice or The Comedy of
Errors, Love’s Labour’s Lost focuses on the very moment in which the rule is
constructed instead of presenting the law as firmly established. Like Casti-
glione, Shakespeare suggests the historical specificity of the conventions that
govern social life. However, he complicates the issue by having Berowne criti-
cize the king’s edict in the name of natural desires. Thus when, later on, the
king and his courtiers forswear the law on which they had agreed, denouncing
its arbitrariness, such a turn in the plot may be interpreted as a triumph of
unmediated nature over convention. That is the interpretation promoted by
Berowne, for whom the courtiers’ final decision reasserts natural values and
rejects the artificiality of academic life. Berowne’s theoretical stance seems to
overcome the tension between the belief in the natural foundation of social
conducted and the doubt that all social life, being constructed, is also potentially arbitrary.

However, Berowne’s comments betray the mystifications of his own argument from the very beginning, in the first complication in the plot, with the arrival of the French embassy. Berowne has just realized that the king’s edict is undermined by the demands of courtly politeness, and has criticized it as “A dangerous law against gentility” (LLL 1.1.127). And yet, in the moral lesson that he draws from the French embassy incident, his acknowledgment of the importance of courtly codes is turned into a defense of the primacy of natural desires:

King. We must of force dispense with this decree;
She must lie here on mere necessity.
Berowne. Necessity will make us all forsworn
Three thousand times within these three years’ space;
For every man with his affects is born,
Not by might master’d, but by special grace. (LLL 1.1.146-51)

By superimposing the logic of the passions on the obligations of social customs Berowne anticipates the strategy of his later arguments about love, where he covers up the question of the rhetorical medium by which he articulates his feeling. The naturalizing move of Shakespeare’s character recalls a passage in the Courtier where Ludovico di Canossa makes a complex, paradoxical appeal to a notion of “natural judgment” that is at the same time linked to, or indeed stems from, habit and social norm:

[...]he good use of speech therfore I beleeve, ariseth of men that have witte, and with learning and practise have gotten a good judgement, and with it consent and agree to receive the wordes that they thinke good, which are known by a certaine naturall judgement, and not by art or any manner rule. (Courtier 59; 1.2)

In reference to this passage Saccone comments on the way in which Castiglione’s rhetorical sequence consciously points to the ambiguous status of the “natural” in human life, where art and custom are implicated and disavowed at the same time:

si noti che quest’ultimo [il bon giudicio], derivando da “dottrina ed esperienza”, è immediatamente e equivocamente, sembrerebbe, ridefinito [... come] “giudicio naturale.” [...] Naturale, però dev’essere inteso come diventato naturale, se è un prodotto di dottrina ed esperienza. [...] La polemica qui è chiaramente diretta contro valori assoluti e metafisici, nel nome e a favore della storia e dell’uso. (45)

Despite Berowne’s supposed reconciliation of nature and social codes, Shakespeare too reminds his audience of the problematical character of an un-
derstanding of human life that appeals to nature and assumes that it can dis-

dens with all mediation. After one of Berowne’s attacks on the king’s edict, the latter remarks: “How well he’s read, to reason against reading!” (LLL 1.1.94) pointing to the inevitable contraditoriness of any rejection of art in the name of unmediated adherence to nature. The play flaunts the sophisticated articulation of rhetorical and social codes that characterizes the courtiers’ supposed conversion to natural values.

The highly conventional character of the main action in the play is aptly inscribed in the ambivalence of the term “courtship,” with its double reference to courtly customs and to romantic pursuits. When the princess describes the Muscovites as “trim gallants, full of courtship and of state” (LLL 5.2.363), she uses two ambiguous words that point to the political authority (“state”) and to the social competence (“courtship”) underlying the men’s expression of supposedly natural passions. And she repeats her point in her final, comprehensive evaluation of the courtiers’ wooing:

We have receiv’d your letters full of love;
Your favors, the ambassadors of love;
And in our maiden council, rated them
At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,
As bombast and as lining to the time.
But more devout than this in our respects
Have we not been; and therefore met your loves
In their own fashion, like a merriment. (LLL 5.2.769-76)

The wooing exchanges have had the character of a game, “a merriment” carried out according to a precise “fashion.”

Shakespeare dramatizes an understanding of the relation between the sexes close to the one presented in the Courtier, where, in the frame, the male and female characters entertain each other with dances and games. In fact the courtiers’ dialogue itself is a game, set in a hall where women and men sit in an alternating seating arrangement. Within the dialogues the speakers represent courtship as a stylized ritual, a series of moves on the man’s part and responses on the woman’s part, and discuss each kind of move for its effectiveness in gaining the woman’s favour. Thus courtship becomes almost a game to be won or lost, depending on the man’s ability but also, as with games, on fortune: “every one of us have scene most noble yong men, discrete, wise, of prowess, and well favoured spend many yeares in loving, sparing for nothing that might entice, tokens, sutes, tears: to bee short whatsoever may bee imagined, and all but lost labour” (Courtier 223; 3.41). The correspondence between the Courtier’s expression and Shakespeare’s title phrase bespeaks an analogous view of courtship as the most refined and emblematical of social games.
In *Love’s Labour’s Lost* – distinct in this sense from other Shakespearean comedies – courtship is always played out in a social, as opposed to an intimate, setting and at no point do the characters express their romantic or passionate feelings for each other. The courtship sequence focuses on the conventional elements of the courtship and does not explore the romantic interiority of the characters. It dramatizes the relation between the sexes as a dance – which significantly the Muscovites ask the women to perform – that is, into an exchange regulated by rigidly established norms, similar to a game.

When the men fall in love, they choose the highly stylized medium of lyrical poetry in the Petrarchan tradition to convey their feelings. Moreover, the development of the courtship is on both sides a social event, since the men plan their actions and carry them out together, and so do the women when they respond to their lovers’ initiative. Even the secret declarations of love that each man makes offstage during the Muscovites episode are of interest only when they are discussed, first among the women and later in the presence of the men. In the final scene, when the king publicly advances a marriage proposal speaking for the whole male quartet, the princess too responds for her three ladies without consulting their personal inclination and justifies her rejection by a reference to a previous “maiden council” where the ladies have together “rated” the men’s actions (*LLL* 5.2.771).

The way in which courtship is regulated by an elaborate code of conduct is dramatized not only in the scenes where the four men and the four women discuss and implement their strategies unanimously but also in the separation between men and women. The choreographic effect yielded by the courtship sequence rests on its emphasis on gender opposition, where the difference between male and female roles and spaces is accurately defined.

The sophisticated codification that the play dramatizes entails a crystallization of social differences, since the identity of every social category is specified and defined by being tied to a precise code of conduct. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* follows the *Courtier* in its clear differentiation of social status along class and gender lines, even if it complicates class distinctions by turning the lower-class comic plot into a parody of the main courtship, a juxtaposition that exposes the conventional foundation of the claims to superiority on the part of the courtiers, since the real difference between the two groups concerns less the supposed natural substance of the action – love – than the codes by which it is conveyed.

However, if in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* the lower classes are not ignored as they are in the *Courtier* (which suggests that “it were not meet that a gentleman should be present in person and a doer in such a matter in the countrey, where the lookers on and the doers were of a base sorte” [*Courtier* 97; 2.9]), still by the end they are dismissed by the nobility and especially punished insofar as they have manifested social ambitions by imitating the aristocracy. Costard is
therefore most spared the mocking attacks of his noble audience since he least affects genteel manners.

As far as gender differences are concerned both Castiglione and Shakespeare are ambivalent, since both texts compensate an exclusionary move on the part of male society by granting women superiority in a limited field. In the Courtier all the characters agree on the necessity to distinguish the gentlewoman's social identity by means of a separate set of norms, a necessity which is not only theorized but also dramatized in the clear division of roles in the frame action. At the court of Urbino the women are allowed to set the rules of the game and to insist that the dialogue be carried out accordingly, but they are never allowed to participate in the dialogue itself, except to express their witty censure, an activity in which Lady Emilia Pia outdoes the men. Even if the decision to keep women out of the dialogue is presented as a privilege that women enjoy, it aims at excluding them from the serious process of codification. Women display a high awareness of social norms but hardly contribute to establishing and manipulating them.

The women in Love's Labour's Lost play a more prominent and many-sided role in the social game – where they hold the rhetorical field with wit and outspokenness and participate in masculine pursuits such as hunting – but they too show their social competence mostly in their critical response to male initiative which is asserted in the initial exclusion from the space of the court and in the later pursuits of courtship.

In their treatment of the relation between the sexes both Castiglione and Shakespeare show the ideological function of courtly codification as a means for a more effective assertion of power. Castiglione acknowledges the controlling function of man-made codes that define women's social identity when he has Lord Julian notice that "the silly poore creatures wish not to bee a man to make them more perfect, but to have libertie, and to be rid of the rule that men have of their owne authoritie chalenged over them" (Courtier 200; 3.16) and insist later that "wee have of our owne authoritie claimed a libertie, whereby wee will have the selfe same offences in us very light, and otherwhile worthie prayse, and in women not sufficiently to bee punished, but with a shamefull death, or at the least everlasting slander" (Courtier 220; 3.38).

In Shakespeare's play, both male and female characters refer to the relation between the sexes through metaphors of combat (LLL 2.1.225; 4.3.362-65; 5.2.82-85). If the characters stylize social interaction into a game, it is still a game initiated with the intention of winning and defeating the opponent. The competitiveness of courtly self-fashioning, even when it hides behind the seemingly innocent notions of entertainment and game-playing, is dramatized in the episode of deer hunting which exposes, as the princess suggests (LLL 4.1.24-35), the implications of both kinds of "courtship," since hunting deer is both a literalization of a commonplace figure of courtly love and an emblem of the courtier's aristocratic pursuits.
Both Castiglione and Shakespeare represent a process of codification that supports the control exercised by the dominant social forces over the definition of individual identity. As a consequence both of them focus on the tension inherent in a culture that is on the one hand sensitive to individual self-assertion, in the tradition of humanistic thought and on the other hand aware that individual identity is continuously subjected to societal control.

The main project of Castiglione’s courtier is to devise the strategies by means of which he can influence society’s response and thus regain power over the forces that control him, namely his prince and his peers. When both Castiglione and Shakespeare explore how self-construction is tied to the manipulation and the control of the audience, they show how the assertion and definition of individual identity entails a complex and devious, seemingly self-contradictory process, which avoids any direct affirmation of the will. Proud self-assertion would generate conflict, and, in Castiglione’s terms, “alwaies purchaseth [it]selfe the hatred of the hearers” (Courtier 37; 1.17). Instead the process of Renaissance self-fashioning focuses on persuasion and aims at inducing society to recognize the constructed identity as acceptable. Hence, both in Castiglione and in Shakespeare, the dramatization of a series of strategies that, however varied, have in common a similar deviousness, an analogous complex rhetorical dimension, strategies such as those of the king, who renounces the world in order to find in it eternal glory and fame, or of Berowne, who mocks his affection at the very moment in which he declares it, or of the princess, who quibbles to gain praise and at the same time show herself superior to it (LLL 4.1.11-23), or of the perfect courtier, who has achieved “sprezzatura,” an art of such refinement that it can hide itself and thus avoid striking the audience with affectation.

The courtier, in order to evaluate the image he projects in society, to “bee a righteous judge of him selfe” (Courtier 102; 2.13), must be aware that social codes articulate human values and meanings whose validity derives from custom rather than from an absolute source of authority. Both writers make fun of the self-righteous seriousness that essentializes norms into a set of rules that cannot be modified, as if they corresponded to the nature of things. They advance their critique of the tendency towards code-crystallization by focusing on their characters’ attitude towards language. Shakespeare in his satiric characterization of Holofernes echoes Castiglione’s critique of the pedants who uphold an archaic linguistic code (in the specific instance the fourteenth-century Tuscan vernacular of Petrarch and Boccaccio) by appealing to the notion of origins and attributing to the old forms an ontological status exceeding that of a social convention.

When Holofernes obstinately objects to “such rackers of orthography, as to speak dout fine when he should say doubt, det when he should pronounce debt, – d. e. b. t. not d. e. t” (LLL 5.1.19-21) he resembles the Courtier’s “Tuskane [who would] reprehend [Count Lewis] for speaking rather Satisfatto than
Sodisfatto: and Honorevole: and Causa, than Cagione: and Populo, than Popolo," about whose censure the Count says: "I passe ful little" (Courtier 65; 1.39). Both Holofernes and the Tuskane pedant abstract the form from its only source of validity, i.e. usage; as the Courtier asserts, "wordes [...] ought to bee apt, chose, cleare, and well applyed, and (above all) in use also among the people" (Courtier 56; 1.33).

According to Castiglione, the pedant's fault lies not only in the inappropriate and presumptuous defense of certain linguistic conventions, or simply in his "over great desire to shew much knowledge: [...] a most odious vice" (Courtier 49; 1.28). Rather his fundamental shortcoming lies in the dogmatic belief with which he holds on to his set of norms and in his complementary obliviousness to the complexity of human relations. He is doubly self-deluded, in accepting as eternal law what is only a historically determined product and in therefore failing to pay attention to changing social expectations and customs.

While Holofernes tries to enforce obsolete linguistic norms associated with the humanistic reevaluation of philological studies, another character, Armado, displays an analogous literal-minded loyalty to a set of linguistic and rhetorical norms that he associates with courtliness and fashionable life, and that he tries to follow without any regard to the communicative context. Thus he courts Jaquenetta in the same style that he considers appropriate for courtly wooing (a style which does not meet courtly standards either, given Armado's deafness to rhetorical subtleties). Even if their cultural/linguistic allegiances are at variance, the two characters end up together as a butt of the courtiers' mockery in the Worthies' pageant, a plot convergence suggesting that they share similar shortcomings. Both characters lack what Castiglione refers to as "judgment," the courtier's ability to evaluate a situation and choose the most appropriate course of action.

For Castiglione the courtier must be able to recognize and control a variety of codes, so as to adapt to the various circumstances of social life: "he [...] must be plyable [...] and] every day alter fashion and manner according to the disposition of them he is conversant withall" (Courtier 105; 2.17). Social flexibility and adaptability are as important as their parallel virtue on the physical level, "nimbleness," the most celebrated quality in the portrait of the courtier as sportsman (Courtier 39; 1.20). Throughout the dialogues, while expounding courtly manners, the speakers qualify their definitions by reminding the audience that norms must always be modified to suit the particular situation, the place, time, and persons involved. The aim of the courtier is not faithfulness to an ideal model of virtues offered for imitation; it is, rather, social control.

The understanding of action as performance and of speech as rhetoric that informs both the Courtier and Love's Labour's Lost makes them both wary of explicit appeals to the audience's favour and conscious of the counterproductive effects of self-display and affectation, of any conduct too obviously calling
for public approval. Castiglione opens the Courtier with a critique of affectation, not in order to defend natural spontaneity but to advance an extreme social sophistication, "grace," that recreates naturalness through art, while Shakespeare mocks, in Armado, the exemplary embodiment of blundering affectation. And as the fourth book of the Courtier attacks that Prince who "wade[s] to an extreme selfe liking" (Courtier 263; 4.7), too eager to show his superiority, so Love's Labour's Lost dramatizes the failure of the too pretentious project of self-promotion devised by the king.

The pompous vision of eternal fame that inspires the king — however ascetic and impervious to worldly enticements he declares his academy to be — quickly betrays his lack of judgment. He is first confronted with the unacceptable arbitrariness of his own edict, when he is forced to admit his misjudgment by the pressure of international political obligations whose validity cannot be questioned by his individual will. Though the individual who proudly asserts his will in defiance of the existing order was also an ideal of Renaissance culture, the king must here recognize the limits imposed by established customs.

The courtier, instead of making direct claims to authority through pedantry, foppery or grandeur, finds more subtle means of social power in his sense of humor, quickness of wit, irony and jesting. Castiglione discusses wit and jesting at length as one of the highest forms of entertainment, and, as such, close to game-playing, masking and dancing (Courtier 133-84; 2.41-100). He also dramatizes the effectiveness of wit in the frame action, where characters often defend or undermine the various arguments by resorting to witty repartee. When he links wit and jesting with entertainment, Castiglione emphasizes the playful character of these rhetorical activities. Entertainment is social interaction for its own sake rather than for the sake of achieving a practical aim. The courtier who displays his wit seems, like a man engaged in other forms of entertainment, less invested in the stance that he is taking. Thus he offers less ground for criticism and attack because he is less openly identified with a certain position. Through his rhetorical abilities the witty courtier exercises a more effective control over his audience than the person who makes his point in earnest because he is on the one hand more indirect in his self-assertion and on the other more flexible, ready to adapt to new circumstances.

In Love's Labour's Lost wit and quickness in jesting are the qualities by which Berowne distinguishes himself. His witty jokes are evidence both of his deeper social wisdom and of his ability to play with social conventions, to distance himself from existing laws and manners. While skillfully practicing his courtly manners, Berowne shows his critical detachment when he mocks the consummate courtier Boyet, as "the ape of form, monsieur the nice" and in jest laments: "Behaviour, what wert thou/ Till this madman show'd thee?" (LLL 5.2.325, 337-38). Moreover, Berowne is the only one who takes a critical view of the king's edict and takes his distance from the act of swearing to it: "By yea and nay, sir, then I swore in jest" (LLL 1.1.54). Aware that the act of
swearing acquires its validity by convention, he attempts to change its significance and resorts to jesting in order to get himself out of his engagement. His playful spiritedness in his rebuttal of his friends’ objections to his choice of Rosaline also shows him undaunted by the arguments of Renaissance literary canonization:

King. By heaven, thy love is black as ebony.  
Berowne. Is ebony like her? O wood divine!  
A wife of such wood were felicity.  
[...]  
And therefore is she born to make black fair.  
Her favour turns the fashion of the days.  
For native blood is counted painting now. (LLL 4.3.243-45, 257-59)

To his friends’ appeal to fixed canons of female beauty that required light skin, hair and eyes, Berowne responds by reversing the canon, making fun of the notion of a model as the embodiment of a fixed ideal value.

But the most interesting dramatization of the power of wit and jesting to assuage the anxieties of the individual confronted with the pressure of codification is offered when Berowne resorts to self-irony and self-mocking as a refined form of control over his own image. In the moment of crisis, when his desire has made him forswear his pledge (see the two monologues in LLL 3.1.168-200 and 4.3.1-19), he manages to regain a degree of self-possession by foregrounding the playful character of all social interaction: “Well, I will love, write, sigh, pray, sue, and groan:/ Some men must love my lady, and some Joan” (LLL 3.1.199-200). Thus he overcomes the seriousness of the crisis (in Byron-like fashion, one is tempted to say, reversing the order of literary history).

Berowne’s strategy of wit, by which he aims at asserting his position without exposing himself to attack, finds followers in the courtiers, who adopt it in their wooing — only to be outwitted by the ladies’ pointed rejoinders. The episode of the masquerade is emblematic of the whole courtship sequence because it shows how jesting serves the characters’ ambivalent strategy. In their deliberate dramatization of a conventional moment of courtship — the declaration of love — the four men are both in earnest, eager to win the ladies, and playful, so as to defend themselves against a possible rejection (cf. Castiglione on how “a maske bringeth with it a certaine libertie and licence” [Courtier 99; 2.11]).

The fact that the dialogues between the two groups of lovers always walk the fine line between earnestness and playfulness makes the lack of comedic closure less conspicuously conflicting with the generic horizon of expectations which would anticipate a definite, socially and sexually stabilizing, resolution. The agreement to postpone all final decisions is not incongruous with the pre-
ceeding action which has encouraged interaction but not commitment. The latter tends to conflict with the ethos of the play and its celebration of flexibility within codification, an ethos that is instead better summed up by the interlocutory agreement of a time-bound service. Shakespeare emphasizes how the ending both departs from generic expectations and sustains the mode of the play as a whole by having the characters explicitly discuss the lack of resolution in the same tone of serio ludere that distinguishes their former exchanges. And if the princess’s justification for rejecting the king’s proposal may sound like a complaint about the courtiers’ ambiguous playfulness, one should remember that wit had been the quality that had most attracted the women in the first place (see LLL 2.1.47-76). Thus the play ends confirming the oscillation between commitment and flexibility, law and self-construction that informs its overall linguistic and dramatic development. In this aspect too, the play makes more explicit and gives full dramatic force to a rhetorical deflation of closure that, despite the traditional reading of the last part of Book Four, characterizes also the very last chapters of the Courtier. Castiglione’s seeming insistence on a high comedic resolution by means of Bembo’s inspired celebration of Platonic love is in fact counterbalanced and qualified by Signora Emilia’s joke, which cautions against excesses (Bembo may be running here the risk of “affectation”): “Take heede (maister Peter) that these thoughts make not your soule also to forsake the bodie” (Courtier 322; 4.71). Moreover, the last page closes on a suspended moment, with a dialogic opening, an unsolved question, whose pursuit is, like the romantic pursuit of Love’s Labour’s Lost, postponed to a future that escapes representation.

In its exploration of courtly ethos and of the sixteenth-century process of secular codification, Shakespeare’s play presents many points of contact with Castiglione’s meditation on the perfect courtier. The echoes, both thematic and verbal, of Castiglione’s text in Love’s Labour’s Lost suggest a convergence not only of linguistic but also of cultural and social concerns. Like the Courtier, Shakespeare’s comedy represents a process of articulation, refinement, and crystallization of the social codes by which the court and its gentlemen aim to bolster or increase their respective power.

Even if no one can deny differences in tone and focus between Shakespeare’s comedy and Castiglione’s dialogue-treatise,⁹ still the correspondences between the two works bring into relief on one hand the social implications of Love’s Labour’s Lost, which is more than a comedy of linguistic experimentation, and on the other hand the dramatic and pragmatic nature of Castiglione’s concerns, thus balancing a critical tradition that, as Saccone has pointed out (35), has often been too concerned with defining concepts, ideas, theories in the courtiers’ dialogue rather than with the significance of the speakers’ dramatic interaction.

Shakespeare’s indebtedness to Castiglione is not less deep or substantial even if it is indirect and mediated by the discourse of the English Renaissance,
which, as a whole, looks to Italy as an authoritative point of reference, a discourse where, as in the courtly culture envisioned by Castiglione, it may be difficult to trace the exchanges and mobility of single linguistic and cultural elements. Shakespeare’s relation to Castiglione may be mediated by those English writers who explicitly draw upon the central debate in the *Courtier* on the rhetorical construction of social life, that is writers such as Sidney and Puttenham, who focus, like Shakespeare in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, on the serious implications of the feast of language. Shakespeare’s indebtedness to Castiglione closes the present critical argument by leading to a consideration of what, in turn, Castiglione’s critical fortune may owe to Shakespeare. The latter’s reinterpretation of the themes of the *Courtier* shows how the ideology expressed by Castiglione, however tied to courtly culture, was not necessarily bound to the fixed, absolute social normativity of late Renaissance Italian conduct-books or to a forced apologetics of despotism, but could instead inspire a literature that had not relinquished its oppositionality. Shakespeare’s dramatization of the critical potential of the courtier’s self-consciousness, whose acuteness will not spare the prince from criticism, as well as of the shaping powers of language, draw out the implications of the *Courtier*, whose author, conscious of the way in which rhetoric constructs the conditions of social life, also suggests the potential for mobility and mutability that such consciousness implies.

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NOTES

1 This assertion indirectly touches upon the *vexata quaestio* of Castiglione’s attitude toward Urbino. The critical debate primarily concerns his introductory remarks to the actual dialogues in both the letter to De Silva, written in 1527, long after the manuscript of *Il Cortegiano* had been completed, and in the introductory portrayal of life at the court of Urbino in the narrative frame. As my observations already reveal, I agree with the critical stance, which has gained visibility and consensus in recent years, that questions the traditional idealizing view of Castiglione as a nostalgic *laudator temporis acti*, Platonically devoted to a perfect and unique model attained in the past but unattainable in the present. From different points of view and in various degrees, such critics as Mazzacurati, Ossola, Saccone, Javitch and Lanham point to the main thematic and rhetorical elements which run counter to a reading of *Il Cortegiano* as a nostalgic or Platonic text. In particular, Mazzacurati argues that Castiglione articulates and interprets the “nuova egemonia culturale delle corti e delle loro aristocrazie” (150). Mazzacurati connects the new historical situation, “[i]l tempo nuovo delle corti [che] appariva [...] al suo principale protagonista intellettuale tempo di fratture (rispetto a precedenti ordini) e insieme di accumulazioni orizzontali, di tensioni multiple, dove la fondazione di nuove gerarchie e la legittimazione delle vecchie è affidata al vaglio monopolistico di [...] una policentrica ‘aristocrazia di massa’, coniugabile attraverso l’intero spazio nazionale” (176-77) with the intellectual and cultural elaboration of new codes of conduct, new systems of value which coexist and interweave in a fluid balance. The courtier is configured as “una nuova germinazione” (181) whose modernity lies in the contamination and coexistence of various codes of conduct and in multiple cultural allegiances, in “varietà e versatilità” (184). In his
excellent series of essays on *Il Cortegiano*, Saccone agrees with Mazzacurati's historical interpretation and emphasizes the social purpose of Castiglione's treatise, the expression of "una classe - nuova, in un certo senso, e specializzata, 'professionale'" (14). Qualifying the critical commonplace that likens *Il Cortegiano* to a static Renaissance portrait, Saccone presents a view of the work as a "manifesto" informed by an innovative, future-directed impulse. Saccone's suggestion, that *Il libro del Cortegiano* is "un'elaborazione simbolica [...] ricca e coerente, e comunicante, nel presente e nel passato, e, come la storia della sua fortuna dimostra, nel futuro, con altri sistemi simbolici, ritratti, ideali e proposte che la società [...] aveva promosso e promuoveva di sé" (27), goes beyond an interpretation of the treatise as a mere celebration of the declining system of Italian courtly patronage. Ossola's extremely subtle and learned analysis of *Il Cortegiano* in the context of contemporary literary discourse also foregrounds the novelty of Castiglione's stance and argues for the crucial importance of the rhetorical self-consciousness of the courtier, which allows him to define a new social function and identity. An approach similar to Ossola's, which focuses on the literary discourse, on its generic genealogies and its intertextual relations, also characterizes, in spite of major critical differences, Lanham and Javitch's *Poetry and Courtliness* (in particular 18-49) which examines the rhetorical and ideological distance that separates *Il Cortegiano* from its classical model, *De oratore*. In this context Javitch discusses how the renewed interest in rhetorical studies in Renaissance England accompanies a reading of the *Courtier* as a text celebrating the rhetorical way of life, the importance of the conscious manipulation of conventional codes in all social life. Javitch's later intervention, "*Il Cortegiano* and the Constraints of Despotism," moves, as the title suggests, to a more explicit treatment of the social implications of Castiglione's discourse, about which Javitch remarks: "[o]ne of the chief novelties of the *Cortegiano* [...] is that it sets forth an art of conduct tailored to the social and political exigencies of Renaissance despotism" (17). And he continues with a complaint that, as the present review of critical positions hopes to have proved, is no longer so relevant as a decade ago: "This pragmatic and forward-looking aspect of Castiglione's code has been obscured by modern commentators who have tended to dwell on the book's idealistic, escapist, and nostalgic features" (17). The critical revision of the idealizing and nostalgic elements in *Il Cortegiano* accompanied an increased concern with and awareness of the social and historical horizon of expectations which Castiglione addresses. As a whole, most recent critics emphasize the relevance of the book to its contemporary historical transformations which determine the emergence of a new social group, the courtiers, who, in the new, non-municipal political centers perform the essential function of articulating the exercise of political power and providing ideal cultural justifications for it. It is important, however, to notice that well-documented and interesting recent interventions on the subject disagree with a "progressive" reading and maintain the crucial significance of Castiglione's backward gaze: Rebhorn, while agreeing with other critics about Castiglione's cultivation of a rhetorical way of life, argues that the *Courtier* presents rhetorical conduct as an ideal model for imitation, a self-sufficient work of art deliberately separated from the contingent purposes and dynamics of social and political interaction. Pugliese, in her most recent essay on Castiglione, connects the pervasiveness of humour in the dialogues to the fundamental elegiac and nostalgic inspiration of the work, arguing that humour performs a crucial consolatory function against Castiglione's melancholy sense of the ephemeral nature of life.

2 I am translating here the title of his most recent book on the subject, already quoted above, which discusses Castiglione as an emblematic and decisive figure in turning the Renaissance cultural debate into a self-conscious claim for modernity. Mazzacurati's definition of the period is taken here as a valuable point of reference; however, a theoretical discussion of his strong historiographical stance would go beyond the scope of the present analysis.

3 On the subject of the *Courtier* 's fortune and influence outside of Italy see Quondam and Crane, both of which deal with the general European fortune of the treatise. For more particular studies on Castiglione's influence on the English Renaissance and on the relation of specific authors to Castiglione's work see Jeffery (whose conclusions have however been questioned in
The critical literature on Shakespeare's play presents isolated references to Castiglione's work, mentioned in relation to particular elements of the play. There is, however, no comprehensive treatment of the play's structural and thematic indebtedness to the discourse of the court as established by Castiglione's archetypal text. Mention of the Courtier is made in interesting essays on Shakespeare and Love's Labour's Lost, such as those by Praz and Bradbrook already quoted; Montrose; Maus. The most important study of the sources of Love's Labour's Lost remains Yates, which however does not deal with the Courtier's possible influence on Shakespeare.

The expression with which I here denote the courtier's conscious construction of his social role is based on Greenblatt's study. In the introduction he explains that the term refers to his belief that "in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (2). I agree with Greenblatt's emphasis on self-fashioning as process, which implies a dramatic and dynamic negotiation of the self and the context in which it moves, as Greenblatt's treatment of Shakespeare's work shows (for a different position see Saccone 70). In his book, Greenblatt mentions Castiglione's treatise in passing as a "manual of behavior [...] portray[ing] a world in which social frictions, sexual combat, and power are all carefully masked by the fiction of an elegant oitum" (162). I would be less categorical about the comprehensiveness of Castiglione's ideological screen, since the figure of the mask, rather than being disguised, is foregrounded and brought to the attention of the reader.

The connection between Spanish culture and an inclination towards bragging is advanced also by Castiglione, whose portrait of the "Spaniardes" well fits Armado: "in too much babling [they] passe sometime their boundes and were unsavory and fond, because they have no respect to the condition of the person they commune withal, to the place where they bee, to the time, to the great gravitie and modesty which they ought to have in themselves" (Courtier 134; 2.42).

For example, sir Fredericke Fregoso gives the following advice: "let him consider well what the thing is he doth or speaketh, the place where it is done, in presence of whom, in what time, the cause why he doth it, his age, his profession, the end whereto it tendeth, and the meanes that may bring him to it: and so let him apply him selfe discreetly with these advertisements to what soever hee mindeth to doe or speake" (Courtier 95: 2.7).

Sir Fredericke opens the long discussion on jesting with the following words: "for that I desire in ye Courtier, it sufficeth to say (beside the matters rehearsed) that he bee such a one that shall never want good communication and fitte for them he talketh withall, and have a good understanding with a certaine sweetnesse to refresh the hearers minds, and with merry conceites and jestes to provoke them to solace and laughter, so that without being at any time lothose or satiate, he may evermore delite" (Courtier 133; 2.41).

Shakespeare emphasizes the playful, experimental, dimension of experience that the awareness of the conventional character of social life opens up and encourages, while Castiglione is always very circumspect, concerned to uphold the dignity of the courtier's function; he focuses on the virtue of adaptability to external circumstances rather than on the possibility of social manipulation achieved through a mastery of manners.

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