

W. R. Albury. *Castiglione's Allegory: Veiled Policy in The Book of the Courtier* (1528). Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014. 275p., ill. ISBN 9781472432636. £55 (hardback).

Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* has been described as a handbook on elegant manners, an idealized portrait of the court of Urbino, a compendium of debates about arms, letters and love, and a dialogue about the best form of government in Italy. W. R. Albury's book adds a new angle, arguing that it is also an historically-sensitive record of a particular set of circumstances. Reflecting on Pope Julius II's visit to Urbino in the days before the book's fictional conversations took place (March 1507) and on the fact that cardinals and papal delegates were amongst the auditors of the dialogue, Albury argues that the *Courtier* served the specific purpose of reassuring the pope "that Urbino is the ideal place for the education of Francesco Maria [della Rovere] as a future prince" (22). Moreover, he argues, there is an ethical-political edge to the *Courtier* that usually goes unnoticed. Castiglione's interlocutors – and especially Ottaviano Fregoso – conceal a "veiled policy" that the ideal courtier should be prepared to become a "physician of the state" when necessary, and to overthrow tyrannical rulers for the common good. The *Book of the Courtier*, in other words, speaks truth to power but also against power, and only the most judicious readers would have been attuned to its radical message.

Chapters 1 and 2 make strides towards Albury's goal of re-reading the *Courtier* as those judicious sixteenth-century readers might have done. They bring to life the volatile political backdrop that is barely perceptible in the *Courtier* itself, but that, once focalized, enables greater appreciation of the risk involved in Castiglione's undertaking. Shining the spotlight on Francesco Maria della Rovere, who plays a minor but crucial role in the dialogue, Albury highlights Castiglione's ambition to instruct princes as well as their servants.

Less convincing is the attempt in chapters 3 and 4 to assert Ottaviano Fregoso's philosophical superiority over Bembo's "inferior credentials" (22). The claim that Bembo is inexperienced and biased while Fregoso shows "more evidence of being a philosopher" (97) is somewhat tendentious and Albury fails to persuade that this hierarchy is necessary for the success of the book's key argument in chapter 5. The individual striving towards divine love that Bembo describes underpins the collective pursuit of civic harmony advocated by Fregoso, so judicious readers would have had little trouble in appreciating the complementarity rather than polarity of their worldviews.

Chapter 5 unveils Fregoso's policy and finds in his words an exhortation to courtier-



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physicians to cure diseased states of corrupt leaders. The remaining chapters add grist to that mill: chapter 6 introduces Plato's *Politikos* as a privileged source text for Castiglione with its explicit alignment of statesmen and physicians, both equally concerned for the better health of citizens and required – *in extremis* – to “purge the city for its better health” (185). Chapter 7, meanwhile, subjects Castiglione's portrait medal and emblem to a rigorous examination and proposes that they, too, encode a covert “policy of resistance to tyrants” (230).

Not all readers will be persuaded by Albury's conclusions. Yet his efforts to read against the grain and to restore the ethical-political underpinnings to our readings of the *Courtier* are commendable. This thought-provoking book will enrich current scholarship by testifying afresh both to the sophistication and depth of Castiglione's text and to the *sprezzatura* with which he wrote it.

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