

DE L'ART D'ETRE VERTUEUX

English version

How to Be Good: The Politics of Behaviour in Early Modern Europe

Exhibition of books from the Old Library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais

The genres of courtesy, etiquette and spiritual guidance constituted some of the most popular categories of literature in the early modern period. How to behave oneself was a serious subject; whether to get ahead in this life or to seek salvation in the next were central concerns of the elites and the masses alike.

This exhibition presents a selection of courtesy and spiritual handbooks held in the Old Library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais in order to explore the themes of civility, spirituality, *le bonheur*, and the relative discourses on the interior and exterior life. The Old Library is home to not only better-known titles like Torquato Tasso's *De la Noblesse* (Case 1) and Antoine de Courtin's *Suite de la Civilité* (Case 2) but to more unusual ones too, most notably the nineteenth-century pamphlet *On the Behaviour of Priests towards Women* by 'A Father of the Society of Jesus' (Case 5). By examining these texts the reader is introduced to the world(s) of the early modern courtier, bourgeois and scholar.

In the wake of Protestant reform and Catholic reconstitution, the presses of Europe were increasingly busy and works on conduct, spiritual, courtly or otherwise, formed a large part of the publisher's list. While France and Italy remained the most prolific publishers of courtesy material, England also enjoyed a lively trade in courtesy works. However, these were more often than not heavily indebted to their continental counterparts, for example Della Casa's *Galateo* appeared in English translation as *The Refin'd Courtier* (London, 1679). Other works were especially popular: Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531), Henry Peacham's *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622) and Richard Braitwait's *The English Gentleman* (1631). Interestingly Braitwait's *English Gentleman* had a companion volume: *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), extolling the proper virtues for ladies of the court. This latter title is rare in specifically addressing a female audience.

It was in the English editions that one can find a wry view of the politics of social niceties: Henry Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman* promised to 'recover you from the tyrannie of these ignorant times, and from the common Education; which is to weare the best cloathes, eate, sleepe, drinke much, and to know nothing'. This lighter side of courtesy literature however contrasted sharply with a much darker one, a side as much concerned with salvation in the next life as it with social advancement in this one. Within the courtesy, nobility and honour genres, several issues continued to attract debate.

Firstly, the issue of *honnêteté* and the *honnête homme* pre-occupied courtiers and the authors who wrote for them. Throughout the century, this concept was open to both praise and ridicule, as the term was alternatively idealised, questioned, belittled and revived.

Secondly, while the emergence of Cartesian thought on mind/body connections enlivened the field, debates on

the relationship between the interior and exterior of the person were already hotly disputed. Della Casa's influential *Galateo* posed the question and offered an answer: 'The habit then, son, beautiful and becoming on the outside, is inside totally empty, and consists in appearances without substance and in words without meaning. This does not allow us, however, to change it. On the contrary, we are obliged to abide by it because it is a fault of our times, not of ourselves.'

A third ever-changing but increasingly relevant aspect of courtesy and spiritual literature is that of happiness, or *le bonheur*. Discussions of Christian *bonheur* gave way to more Enlightened ideas of happiness arising from things other than God or godly behavior and continued with increasing intensity during the eighteenth century. In this sense Crussaire's *Manuel du vrai sage* (Case 4) presents us with an interesting post-Enlightenment fusion of both secular and Christian viewpoints of what it takes to make man happy.

These works were used by readers in a multitude of ways: to seek self-less salvation, to find true goodness and for more pragmatic reasons, to 'get ahead' in society. To call these works the 'self-help' books of their time may be a little anachronistic, however these constituted a lucrative market of literature until the late-eighteenth century, when the primary world in which they operated, the court, was changed forever.

This research was undertaken primarily at the Old Library, Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris.

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Introduction

The genres of courtesy, etiquette and spiritual guidance constituted some of the most popular categories of literature in the early modern period (1500-1800). This exhibition presents a selection of courtesy and spiritual handbooks held in the Old Library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais in order to explore the themes of civility, spirituality, *le bonheur*, and the relative discourses on the interior and exterior life. How to behave oneself was a serious subject; whether to get ahead in this life or to seek salvation in the next were central concerns of the elites and the masses alike.

Building upon earlier chivalric traditions, the works of Machiavelli, Castiglione and Erasmus injected a vigour into the genre, motivated by the increasingly complex court system, changing political circumstances, and an ever-growing population of educated, ambitious as well as socially - and geographically - mobile readers. Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513), Castiglione's *The Boke of the Courtier* (1528) and Erasmus's *De Civilitate* (1530) all dealt with elements of court society; essentially how to survive and thrive within it. Beyond these well-known names a host of authors, a good number of them Italian, contributed their views and wisdom. During the seventeenth century, French asserted its place as the dominant linguistic medium of the courtesy genre, influenced no doubt by the growing primacy of the French court in the wider European context. The extent of these works and their reach is borne out by their extensive record of translation, re-edition and re-printing over the following two centuries, as well as their citation by new authors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

While courtesy literature was enjoying a growing audience, spiritual literature was slowly but surely losing ground to the emerging genres. As one would expect, the spiritual guides were generally written by those who held ecclesiastical office while the courtesy guides usually traded on the expertise of their author as a man of the court. In keeping with the general trend in publishing during the seventeenth century, spiritual literature was increasingly published in the vernacular; whereas Latin titles accounted for the majority of works published in 1600, they held just 5% of the market in 1800.

The genres of religious and courtesy literature constituted a sizeable proportion of what was published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. The relationship between the two has been regarded as unclear and problematic, displaying the close ties and almost **indiscernible boundaries between the ideals of religion and the secular life**. The genres of courtesy literature and, later, the less reputable literature of etiquette, were lambasted for their tendency to gild, rather than reform the character, therefore placing this genre outside the realm of moral ecclesiastical guidance. However, perhaps conscious of the criticism, **courtesy literature increasingly argued that a respectable and forthright character was not simply a case of 'faking it'**. The perception and projection of goodness was reliant upon an inner core of integrity; outer harmony and composure were utterly dependant upon inner purity and sanctity. In many ways, the courtesy genre gave religious lessons new life in the wider world, offering not just personal peace, but presenting it as **a means to 'get ahead'**; classically humanist promises. The performance of good deeds, one's faith in one's fellow-man, and the presence of inner peace, arise again and again in the discourses of nobility, honour and courtesy. It suggests that while the great conflicts of the reformation and religious wars across Europe might have settled to some extent, the central debate of whether one earned or was awarded salvation continued unabated in many forms.

Questions of salvation, of virtue, of man's place in society and of the purpose of his existence troubled all types of writers, and were popular avenues of exploration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From the lesser-known works included in this exhibition to the best-selling essays of Michel de Montaigne, writers searched within themselves and examined the projection of the self in the wider world with an increasing intensity. The motivations were both circumstantial and pragmatic. The certainty of religious practice and reward had been irrevocably undermined in the sixteenth century and, for writers of the late sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, this instability of belief was played out not just in the mind, but on the battlefield, in the court and in society at large.

Panel 1

Torquato Tasso, *De la Noblesse*, 1633

De la Noblesse by Torquato Tasso is the **earliest work pertaining to courtesy and nobility in the Old Library's collection**.

It first appeared as *Il forno overo della nobilita* in 1580, competing with the texts of a prolific group of Italian writers concerned with comportment and manners. Tasso was already a celebrated poet with strong links to the Ferrara court and he is **best-known as the author of *Jerusalem Delivered***, published when he was thirty-one. His reputation remained strong into the early nineteenth century, helped to some extent by Goethe's celebration in the eponymous 1780 play and Byron's tribute *The Lament of Tasso* in 1817.

Like many others in the courtesy genre, the book employs the popular device of a dialogue, this one between Alcandre and Clidamant, who discuss the merits of the court and the qualities of the nobility. Throughout the work Tasso's protagonists debate the great eternal issues including **questions on the nature of love, beauty and what constitutes the true state of nobility**. This work alludes to nobility as a virtue, indeed that noble behaviour constitutes a beauty of sorts.

It would appear that his confinement during the writing of the work may have had something to do with its increasingly philosophical approach; indeed **he offers his views as a *philosophe* as well as a *courtisan***.

Charles de Bourdonné, *Le Courtisan désabusé ou Pensées d'un gentil-homme*, 1658

This is a first edition of Bourdonné's work which proved to be extremely popular. It was printed by Antoine Vitry, 'imprimeur ordinaire du Roy, & du clergé de France', who introduced his readers to 'un livre qu'on peut appeler avec raison un ouvrage de bonne foy, puis qu'il est sans artifice, & qu'il part d'un homme sans science'.

Bourdonné offers some very well-worn advice at times, echoing Polonius' advice to Hamlet: 'Considerons-donc bien toutes ces choses, & travaillons tout de bon à acquerir la connoissance de nous-mêmes, puisque c'est la science des sciences & la plus importante de toutes.'

The style of Bourdonné's work is accessible and his tone engaging, constituting one of the most readable works not only in this collection but in the genre at large. Bourdonné sets himself a familiar task: to **explore and assess the attributes of man, his virtue, knowledge, patience and humility** among other things. Like many of the other authors in this collection, Bourdonné offers his advice on all aspects of life, intermingling practical topics on the nature of nobility, on the wisdom of marriage and on the court, with chapters on penance, death, vengeance, as well as on enmity and friendship.

Panel 2

Antoine de Courtin, *Suite de la Civilité*, 1675

Courtin's *Suite de la Civilité* constitutes **one of the most influential and ubiquitous works** of the courtesy genre in the seventeenth century.

Suite de la Civilité adopts a **philosophical tone**, and looks beyond the finer points of conduct. The issues of human nature, of vengeance and honour concerned Courtin too. **The *bons sens* of man is treated as a sacred thing**, equal in importance to his own bodily mortality and to injure it should be seen as tantamount to murder; Courtin is far from timid in defending the subject of his writings. However time and again he promotes patience and tranquility. Rather than react harshly to perceived insults **one should embrace a toleration of (perhaps imagined) enemies**. 'C'est donc par où s'exprime la méprise, et cette énumération nous fait voir combien on se préoccupe, en prenant souvent de gaieté de coeur pour injure, des actions et des paroles qui ne sont nullement offensantes ny injurieuses'.

This appeal to humility and restraint is present in many of the works on display. The dilemma was whether to foster peace at increasingly fractious courts or, as a reflection of true Christian sentiment, to 'turn the other cheek'. **These works fulfill both courtly and Christian duties in many cases, leaving the reader to follow at times indistinguishable paths.**

Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, *Conduites pour les Principales Actions de la Vie Chrestienne*, 1682

Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure was a **Jesuit priest and writer** whose many works included *De la connaissance et de l'amour du Fils de Dieu* (1634), *Méditation sur les plus grandes et les plus importantes vérités de la foi* (1642) and the popular *La vie de M. de Renty* (1651).

Saint-Jure had intriguing links to the mystic spiritual side of the Christian faith. **Saint-Jure became the *père spirituel* of Jeanne des Anges**, who had gained fame as Mother Superior at Loudon in 1634 when she and a number of her nuns had been victims of 'demonic possession'. Saint-Jure also acted as spiritual advisor to Gaston Jean-Baptiste de Renty, whose good works he immortalised in his life of the aristocrat.

The copy held by the Old Library dates from 1682 and is **one of the posthumous reprints of this work, printed by Charles Angot** on the rue Saint Jacques.

In a reprint of the work (Nancy, 1714) the author is commended to the reader thus: 'Les Ouvrages de R.P. Saint-Jure (. . .) sont entre les mains de toutes les Personnes pieuses, qui pardonnant au style suranné en faveur de la solidité & de l'onction qui s'y trouvent, en font encore le sujet de leur lecture ordinaire'.

Panel 3

Antoine Le Grand, *Les caractères de l'homme sans passions*, 1682

This work by Antoine Le Grand was previously unidentified in the collection of the Old Library. Judging by the layout of the work and the number of missing pages, this copy is most likely the **edition published by J. Le Gras in Paris in 1682.**

Le Grand's work first appeared in 1662 as *Le sage des Stoïques, ou l'homme sans passions. Selon des sentimens de Senèque*, published in The Hague. The following year it was published anonymously in Paris as *Les caractères de l'homme sans passions, selon les sentiments de Senèque*. Its popularity grew steadily across Europe. It was published again in Lyons in 1665 and was first 'Englished' in 1675 as *Man without passion, or, The wise stoick, according to the sentiment of Seneca*, indicating a growing European audience for such works.

Le Grand's book represents **an interesting juncture between courtesy works, spiritual guidance and indeed the changing philosophical landscape.** While this work pre-dated his 'Cartesian' years, it suggests that for many thinkers and writers of the period, penning a work that dealt with the inner turmoil of man, and his attempts to reconcile himself with society at large was a vibrant subject on which to publish. By no means were these works quaint or affected; they addressed **the very serious subject of 'how to live'.**

Joachim de La Chétardie, *Instructions pour un jeune seigneur*, 1682

Joachim de la Chétardie wrote numerous titles in French and Latin, many before he took office as curé of Saint-Sulpice in 1696. Unusually for a French author, Chétardie wrote a companion volume for '*jeune seigneur*' in the form of an ***Instruction pour une jeune princesse, ou L'idée d'une honnête femme***, produced by the same publisher, T. Girard, two years later in 1684. **Both works proved popular and were reprinted many times.** The sense that this is indeed a world for the younger gentlemen is borne out in **warnings against *railleurie*** for example, advising that what one might consider good fun could end up being source of alarm or distress for others.

In defense of the 'high-spirited' however the author describes it as a 'combat d'esprit'. And it is to the popular subject of *l'esprit* that the author returns on repeated occasions: **'La vie d'un Courtisan doit être une continuelle étude de souplesse d'esprit'.**

Panel 4

Barthelemy Baudrand, *L'âme intérieure, ou conduite spirituelle dans les voies de Dieu*, 1787

Barthelemy Baudrand was one of the **most widely-read spiritual authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**. In a series of similarly-titled books, Baudrand blended the piety of the Jesuits with that of popular devotion.

Following the suppression of the Order, Baudrand settled in retirement in Lyons and continued to publish anonymously. His best-known works are *L'Âme élevée à Dieu*, *L'Âme sanctifiée par la perfection de toutes les actions de la vie* and *L'Âme sur le Calvaire*, several of which are held in the Old Library.

Baudrand's work is written from the religious, rather than the secular viewpoint. However it is difficult to distinguish some of the central tenets of Baudrand's writings from those of the courtesy works of the seventeenth century. He particularly argues for the need to **recognize God's place in the world** and the necessity of obedience to God's law.

Baudrand presents a **discussion of the interior life and the peace to be found within**, followed by a popular device found in several works: a daily duty of prayer scheduled for each day of the month. The **themes of selflessness**, of the duty of good works, of taking the sacraments on a regular basis, the unsurprising rewards of an inner peace, **a special relationship with God**, and an expectation of a heavenly after-life form its core.

Martin-Pierre Crussaire, *Manuel du vrai sage ou recherches sur le bonheur de l'homme et sur ses devoirs*, 1803

The work is written in a **simple and accessible style** (despite the author's legal background). It includes discussions on the nature of happiness, man's duty, and incorporates an interesting mixture of thinkers from Rousseau to Saint Augustin. However despite the inclusion of Enlightened thinkers to begin with, **Crussaire soon takes refuge with mainly religious thinkers**, and as the work progresses it increasingly becomes a religious text, both in content and tone. Crussaire appears to be a man grappling with the **legacy of the Enlightenment and the resurgence of religious devotion** in the aftermath of revolution.

His views on human happiness are unsurprising given his inspiration. Various obstacles block man from happiness, avarice most of all; Crussaire points out that once man has acquired possessions, the pleasure he derives from them is outweighed by the anxiety he experiences over their protection. He notes that **man can be governed by his desires**, and that reason and passion are constantly at odds with one another, though the remedy for this problem is less clear.

The 'Romantic' element is strong within this work, the shift away from the use of reason highlighted in his third chapter '**Le bonheur de l'homme ne peut pas être le fruit de sa raison**'.

Panel 5

A Father of the Society of Jesus, *On the Behaviour of Priests towards Women*, printed for private circulation, no date [c. 1880s]

This 12-page pamphlet constitutes **one of the more intriguing titles in the Old Library's collection**. Giving no details regarding publication place, date or authorship, the background of the piece has been tentatively sketched.

No further library records for this publication could be located.

The sole concrete reference found relating to this piece is in the Kirby Catalogue, which lists the archives of the Irish College in Rome, and in particular the personal correspondence of the Rector Tomás Kirby.

On 28 May 1891, Kirby received a letter from Rev. Robert Whitty who enclosed two copies of *On the Behaviour of Priests towards Women* – a delicate and difficult subject. This does not indicate if the sender is the author however. Rev. Robert Whitty was a late convert to the Society of Jesus, but an active one, giving ecclesiastical retreats throughout his later years. Originally from Pouldarrig in Wexford, he spent a good deal of his later years travelling and the above letter is postmarked Fiesole, Italy.

In the same year the Irish College, Paris, received Rev. Martin Whitty CM as professor of moral theology. He remained in office until 1893, retiring on grounds of ill-health despite his young age. These tenuous links between Robert Whitty and Martin Whitty are as yet unsubstantiated, however it is possible Martin invited Robert to give an ecclesiastical retreat during his short tenure as professor.

The author is modest in the aims he sets out for this small, but ambitiously-titled, pamphlet. He describes it as a **'practical subject'**, especially for young ecclesiastics about to embark on their church careers. The author contends that the 'subject is far too living (. . .) shifting and changeable, to admit of being stereotyped in the written words of a dissertation', but he tries his best anyway. **The short piece draws from the teachings of St Augustine, Thomas à Kempis, and St Francis of Assisi.** 'Human nature remains indeed ever the same, and the principles laid down by the saints remain the same'. **Any advice drawn from experience is completely absent.** It is indeed summed up in the one word of the *Imitation of Christ*, **'Be not familiar with any woman'**.

This pamphlet is a rare 'curiosity'; there is only one other known copy in European collections, in the Irish College, Rome.

Conclusion

Three major themes present themselves through the genres of courtesy, spiritual and guiding literature: the true gentleman, the search for inner peace and outer harmony and the elusive, ever-changing idea of happiness. Unsurprisingly, these central subjects have formed the basis for a number of large studies over the years. However, as individual concepts, their definition defies easy categorization and transcends not only the history of behaviour and comportment, but also the much more challenging realms of personal happiness, fulfilment and reflection. What is presented by these volumes is not just a cross-section of individual musings on these personal matters, but also interpretations of institutional stances, whether from the court or the church, on concerns of outer conduct and inner conscience.

The conflict between the inner and the outer life has troubled thinkers for centuries. In the *Distichs of Cato* (a third-century Latin collection of proverbs and moral tales popularized in the Middle Ages), the anonymous author wrote of the conflict between **the need for dissimulation and the duty to follow Christian ideals**. The debate continued in the following centuries, for example in the twelfth-century Latin poem *The Facetus*, an early courtesy manual.

However the tradition of medieval courtesy literature was discarded by the humanist writers of the early fifteenth century. Erasmus, and others in some cases, borrowed from these earlier works, but they did not explicitly acknowledge their immediate predecessors. What would be considered plagiarism today was practiced widely in the early modern period and considered a tribute to the author whose work had been plundered.

Nonetheless, it appears that many of these writers addressing these issues in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries considered themselves **writing for an evolved audience, in a complicated time**. The tumult of religious upheaval, combined with the increasing centrality of the royal court, gave new impetus to writers and audience alike. But despite new circumstances, a very old problem lay at the heart of these texts and in many ways the courtier's compulsion to learn the *gracia morum* (the elegance of manners) and to study the 'subtlety of spirit' was **the latest incarnation of man's attempts to reconcile the dichotomy of being and seeming**.