

## *Introduction*

Recent years have seen a shift in focus among early modern English and British social historians from the ‘demographic, economic and institutional’ aspects of every day life to the cultural values and *mentalité* of ‘communities’.<sup>1</sup> An area of study receiving fresh attention is the courtesy literature of 1500–1800 which disseminated new codes of conduct. Mostly, research in this area has established that the preoccupation with manners is an eighteenth-century phenomenon. Social historians of this period have argued that an increasing emphasis on good manners is related to the development of a consumer society, or have found in this century’s conduct books a precursor to the bourgeois etiquette books of the nineteenth. This orientation towards the eighteenth century has inhibited debate about manners and sociability in the earlier period.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Norbert Elias reminds us in *The Civilising Process* (1939), and, more recently, Anna Bryson in *From Courtesy to Civility* (1998), the change in the advice on manners actually begins in the early sixteenth century, with treatises such as Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano*, printed in 1528.

The new emphasis on cultural values has the potential to bring social historians into closer contact with literary critics. ‘Literary specialists’, Anna Bryson argues, have for some time ‘been offering a challenge to historians by showing much concern with the cultural codes, value systems and conflicts of value which underlie the productions of high culture’. In response, she urges her colleagues to recognise how an understanding ‘of the traffic between the two definitions of culture’ – culture both in the sense of ‘art’ and in the ‘broader and more anthropological sense of the ways in which a society or group orders and perceives itself’ – is ‘crucial in the study of the literature of manners’.<sup>3</sup> However, I would argue that literary critics have yet to provide a sustained analysis of the relationship between literary form and manners: that is, a study of how the structuring of courtesy literature might both reflect and inform a particular apprehension of social and political interaction. For, though early modern literary critics have long

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expressed an interest in the courtesy books, these texts are usually invoked to explain the emergence of a culture of jostling and competitive courtiership.<sup>4</sup> More problematically, their discursive style tends to be overlooked, so that dialogic books are discussed alongside didactic prose treatises as if their different form did not matter. When their form *is* taken into consideration, moreover, it is presumed to exemplify a departure from, or a corruption of, a classical republican culture. The courtesy books are seen to disseminate an effete, dissembling courtly rhetoric that performs the subordination of the male aristocrat to a despotic monarch.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, early modern critics of courtesy share with historians of eighteenth-century politeness the assumption that the discourse of manners engenders conformist and hierarchically sensitive behaviour and the view that the ‘social’ and ‘political’ realms function independently.<sup>6</sup> However, we need not only to address what is distinctive about an earlier discourse of civility (as opposed to eighteenth-century notions of politeness), but to consider what a recovery of a sixteenth-century conception of the ‘social sphere’ might mean for our understanding of the period’s political idiom.

This study has two broad aims. First, it argues that we need to attend more carefully to the dialogue form of the courtesy books, especially those which introduce and explore a new mode of speech, civil conversation. This speech form is derived from that same classical republican culture: that is, from the philosophical writings of the orator Cicero.<sup>7</sup> Recognising this will allow us to recover a lost discourse. Courtesy books written as dialogues are often engaging in a formal exploration of Ciceronian ‘*honestas*’ or self-restraint. For Cicero, and the courtesy writers who follow his example, apparently dissembling conduct is also ‘honest’ when it facilitates negotiation between different and conflicting interests. Without ‘*honestas*’ – that is, without the self-restraint of potentially domineering speakers – there can be no conversation *or* critical reflection. Many of the courtesy writers and translators are engaging directly with this aspect of Cicero’s philosophy; they aim to accommodate Roman ‘*honestas*’ to Italian ‘*onesto*’ or plain English ‘honesty’.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the fascinating and forgotten achievements of the courtesy books: that they contribute to the definition of a key concept of civility at a time when its meaning was highly unstable. In so doing, they offer a re-examination of the complex, sometimes conflictual, relationship between the individual and society. As I will argue, they are less interested in advising on tactics of self-promotion at court than in exploring ways of managing the relationship between self-interest and social duty, self-restraint and freedom and competition and cooperation in both social communication *and* commercial exchange. Indeed, their focus

is extended far beyond the narrow confines of the court. Some courtesy books are describing conversation which is as suitable for the market as it is for the court.

Secondly, this study reconstructs an English, protestant reading community for the Italianate courtesy books. It investigates how a network of friends, based in Cambridge, were responsible for the dissemination of this distinctive rhetorical culture: from the 1530s onwards, John Cheke, Thomas Smith and Roger Ascham and, in the 1570s, Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser. What these readers share in common with the Italian courtesy writers is a commitment to understanding Cicero's philosophical writings, in particular *De amicitia* and *De officiis*, so as to re-shape social relations, inevitably to their advantage. This self-interested recovery of Cicero is well recognised.<sup>9</sup> In this study, though, I will question a common form of ideology critique which tends to reduce social interaction to its most obvious manifestation: materialistic self-interest. The Elizabethan writers I will be analysing are of course self-promoting. Smith, the son of an Essex farmer, served under the Protector Somerset during the reign of Edward VI, and then became Elizabeth's ambassador to France in the 1560s, while, notoriously, Spenser, whose father was probably a journeyman tailor, became a landowner in Ireland. Harvey, the son of a Saffron Walden ropemaker, was less successful, though no less ambitious. He was appointed Lecturer in Greek in 1573 and, later, University Praelector in Rhetoric; however, he retired to Saffron Waldon in the late 1590s where he died in 1631. Even so, I want to explore, not how the ambitions of these men took both obvious and indirect forms in their life and writings, but rather, how they engaged in a process of dialogue and negotiation with their own aspirations and, in inevitably partial but deliberated ways, the interests of others.

A key aim of this book, then, will be to analyse how a group of humanists experimented with the dialogue form to express their personal aspirations whilst simultaneously recognising alternative and competing interests. We need to allow for the possibility that this negotiation was genuinely meant even as we identify the ways in which it failed or was exploited. In different ways, Smith, Ascham and Cheke, and later Harvey and Spenser, offer a self-conscious departure from the so-called 'cultural revolution' of the mid-Tudor Protestant reformers.<sup>10</sup> They use civil conversation to challenge a moral argument that was central to the first wave of Reformation literature: that an individual should serve the commonwealth by restraining his or her appetite for social advancement and personal profit. They do so by engaging in different kinds of textual conversation in order to discover a form of social interaction between teacher and pupil, or male friends,

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or indeed, individuals of different estates, which is capable of nurturing shared aspirations *and* sociability. In making this claim I am not denying that, as many have argued, the early modern period, with its expanding markets, print technology and, as some believe, increasingly centralised government, made possible a more individualistic ethos and instrumental association. Rather, I am arguing that we need to recognise the ongoing cultural significance of ideas of community and the common good with which any defence of self-interest or personal aspiration must negotiate.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the individual in this period remains part of a debate about one's 'duty' or 'obligation' to the commonweal; this is a difficult and disputed concept which is making a return in current debates about society and trust.<sup>12</sup>

In the sixteenth century this debate was only partly successful. We will need to be sceptical of Ascham's and Smith's efforts; the conversations they conduct are usually stage-managed by a dominant figure who clearly represents his own interest in being rewarded for the skilful management of others. Harvey and Spenser, in contrast, are more experimental; in their textual conversations they tend to question the role of the leading speaker, offering 'friendly' criticism of the attempts of early humanists at social negotiation. However, in the 1590s Harvey's own style of civility was to be criticised by the next generation of Cambridge graduates, especially by Thomas Nashe and Robert Greene. For all of these writers, though, the project of improving manners was inseparable from the pursuit of self-interest; this is not the same as the argument that reform is undertaken for the sake of self-promotion.<sup>13</sup>

Why then did civil conversation fail? An obvious reason is that this idealistic discourse could not keep pace with the increasing opportunities made available by ever-expanding markets and by colonisation. In the 1570s Harvey and Spenser experiment with the dialogue form to imagine a more open style of social communication for the benefit of the commonwealth. As a settler in Ireland in the 1590s, however, Spenser's priorities change. More obviously coercive means are needed to achieve civility. Irenius, the leading speaker of *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (c. 1596), argues that civil conversation – both familiar discourse and trade – will only achieve a functioning commonwealth after the brutal military conquest of the wild Irish has been accomplished.<sup>14</sup> However, another reason is that the discourse is itself fraught with internal contradictions. Sixteenth-century humanists inherited an overlapping but distinct Socratic dialogue style which informed that rival genre to the courtesy book, the husbandry manual. The figures of the courtier and the husbandman offer different

styles of social and commercial exchange and also different styles of ‘honesty’ which are not easily translated into a modern political idiom. To understand these traditions we will need to be more open in our thinking about where we locate ‘subversive’ or ‘conservative’ agendas. The representation of the courtier as dissembling in much modern criticism, for example, indicates the victory of the plain husbandman as a social and cultural authority. Yet, there are good reasons why such plain-speakers are not to be trusted, not least because there is no way of knowing whether the claim to be telling the truth, or the promise of transparency, however plainly put, is not also a rhetorical ploy which aims to occlude the interests of others.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this study involve a reappraisal of the dialogue form of the well-known courtesy books such as Castiglione’s *Il cortegiano*, Englished as *The Book of the Courtier* by Thomas Hoby in 1561, and Stefano Guazzo’s *La civil conversatione* (1574), the first three books of which were translated by George Pettie as *Civile Conversation* (1581) and book 4 by Bartholomew Young (1586). The question of how we should read a dialogue that purports to be a civil conversation is explored in detail in chapter 1, which considers the critical possibilities and rhetorical slipperiness of the form of *Civile Conversation* – the treatise that gave the phrase ‘civil conversation’ its ‘European currency’.<sup>15</sup> This chapter studies the differences between the Roman (Ciceronian) and Greek (Socratic) dialogue forms, and considers what their confusion means for the debate about social duty and self-interest, especially for women. Chapter 2 explores Castiglione’s challenging exploration in the *Courtier* of the potential of Ciceronian dialogue as a critical method, a means to put pressure on restrictive social conventions and assumptions about the political order. Chapter 3 addresses the difficult question of why a group of Cambridge-educated protestant reformers is so interested in this treatise. It argues that this community share with Castiglione a commitment to re-defining the meaning of honesty as part of a process of linguistic reform, and that this process is implicated in religious, political and social Reformation. It also recognises, though, that they compromise the apparent openness of Ciceronian conversation. In chapter 4 we will examine less familiar treatises, the anonymous *Cyvile and Uncyvile Life* (1579) and Lodowick Bryskett’s *Discourse of Civill Life* (1606) (a courtesy book turned colonial tract which transforms the dissembling Italian courtier into a plain English husbandman). These books will help us to understand how the experimentation with the dialogue form in the period informs both a critique of dishonest or exploitative commercial exchange and the formulation of a discourse of self-improvement and colonial expansion. Chapters 5 and 6 consider the literary collaborations of Edmund

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Spenser and Gabriel Harvey, which includes *The Shepheardes Calender*, as exemplary civil conversations that challenge the easy assumption of social authority by the earlier reformers. These final chapters aim also to recall what is innovative and distinctive about the attempt of early Elizabethan literary writing to achieve cultural influence and social and political change.

CIVILITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A potential danger with this attempt to recover the attachment to Ciceronian conversation in the sixteenth century is that it unravels the subtle critique of the ‘civilising process’ which has been so important to the development of theorised and ethical readings of literary texts in the last three decades. In *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt appeal to Johann Gottfried von Herder’s ‘principle of diversification’ – that there are different truths for different cultures – to support their commitment to ‘the abandonment of the project of charting the *translatio imperii*, the great westward trajectory of civilization from Athens to Rome to, say, London’.<sup>16</sup> In this study, however, I will be exploring the attempt of the dialogic courtesy books to explore formally a Greco-Roman idea of *societas* as an association of communicating or conversing individuals. Since such an emphasis promises a return to an abandoned project, I think I owe an explanation. For this idea of society – best expressed by the Roman republican philosopher Cicero – now appears disingenuous, even deceitful, thanks partly to the influential counter-argument of Sigmund Freud which underpins modern critiques of the ‘civilising process’: that civilisation necessitates the repression of the instinctive, often violent assertion of the super ego. Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, published in 1930, self-consciously turns Cicero’s myth of *societas* – and the Enlightenment tradition it inspired – on its head. In contrast to Cicero, who argues that men are naturally social, Freud insists that:

men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved . . . they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent . . . *Homo homini lupus* [man is a wolf to man].<sup>17</sup>

Freud’s influence is apparent in Norbert Elias’s sociology of the courtesy books in *The Civilizing Process*, which explores the relationship between the rise of civility and state formation. Elias uses the language of Freudian

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psychoanalysis – ego, super-ego, repression – to assert the psychological dynamics of a civilising process that increases the thresholds of embarrassment and encourages self-surveillance.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Freud's insistence that 'it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct' has inspired the argument of Stephen Greenblatt in his ground-breaking *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) that the development of a courtesy tradition is homologous with colonial expansion.<sup>19</sup>

Against this insight, though, I will explore the critical possibilities which the discourse of civil conversation offered. In particular, I am interested in how the textual practice of civil conversation offered a method for demystifying commonplace ideas, while establishing new habits of thought. In *The Book of the Courtier* conversation is used to unmask the 'myth' of native nobility: nobility is exposed as a social practice rather than a birthright. Meanwhile, in the anonymous English *Cyvile and Uncyvile Life* it is used to demystify what its author sees as a form of 'false consciousness': a tradition of monologic, plain-speaking social complaint (represented, say, by the georgic idealism of Hugh Latimer in the 1550s). This tradition, which defended the need to suppress self-interest for the greater good of the community, is shown to be quietly self-interested. In all three books, though, there is an understanding that straight-talking is not adequately honest and a wish to expand the meaning of 'honesty' to include conduct which might be deemed ironic or dissembling.

This shift of focus from the disciplinary nature of the 'civilizing process' to the critical possibilities that civility offered particular social groupings – mainly, educated university men from relatively humble backgrounds – is not meant to be a 'whiggish' defence of the progressive democratisation of a civil society. I understand well the limits and, indeed, failure of this discourse, not least in relation to women. (It should be noted, though, that this failure is also often repeated by 'modern' critics of the civilising process, as Freud's persistent use of the male pronoun suggests.) The particular failure of civil conversation will be addressed in chapter 1 under the heading of 'domestical conversation'; in chapter 4, we will explore how the courtesy books, in conjunction with the husbandry manuals, did indeed inform colonial projects in Ireland. Meanwhile, my discussion of Harvey's and Spenser's collaboration in chapters 5 and 6 is not intended to herald the beginning of a sophisticated English literary culture, but to explore a moment of possibility revealed in the self-conscious conjoining of new styles of friendship and literary experiment in the 1570s.

My style of argument, however, was developed in negotiation with the critical practices which govern the so-called 'new historicism', to which I

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am indebted. In particular, I wish to avoid the impasse that characterised much early new historicist criticism. There is a need to understand civil conversation as a discourse – to explore it on its own terms – so as to avoid making the unmasking of ideology the special prerogative of the modern critic. This imperative remains an issue even as leading ‘new historicists’ review their critical practice. In *Practicing New Historicism* Gallagher and Greenblatt brilliantly respond to their critics. ‘Our project’, they strenuously argue, ‘has never been about diminishing or belittling the power of artistic representations . . . but we never believe that our appreciation of this power necessitates either ignoring the cultural matrix out of which the representations emerge or uncritically endorsing the fantasies that the representations articulate’. The difficult question which might be posed of their critical work, though, is whether *its* form has always been adequate to the ambitious and thoughtful task they set themselves. In this most recent manifesto, for instance, they continue to defend the privilege of the modern critic who has the opportunity to recover ‘something that the authors we study would not have had sufficient distance upon themselves and their own era to grasp’.<sup>20</sup> Yet, there remains a need to work into historicist practice an acceptance of the fact that this distance also means that there will be some things which *we* cannot grasp, and a need to recognise that in avoiding ‘uncritically endorsing the fantasies that [past] representations articulate’, we might easily mistake or misunderstand their strategies of critique. This is critical ‘honesty’.

We can see the problem posed by suspicious reading if we attend to Greenblatt’s use of Philibert de Vienne’s French anti-court satire *Le Philosoph de Court* (1545) – *The Philosopher of the Court* – to demystify the courtly trope of *sprezzatura* (pretended ignorance) in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), the formative example of new historicism. For Greenblatt, Philibert’s treatise is invaluable because it exposes the subtle working of courtly ideology in sophisticated texts like Castiglione’s *Courtier*. Philibert’s argument is that sixteenth-century courtesy books disguise their departure from classical ethics – represented by Plato, Aristotle and Cicero – so as to appear ethical, when in fact all they recommend is a superficial and amoral behaviour. This is a reading which makes sense to us historically once the courtier is envisaged at the court of an autocratic ruler. In such a context, we presume, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak frankly or to influence policy. The essential mode of operation becomes the winning of favour, an aim which it is supposed must be secured with sycophantic display.

*The Philosopher of the Court* is a spoof courtesy book which is modelled on Cicero’s *De officiis*. The joke of this treatise is that *De officiis* is subjected



to a biased courtly reading, presumably after the fashion of a courtesy book like the *Courtier*. For example, its narrator follows Cicero when suggesting that the courtier's philosophy is based on the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, fortitude and temperance, but he proceeds to offer ironic re-definitions: the courtier is wise if he knows how to deceive, and he is temperate if he is willing to be pleasing. Philibert also invents a fifth virtue, 'Grace', which represents the *sprezzatura* of courtly display paradoxically, as an ethical deceitfulness. 'Philibert's interest is in the working of the court mind at such moments', remarks Greenblatt, and especially in 'the social accommodation of an ethical embarrassment'. To make manifest this accommodation Greenblatt follows the moves made by the narrator in the chapter on Grace. The narrator begins by noting that Socrates has taught us 'that we should not maske, or disguise our selves'. He pauses for a moment because, as he has argued throughout the book, dissimulation is 'of so great force in our Philosophie', but he quickly proceeds to explain away the conflict of interest. Dissembling to accommodate others is not 'evill', he remarks, and then adds that Socrates 'Himselfe doeth serve us for example, for although he was ever like unto himself, constant and not variable, and desirous not to be seene other than he seemed: yet was he the greatest dissembler in the worlde'.<sup>21</sup> Greenblatt's observation that 'Philibert has seen deeply into the mind he satirizes and cunningly mimics its forms of thought and expression' seems absolutely, perhaps *too* reassuringly, right.<sup>22</sup>

This insight into the dishonesty of courtly ideology does not seem to have been shared by Philibert's English translator, George North, who, as Daniel Javitch observes, apparently mistook *The Philosopher of the Court* for a straightforward courtesy book.<sup>23</sup> His misreading of Philibert raises interesting questions about the reception of sophisticated continental courtesy books at the Elizabethan court. Still, it is easy to underestimate the insights of our forebears who were probably better schooled in classical philosophy than ourselves. To proceed with care we should recognise the possibility that, if North did misread *The Philosopher of the Court*, then he may have done so because of the superficiality of Philibert's own reading of Cicero.

The prologue articulates the reasons for Philibert's rejection of court culture quite clearly. In North's translation Philibert's narrator begins with a rant against the courtly philosopher who, living in the world, has 'no other guide than that blinde beast of common and popular judgement' rather than the promptings of Nature (sig. B5v). He attacks the courtier's confusion of the distinction ancient philosophers made between 'first nature', given us at our birth by God, and a corrupted 'seconde Nature', synonymous

with custom or habit, before going on to perform (ironically of course) just such a confusion (sigs. B7r–B8r). The narrator's early attack is meant to clarify the subject of the satire: the failure of courtly philosophers to distinguish between nature and custom, truth and lies, right and wrong. He wants to show us how courtly philosophers turn words inside out, wresting them from their true meaning for personal advantage. Yet, the joke is really on Philibert. The irony, as we will discover at more leisure in chapter 2, is that it is Philibert's misrepresentation of Cicero which actually approximates Cicero's interrogation of the ironic Socrates in *De oratore*: honesty for Cicero encompasses the kind of dissimulative – or accommodating – conduct which Philibert dismisses. Thus, a key speaker in this rhetorical manual admits that 'what impressed me most deeply about Plato [in his disguise as Socrates] was, that it was when making fun of orators that he himself seemed to me to be the consummate orator'.<sup>24</sup> Cicero and Castiglione understand that this kind of pretended ignorance is an important discursive tool. It helps them to expose the artificiality of the distinction between nature and custom or truth and lies insisted upon by some philosophers who, like Plato, are committed to the discovery of a universal Truth.

Readings of the courtesy books which emphasise their dishonesty are within the venerable tradition of Elizabethan anti-court satire, as Greenblatt's self-identification with Philibert suggests. But we should be wary of associating ourselves too readily with such truth-telling critics. Philibert's treatise offers a sophisticated study of the presumed ideology of courtliness, and yet his critical thinking relies on an overly simplified vocabulary of opposites drawn from the very Platonic tradition that Cicero is seeking to unmask: honesty versus dissimulation, the metaphysical philosopher versus the courtier deemed a slave to fickle opinion. These same terms are to be found in less sophisticated satires. The dialectic of Antonio de Guevara's *Libro Llamado Menosprecio de Corte y Alabanza de Aldea* (1539), translated into English in 1548 by Sir Frances Bryant as *A Dispraise of the life of the Courtier, and a Commendacion of the life of the labouryng man*, is between the courtier who 'occupieth himselfe in nothyng but in eatyng, drinkyng, & sleapyng' and inventing 'shiftes' and the husbandman (really a landowner) who recreates himself pleasantly and honestly in the village, fishing, netting birds and hunting with dogs. Since the court is a fantastical place, Guevara concludes, we should, like Plato, abandon its 'clamor & cry' and dwell in a village, in fact an *Academia* or 'schole' where we will find 'a pore, an honest, and a peaceable life'.<sup>25</sup> We might remember here the advice of the critical theorist Hannah Arendt to all plain-speakers in her essay 'Truth