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Cuchulain, Yeats's Ideal Courtier: Baldassare Castiglione's Influence on W. B. Yeats and his Cuchulain Plays

In the summer of 1903, Lady Augusta Gregory read out to Yeats all four books of Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, introducing him to the seemingly harmonious atmosphere of the renaissance palace of Urbino. This experience made a lasting impact on Yeats who often referred to Castiglione, the figure of the ideal courtier and Urbino and in 1907 he visited northern Italy, including Urbino. Castiglione's influence on Yeats is, however, mentioned almost exclusively in relation to Yeats's ideas on the aristocracy, expressed in his poems. This paper sheds new light on Castiglione's traces in the Yeatsian *oeuvre*, demonstrating that the effect of Castiglione's ideal courtier on Yeats may also be seen in the figure of the well-known Irish warrior-hero, Cuchulain in Yeats's five Cuchulain plays. The analogies between the *Courtier* and the five Cuchulain plays derive from Yeats's fascination with the old aristocracy of Ireland and his ideas on the mask. The connections between Castiglione's figure of the ideal courtier and Yeats's depiction of Cuchulain in the plays yields a special focus on the relationship between the ideal aristocrat and the artist (poet) as well as on Yeats's and Castiglione's concept of *sprezzatura* as it relates to the figure of the aristocrat. Both Yeats and Castiglione emphasised the nonexistence of the ideal worlds that their heroes embodied. Plays discussed include *On Baile's Strand* (1903), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939). (ZB)