

Miner's "The Art of Sprezzatura": the Gentleman's Conduct: Discrete, Suave, & Restrained Doing Difficult Things with Ease; Superman & Batman; Kipling's "If..."

"The Art of Sprezzatura":

1. This word is of Italian derivation but found in English dictionaries. Here are some samples:

Merriam-Webster Online Unabridged Dictionary:

Sprat-tsā-tū'-rā: Studied nonchalance: perfect conduct or performance of something (as an artistic endeavor) without apparent effort.

The New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v.:

Studied carelessness, especially as a characteristic quality or style of art or literature.

Wikipedia.org:

Sprezzatura is an Italian term meaning the expression of aristocratic attitude. The Mona Lisa is a classic example of sprezzatura. The sprezzatura of the Mona Lisa is seen in both her smile and the positioning of her hands. Both the smile and hands are intended to convey her grandeur, self-confidence and societal position. Leonardo da Vinci was a master at capturing not only the physical likeness, but also the subject's attitude: the sprezzatura.

Sprezzatura is a complicated word that first finds its origins in Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier. Its basic meaning within the book pertains to the art of concealing (skill). The courtiers of the day did not think that any activity or goal was worth doing or having if the effort to do or to have it was obvious. As the character Count Ludovico says in Castiglione's Book, "It is an art which does not seem to be an art. One must avoid affectation and practice in all things a certain sprezzatura ... so as to ... make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it ... obvious effort is the antithesis of grace."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sprezzatura>

2. This word is used to describe the persona of the gentleman in:

Miner, Brad. "The Art of Sprezzatura," in The Complete Gentleman: The Modern Man's Guide to Chivalry (Dallas: Spence Publishing Co., 2004), 221-22; 226-37:

If "honor" is properly the one word that epitomizes the *character* of a gentleman, then *sprezzatura* is the last word about the gentleman's *conduct of life*. (p. 221)

Sprezzatura, was the coinage of Count Baldesare Castiglione \kās-tēl-yō'-nā\. He was born in Castatico \kās-tā-tē'-kō\, Italy, in 1478. He was a nobleman classically educated to be at home in royal and papal courts, and from his early twenties until his death at the age of fifty, he served the high and the mighty, including Popes Leo X and Clement VII and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who considered him the perfect gentleman. (pp. 221-22)

Castiglione wrote *Libro del cortegiano*, The Book of the Courtier ["One in attendance at a royal court" (MWCD-11)]. It has freshness even today; in his own time it was revolutionary. Yet even Castiglione's novel take on manliness owed much to Greek and Roman antecedents, to Aristotle and Cicero especially. The ideal courtier was to have Aristotelian *aretē* [ἀρετή, *aretē*: virtue], which is to say *excellence*.

An *aristos* [ἄριστος, *aristos*: best in birth and rank, *noblest*. 2. best in any way, *bravest*. 3. *morally best* (Liddell & Scott, 242).] (from whence *aristocrat*) was a man educated in the best ideas and tempered by training to possess the best impulses. For Aristotle—and for men of the Renaissance such as Castiglione and even Shakespeare—the standard for self-fashioning is the "golden mean," the center between extremes. [NOTE: "Golden mean" is another term for "golden section": the division of a line so that the whole is to the greater part as that part is to the smaller part (i.e., in a ratio of 1 to $\frac{1}{2}(\sqrt{5}+1)$, a proportion that is considered to be particularly pleasing to the eye (NOAD).] (p. 222)

OPENNESS VS. DISCRETION. For many the notion of being upright is downright offensive, since they infer that the man standing straight stands in judgment. Not to be “open” to every “lifestyle” and every “preference” is to be unjust. Of course, many who profess “openness” are in fact hostile to those who refuse to acknowledge the equality of all opinions and behaviors. This is what has turned some of the politically-correct bluecoats on college campuses into latter-day versions of Jacobin secret police. (p. 226)

I think that “liberals” believe it right and even necessary to tolerate more bizarre behavior than do “conservatives” and are less quick to condemn the unrefined and the obscene. But it’s one thing to defend the rights of the boor and the pornographer, quite another to dignify discourtesy and obscenity as valid “choices.”

A man who has *sprezzatura* is a man content to keep his own counsel. He not only does not need to have his motives understood; he prefers that they *not* be understood. His actions, including his carefully chosen words, speak for him. More it is not necessary for others—save his intimates—to know.

It’s a little like the scene in *The Godfather* when Don Corleone takes aside his oldest son and admonishes him *never* to let anyone outside the family know what he is thinking. (p. 227)

It happens that a discrete gentleman amasses, over time, a tremendous edge in the affairs of this world. He hears things others do not, simply because people of all sorts confide in him, knowing that he will not betray their trust. The knowledge of the human heart that the compleat gentleman thus develops can be a burden, but it is also something of liberation. It may call upon every bit of his strength to restrain himself from saying or doing more than he ought with knowledge gained from friendship, but there it is. (p. 228)

Of course, there is more to *sprezzatura* than just restraint. There is that quality people refer to when a man is called *suave*. Cary Grant was usually a gentleman in his film roles because he seemed able to do difficult things with ease. One could not imagine Cary Grant saying anything inappropriate, and it was inconceivable that he would blurt out an intimacy. He knew the difference between a true friend, an acquaintance, and a stranger. But to a very great extent we may think of a compleat gentleman as a man who is known by his discretion and his restraint.

Restraint may seem the least of the gentlemanly virtues, although it is the most recognizably Stoic. The ability to pause before acting and then to act sensibly is manifest prudence, which is the first among the cardinal virtues.

Most gentlemen today are as Matthew Arnold [English poet, 1822-1888] described his friends at Oxford: believers in “lost causes and forsaken beliefs.” Here Arnold is joined in comradeship with T. S. Eliot, who although he usually mocked Arnold, was also a believer in lost causes, in the necessity of holding fast to the permanent things the modern world no longer values. (p. 229)

In all of American popular culture, Superman is our strongest hero. He is also the most restrained. True, Kent’s *sprezzatura* conceals more than any other gentleman’s, but then the art and depth of *sprezzatura* is defined by a man’s power: the stronger and wiser he is, the gentler his manner and the more circumspect his speech; the more, in other words, his true self is hidden.

Kent is a fiction, but an interesting one, both in terms of his enduring appeal and his history, by which I mean the real story of his invention. His first appearance in comic-book form was in 1938. His creators, illustrator Joe Schuster and writer Jerry Siegel, were Jewish teenagers living in Cleveland, Ohio. DC Comics introduced Superman in Action Comics #1, a good guy with a nerdy alter ego who got his name from two of the era’s movie stars: Clark Gable and Kent Taylor. The original model for the look of Superman was another actor, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. whose classic arms-akimbo, feet-apart stance became the most common motif on Action Comics covers. And for Clark Kent’s appearance and demeanor, the boys thought of silent-film comedian Harold Lloyd. (pp. 230-31)

Although Superman was born on an alien world (the planet Krypton) and was raised by gentle Kansas Protestants (Jonathan and Martha Kent), there was a strong sense of Jewishness about him. His real name is Kal-El [in the Hebrew these two words קל אל *qal el*, mean “swift, speedy, or quick god”], a clearly *theophorous* [derived from or bearing the name of a god] name, the “el,” in suffix or prefix, meaning: “god” or “of God” in Hebrew. Kal-El in the cornfield is rather Like Moses in the bulrushes, Martha Kent equivalent to Pharaoh’s daughter. And if this seems a stretch, consider that Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propagandist, once railed against Superman’s “Semitism” in a cabinet meeting, probably spurred on by a scathing attack on Siegel that appeared in the ss newspaper *Das Swarze Korps*, in which he was referred to as “intellectually and physically circumcised.” Of course, there was the 1944 cover that showed a grimly triumphant Superman holding by their collars: Hitler in one hand, Tojo in the other. Goebbels can’t have liked that.

Contemporary scholars enjoy bashing Superman almost as much as the Nazis did. [Italian novelist] Umberto Eco sees him a “conservative” hero, in that he is a defender of the status quo and fundamentally a capitalist lackey, since he only attacks criminals and never—as American liberals would put it—the “underlying causes” of crime. That he exemplifies “truth, justice, and the American Way,” that he is a *chivalrous* hero, makes him as much a figure of fun as the character of Benjamin Guggenheim in *Titanic*. (p. 231)

Perhaps Bruce Wayne is more exemplary than Clark Kent, since as Batman, the Dark Knight, he lacks superhuman powers. He’s simply a martial artist with a powerful sense of right and wrong and sufficient learning and wealth to fill his basement with myriad crime-fighting gear. But like Kent he has to shut up about it. When these guys meet their Lois Lanes or Vickie Vales, they never say “Hi, I’m Clark or Bruce, but (whispering)—I’m really Superman or Batman.”

Some of the most important things about a man are those he keeps from most people all the time and from those closest to him until the time is right. (pp. 231-32)

This also applies to a gentleman’s views about politics and religion and everything else under the sun. It may be tempting when hearing a topic discussed to say to the idiot defending the militia movement or touting economic redistribution that he is an ignoramus. This is tempting, but why ought this knucklehead know what’s in your heart?

Is it insincerity to thus withhold one’s true thoughts? If so, why object? It is among the more familiar aspects of living that when knowledge is first acquired—and especially moral knowledge—it is necessarily raw, which is to say in a form that is so undeveloped as not to be the thing itself. For instance, the first political notions of teenagers are as self-righteous as they are self-contradictory, and only the tempering of many years of experience and study will transform these airy opinions into solid convictions. In a similar vein, when we teach manners to our children they often object—at least the bright ones do—to rules the meaning of which neither they nor their parents can quite explain. Yet over time these minor morals take on inestimable value. It doesn’t matter if the form as practiced often disguises some insincerity. The practice of courtesy, even when artificial, will likely lead to a very concrete civility. When at the end of a war two former combatants embrace, it is not because they have come suddenly to love their enemies. It is because gestures of hope are preferable to expressions of hostility. (p. 232)

So if a gentleman practices *sprezzatura*, it is so he can get it right. The cult of spontaneous sincerity has it that it is better for a man to behave like a creep until he’s really a gentleman, until he has genuinely and completely digested civility, but that’s both silly and depressing. (pp. 232-33)

A man’s behavior should never draw attention to himself. Well, obviously there are times when a man, standing upright, can’t help but be in the center of things, but the point is that *recognition* ought to be without appeal to the gentleman.

The hardest thing of all in some situations may be silence, may be the ability to keep quiet when one knows the answer to a question one hasn’t been asked. (p. 233)

WISDOM EAST AND WEST. I find it deeply pleasing to note that Confucius, who taught a half millennium before Christ, defined the gentleman along lines remarkably similar to those we've discussed in this book. Of course, he did not use the word "gentleman," and scholars dispute that this is the best translation, but the term he did use, *chun-tzu*, has a history startlingly like that of "gentleman." Literally, *chun-tzu* is "ruler's son," and was originally applied only to the virtuous aristocrat. But Confucius did to *chun-tzu* what Europeans more than a thousand years later were to do with *gentleman*: he made the term classless. "A gentleman," Confucius said, "is distressed by his own lack of capacity; he is never distressed at the failure of others to recognize his merits." He will be "slow in word but diligent in action," indeed he is "ashamed to let his words outrun his deeds." And he remains "unperturbed when not appreciated by others." (pp. 233-34)

Note how the Confucian virtues are like those of the European knight. The *chun-tzu* possesses five essential qualities: integrity, righteousness, loyalty, altruism, and goodness. Missing from this list are prowess, the notable characteristic of the knight, and restraint, the signature quality of the gentleman, but the master's extensive commentary on the proper "conduct of life" amplifies the similarities between the Asian and European models. (p. 234)

Confucius said: "The true gentleman is conciliatory but not accommodating. The lesser man is accommodating but not conciliatory."

We ought to condemn lying but we ought not to confuse honesty with impulsiveness, prudence, with naked candor. It's true that the art of *sprezzatura* involves a degree of cunning, but the same may be said for social order at every level. Writ large, morality exists in part to endorse goodness and in part to *restrain* evil; writ small, morals are the manners we employ to *repress* the impulse for base behavior and to provide others with status in the kingdom of our selves. (p. 235)

So this is the compleat gentleman. He is a fellow you may not recognize at first, such is the mask of *sprezzatura*. He is the descendant of the medieval knight and the Victorian gentleman; he is very much like them except that he has a newer and more realistic view of women. He is a conservative liberal, a man educated in tradition but not bound by it. If he is very different from other men, it is by virtue of his commitment to honor and his devotion to restraint. He is like a warrior, because he knows that there are things worth fighting for and will fight. He is a lover, because he allows his wife and family to liberate him from the tyranny of ego. He is like a monk, because he employs learning to unlock the mysteries of the human heart. He is possessed of that commingling of restraint and detachment that is *sprezzatura* and that we can as easily call *cool*. (pp. 235-36)

In closing, I present what I consider the best short summary ever written of the compleat gentleman's profession. I close with "If ..." by the great Victorian neo-Stoic Rudyard Kipling: (p. 236)

"If ..."

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumphs and disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,



And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run—
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!
(p. 237)