Sue W. Farquhar
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

On Civility: The Model of Sparta in Montaigne’s “Defence de Seneque et de Plutarque”

This paper examines accounts of civilité that define subjecthood in late sixteenth-century France through an essay of Michel de Montaigne and Jean Bodin’s theory of citizenship. Tied to the lives of ordinary citizen-subjects and influenced by legal theory, their views of civility focus on the art of governing and being governed during politically troubled times. As such, they raise questions of obedience, consent and conscience from contrasting perspectives, providing a counterweight to Norbert Elias’s focus on courtly manners (Civilizing Process). Their contributions complicate Elias’s insight that a redefinition of the emotions and manners was a moving force behind the new civilité, informing an ideology of absolutism and a national (aristocratic) identity.

The parallel Norbert Elias draws in The Civilizing Process between the social and self-constraints of civilité and the rise of absolutist ideology in Europe raises intriguing questions for Renaissance ethics (xii, 187-91). If the “civilizing process,” as described by Elias, involved a practice of rational control that increasingly transformed feelings and manners, how exactly did such a redefinition of the emotions change moral, legal and political attitudes in the early modern period? His account of “civilité” suggests initially a shift of sentiments and behavior in the early sixteenth-century, based on vivid social data found in handbooks on manners, such as Erasmus’s advice to young school boys on how to dine without sniffing at the food and snorting like a seal or blowing one’s nose on the tablecloth (47-52). By the mid-seventeenth-century, polite manners had become the hallmark of
a French courtly elite living under an absolutist regime. Yet, the historical and textual evidence accumulated by Elias was intended to sketch out a hypothesis based on his observations, not systematically prove a theory. Perhaps this is why his path-breaking study continues to be of fundamental interest, inviting readers to guess at rival versions of civility or wonder at crucial shifts and discontinuities in the “civilizing process.” Among the promising areas that will receive closer scrutiny in this paper are accounts of civilité that spring from experiences defining subjecthood and citizenship in late sixteenth-century France. Tied to the lives of ordinary citizen-subjects and influenced by legal theory, such views of civility focus on the art of governing and being governed during politically troubled times. As such, they raise questions of obedience, consent and conscience, providing a counterweight to Elias’s focus on courtly civility. Their contributions deepen and complicate his insight that a redefinition of the emotions and manners was a moving force behind the new civilité, informing an ideology of absolutism and a national (aristocratic) identity.

It is noteworthy that, at the height of the religious wars, such writers as the essayist Michel de Montaigne and the political theorist Jean Bodin described the workings of civility in contemporary contexts of civil (dis)obedience amidst a crisis of political authority. As jurists, they would have noticed that the etymology of the term civilité derived from civis, or citizen, and had become synonymous with civilitas, which could be translated both as the “art of government, politics” and “courteousness” (Lewis and Short, Cotgrave). Although the earlier Italian civic-humanist commitment to neo-Roman ideals of citizenship was in decline by their time, Montaigne and Bodin would have known that the term civilitas implied a favorable attitude toward Republican liberty and even resistance to tyranny (Kelley 145). However, earlier medieval and civic humanist notions of citizenship based on community and neo-Roman values posed a dilemma for some later Renaissance redefinitions of civility, conceived in terms of the sovereign or “absolute” power of a monarch. The writings of Montaigne and Bodin bring out these tensions from different perspectives, offering legal and humanist contexts for redefining citizenship in contrasting ways, as will be shown through a close reading of Montaigne’s essay “Defence de Seneque et de Plutarque” (II, 32).