SPIRITS OF LOVE:  
CASTIGLIONE AND NEO-PLATONIC DISCOURSES  
OF VISION

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The Western tradition has long organised its understanding of human perception by positing the existence of five senses in a more or less stable hierarchy. In philosophical, religious and literary discourses, vision tended to reign supreme as the sharpest, noblest and most spiritual of the senses; it was followed, at times contested, by hearing; and most often, smell, taste and touch occupied the bottom rungs of the ladder, constituting the lowliest, most physical forms of perception. The stability, ubiquity and stereotypical nature of this abstraction, which was dominant well into the early modern period, make it hard to fathom its relationship to lived experience. It is from the appropriation and deployment of the stereotype within concrete historical settings that we can sometimes glean some insight in the experience of perception.

The present essay pursues just this kind of insight based on a seemingly unpromising source – Baldassare Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528). Castiglione discussed the senses, particularly vision, in ways that initially appear entirely conventional. He relied, probably indirectly, on the medieval medical tradition in explaining perception as the action of ‘spirits that are most subtle vapors made of the purest and brightest part of the blood’ (IV.65). He also drew on Renaissance Neo-Platonism in idealising vision as the principal gateway to love. The eye alone (possibly supplemented by hearing) was fit to perceive beauty, the object and source of love. Undoubtedly, the ‘spiritual’ view of visual perception served, in Castiglione’s book as in other courtly-literary dialogues of the early Cinquecento, to uphold the respectability of court culture.

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Yet, if this was Castiglione’s goal, his book also evidences serious qualms about received notions of perception and sexuality. An examination of the manuscript tradition of the Cortegiano suggests an increasing awareness of vision’s moral dangers, which undercut Castiglione’s idealism, prompted a moralizing response on his part, and complicated the final version of his book. Such anxieties probably went beyond Castiglione’s personal views. During the mid-Cinquecento, the Neo-Platonic debate about vision and love reached an impasse, soon to be overshadowed by Counter-Reformation censorship and new discourses about sense and sensuality. Castiglione’s case, and the trend he appears to inaugurate, contribute to the growing evidence of a sixteenth-century crisis in the economy of perception, and particularly vision.

In the editio princeps of his Cortegiano, Castiglione articulated his understanding of vision in brief comments interspersed across the debate on courtly love, in books III and IV. He explained the working of visual communication especially in book III, where he had the main speaker, Giuliano de’ Medici, discuss the ways in which the courtier conveyed his love to a lady. The eyes were instrumental as ‘faithful messengers’ (fidi messaggeri, III.66):

Because those vital spirits that come forth from the eyes, being generated near the heart, enter in through other eyes (at which they are aimed as an arrow at a target) and penetrate naturally to the heart as if it were their proper abode, and, mingling with those other spirits there and with the very subtle kind of blood (natura di sangue) which these have in them, they infect the blood near the heart to which they have come, and warm it, and make it like themselves and ready to receive the impression of that image which they have brought with them (III.66).3

Thus vision occurred when the eyes received spirits carrying the ‘impression’ of an image, and passed them on to the heart. This was an

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3 Castiglione B., Il libro del Cortegiano 340: ‘perché que’ vivi spiriti che escono per gli occhi, per esser generati presso al core, entrando ancor negli occhi, dove sono indrizzati come saetta al segno, naturalmente penetrano al core come a sua stanza ed ivi si confondono con quegli altri spiriti e, con quella sottilissima natura di sangue che hanno seco, infettano il sangue vicino al core, dove son pervenuti, e lo riscaldano e fannolo a sé simile ed atto a ricevere la impression di quella imagine che seco hanno portata…’