

A List of Pre-eminent Ethical Treatises of the 16th Century  
in conjectural order of importance

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Cicero's **De Officiis**: "Tully's **Offices**," was well-qualified to become the gentleman's manual of the age, being short and imparting all a schoolboy needed to know, from how to make war and peace to how to behave in company. It was the first classical text ever printed, at the Monastery of Subiaco in 1465. The **British Museum Catalogue** lists 11 printed editions of it before 1600--8 interlinear translations, 1 English without Latin, and 2 in Latin, bound with Cicero's **De Amicitia** and **De Senectute**. 18 more editions were published before 1700. For comparison, the **BMC** lists no edition of any dialogue of Plato in any language printed in England before 1600, and only one edition of Aristotle's **Ethics**, a translation into English of Brunetto Latini's compendium of its "preceptes of good behaouour and perfighte honestie." Erasmus prefaced and annotated an edition of **De Officiis** in 1501. Sir Thomas Elyot, in his popular **Governour** (1531), lists three essential texts for bringing up young gentlemen: Plato's works, Aristotle's **Ethics**, and **De Officiis**. "Those three bokes," Elyot says, "be almost sufficient to make a perfecte and excellent governour" (1.47-8). King James I's own version of **De Officiis**, **Basilikon Doron** (1603), in which he tells his son Prince Henry his duties as man and ruler, refers him to Cicero 55 times, 16 of them to **De Officiis**. In **The Complete Gentleman** (1622), Henry Peacham implies that **De Officiis** is a standard beginning Latin text (29). In the preface to his translation of 1681 Sir Roger L'Estrange calls it "the commonest school book that we have," and goes on to observe, "as it is the best of books, so it is applied to the best of purposes, that is to say, to training up of youth in the study and exercise of virtue." Voltaire said of it, "No one will ever write anything more wise." (Wells, **Wide Arch**, p. 142) And Hume preferred its moral teaching to that of Allestree's **The Whole Duty of Man**, a standard Christian competitor. (MacIntyre, p. 214). It gave Wordsworth his first acquaintance with a morality of nature, when he studied it at Hawkshead school (Schneider, **Wordsworth**, 72ff). T. W. Baldwin, after exhaustive researches into Shakespeare's learning, could be certain only that he read one classic: **De Officiis**, in grammar school (Martindale 7).

Seneca's **Moral Essays** and **Moral Epistles**: "In the Renaissance no Latin author was more highly esteemed than Seneca," said T. S. Eliot. Montaigne confesses that his oeuvre is totally dependent on Seneca and Plutarch. Erasmus, Justus Lipsius, and J. F. Gronovius published "famous editions" of Seneca's **Essays** in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The **BMC** shows that in 1547 the first Senecan epistle was translated into English by R. Whytton, Poet Laureate. In 1578 Arthur Golding translated the **De Beneficiis**, the authority on reciprocal giving. Something called **Seneca's Morals**, probably a compendium of excerpts, was published in English in 1607. In 1614 Thomas Lodge translated the complete moral works. Then, in 1678, Sir Roger L'Estrange published **Seneca's Morals by Way of Abstract**. By 1793 it had gone into 17 editions. I found a copy (Cleveland: 1856) in my mother-in-law's Illinois farmhouse.

Epictetus's **Encheiridion**: the primer of Stoicism. States the basic principle that the only things in the world that you can control are your will and your body.

Plato's **Republic**: Someone said that "all philosophy is only a footnote to Plato," certainly true of the works in this list. Although no English translation was available during Shakespeare's time, learned men draw heavily on it (as did James I in his **Basilikon Doron**).

Plutarch's **Lives**: Translated from French into English by Sir Thomas North in 1579. The fact that Shakespeare used Plutarch's biographies of **Julius Caesar**, **Antony**, and **Coriolanus** as plots for plays only begins to convey the impact of the work on early modern Europe.

During this period history in general, and especially Plutarch's **Lives**, was packaged as a series of moral exempla, and on these we should focus our attention. As I have noted, Montaigne gives nearly full credit for his accomplishment in letters to Seneca and Plutarch. He uses exempla from Plutarch over and over again.

Ruth Kelso's *\*Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century\** (1929) and **The Doctrine for the Lady of The Renaissance** (1957): These two works contain bibliographies comprising almost 1500 titles, about one-third in English. And she does not include 16<sup>th</sup>-century publications of classical moralists in their own or modern languages, which were also profuse. In her second book she summarizes her monumental research as follows: "the bulk of all that these treatises contain is made up of commonplaces, culled mostly from the ancients, whose names besprinkle the pages of all writers. (322) Her list of those ancients most commonly cited is very short, consisting solely of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca. (311)

Montaigne's **Essays**: Translated by John Florio in 1603, and paraphrased at some length in **The Tempest** (1611), with strong reverberations in **Lear** (1605). Reading Montaigne shows us how deeply classical morality dominated the European mind. Simply by perusing Montaigne and Plutarch, Shakespeare and his contemporaries could become "deep learned and shallow read," as Swift put it in *\*Tale of a Tub\**. So may we.

Elyot's **Governour**: An outline of subjects necessary to be taught to gentle offspring, it testifies to the importance of classical morality in Shakespeare's England. It was published in 1531 and went into nine editions before 1600 (xxvi).

James I's **Basilikon Doron** (1603): The king's own version of *\*De Officiis\**, also written as a letter to his son. It, too, confirms the presence of classical thought in Shakespeare's England.

Joseph Hall's **Characters of the Virtues and Vices** (1608): Here an English Bishop praises the Stoicism in his preface, and displays Stoic virtues in his characterizations. The eminent 16<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Justus Lipsius devoted much of his life to proving that Stoicism harmonized with Christianity.

Castiglione's **Courtier**: Translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561 and into Latin by Bartholomew Clerke (1571) and went into many editions. Castiglione's famous virtue "sprezzatura," which Hoby translates as "carelessness" clearly has its origin in the Stoic prohibition of affectation (Castiglione—"affetazione;" Hoby—"precision," "formality").