

**BY THE BOOK**  
*Galateo* author Giovanni Della Casa would not approve of inappropriate cell phone use.



## Words to the Wise

**Modern gentlemen can learn much from a 16th century tome.**

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 | Illustration by Donovan Foote |

quaint in our casual society—and unimportant, even, in a world grappling with global crises. Author Della Casa had an answer for that. Good manners, he wrote, aren't trivial because each rudeness is a blow and "even light blows, if they are many, can kill."

Although stern in overall tone, *Galateo* is also humorous. Consider its blunt chapter

### Courtesy Calls

Vintage advice from Giovanni Della Casa

Being overly lavish with compliments can make you a "fawning parasite."

"You must not speak slowly... nor should you chew your words, or swallow them all smashed and stuck together, one with the other."

"One should not, for the sake of making someone laugh, say obscene

words or indulge in such vile or perverse acts as distorting one's face and eyes or gesticulating like a dope, for no one should debase himself in order to amuse others."

No "humming a tune, or imitating the beating of a drum on the table with fingers, or shuffling legs, for these actions indicate a contempt for others."

titles: "Petulant and Pompous and Self-Serving People" and "On Those Prim and Ladylike Men." On the latter, Della Casa says manners needn't be prissy. Rather, the point is to be gracious.

All these years later, his words could make readers better, kinder conversationalists. He chastises chatterboxes, interrupters and the taciturn. Windbags who won't "let others get a word in edgewise," he says, are like "a chicken snatching a grain from another's beak, so these men take the ideas out of the mouth of the man who began them, and they start talking. They surely make the other person eager to punch or smack them."

Compassion and self-restraint are at the heart of Della Casa's tutorial. "It's a polite and pleasant habit to excuse a man's fault even when you know him to be in the wrong," writes Della Casa. "In fact, one should share a friend's mistake and first claim a portion of the blame." For example, when a driver has gotten a group lost, he suggests saying, "We've taken a wrong turn."

He was talking horses, not cars, of course. But it still applies, as does his dislike of conversational distractions—particularly poignant in our hyper-connected culture. In addition to admonishing fidgeting, he says, "Those who occasionally pull a letter out of their pocket to read are equally rude."

Personal conduct issues know no century, which is why Della Casa has a modern-day Italian-born counterpart. P.M. Forni, who founded the Civility Project at Johns Hopkins University, echoes Della Casa's belief that rudeness can kill. "By keeping levels of incivility down," Forni has said, "we keep levels of violence down."

One of these centuries, maybe we'll get it right.