

*Courtesy, Cultivation, and the Ethics of Discernment* examines the relationship between courteous behavior, virtue, and Christian grace in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*. The article argues that the last complete book of Spenser's epic redraws the conceptual parameters of courtesy, contributing to a late-sixteenth-century discourse about the relationship between courteous behavior and social success. Rather than depict courtesy as a set of practical skills by which an ambitious man might rise in the esteem of the aristocracy, Book VI reveals that courtesy entails a kind of perfected discernment: an ability to see, judge, and act properly in a given situation, *without* hope of reward. By shifting the courteous mechanisms of giving and receiving away from the world of court and focusing instead upon courtesy's role in regulating the dynamics of gracious exchange, Spenser swerves away from the narrow field of the social, opening courtesy up to the complex demands of the ethical. For Calidore and the Salvage Man, especially, the path to virtue depends on two factors: first, a social environment which makes ethical demands upon the virtuous subject, requiring virtuous interventions and performances; and second, a receptiveness to aesthetic experience, broadly defined – experience, that is to say, that makes inroads upon the sensory capacities of the subject, that assails sight, hearing, and touch, and demands a critical, evaluative response. The consistent importance of these two factors – inextricably tied together yet crucially distinct – suggests that virtuous development depends on the intersection of the social and the aesthetic.