

Jacques Bazin  
From Dawn to Decadence

kept in mind, though unfortunately not as long as he did the nobles' ambition to demote him.

Life at the court of Louis XIV was a daily drama in which he played the lead. He was also its director and producer, and he built his own theater for it as soon as he was of age and fully king: the palace at Versailles. It was wise to move the court out of Paris, away from the restless populace and the intellectuals. When the chateau 11

miles away was completed, the show, underwritten by the vanity of the nobles themselves, put them at the mercy of the Grand Monarch. Every hour of every day they wanted his favor, his glance—a nod was enough reward, a blessing. By watching one another, making little plots, and getting in each other's way, the mischief-makers of the Fronde were kept amused and tamed.

To stay out of the production was impossible. Louis, with the memory of a politician, knew everybody and noted at once the absentees. "Where is So-and-so?" Any relative who was present was rebuked by the question alone, thus compelling attendance from whoever had stayed away out of sulks or love of country life. By this simple device potential rebels were under permanent surveillance. It was an automatic "Divide and rule," because the competition for favors made each courtier the enemy of every other, and not in a trivial way. For in addition to the short-lived joys of vanity, there were real plums to be got—posts of high honor, titles affording privileges, decorations and favors giving access to his majesty and thus to other benefits—gifts of land or cash, appointments and promotions in the army and the church. Incidentally, one decoration created in Louis's reign, though not by him, has had a circuitous history. The period was one of marked advances in cookery, in which some women distinguished themselves. To honor their talents, the blue ribbon of the highest state medal was chosen as appropriate. The connection with the Medal of the Holy Ghost has been forgotten and the ribbon is now freely bestowed on male chefs, restaurants, and grand juries.

The fulfillment of desire hung on first obtaining the favor of a word or a smile. It was in this way that the monarch was absolute and arbitrary. An ear-lier Louis, the eleventh, had coined the formula "For such is my pleasure..." which might better be rendered "such is my whim"—not a compliment but a notice served that luck, not merit, secured the boon. Besides tossing around plums, the later Louis had to keep inventing new pastimes to keep his huge retinue diverted; it was a feat of high imagination. To go with him on a hunt

—ANTHONY HAMILTON, MEMOIRS OF GRANMONT (1704)

NAME

or a country outing or be a guest at camp during war required special designation beforehand. He chose the group in the light of recent remarks, attitudes, costume, or facial expressions. Everyone was on tentatohooks. If at the appointed place a room had the magic word *Pour* (for), followed by the name, this touch doubled the delight. Permission to keep one's hat on at various times was another honor, which the king's call: "Hats, gentlemen!" made visible to all. He, by the way, always raised his hat in passing by a woman or an upper servant.

To provide such lures, the royal master of ceremonies thought up entertainments without cease—rides, balls, masques, ballets, plays, banquets, games—and made the most of birthdays, christenings, receptions of foreign notables, all this besides the feast days of the church, his days of taking medicine (purge), and whatever little circumstance in the life of his family, legitimate or "natural," gave excuse for some form of pageantry. His resourcefulness in this domain kept the crowd continually busy—getting new clothes, wondering and arguing about the moves to make, the words to say if this person or that was to be the center of attention, and worrying about precedence—one's place on the ladder that reached the sun. The fuss, the frenzy can readily be conceived if one thinks of such lesser models of court life as Washington, D.C., or Hollywood in its prime. A court under any climate is a mass of resourceful people with only one aim in life.

At Versailles what one might call the fusion of revelry and rivalry was an instrument of government, expensive but efficient—no need of any army of spies throughout the country as Richelieu had needed, or of soldiers to fight coalitions of nobles. They fought each other, without bloodshed, under their king's eye and over such things as footstools and "bonnets" (caps), these being the cause of famous quarrels too involved to go into. Louis looked on impassively like a teacher in the playground at recess time.

At other moments, each day, he sacrificed his privacy to the good of the state: rising and going to bed, at meals and at stool, he occupied center stage. He chose what noble fingers should hand him his shirt or who should sit opposite him across the table of perfume some other rite. These privileged beings shone in rotation as did the select crew allowed to stand near the chamber door and feast their eyes on the daily spectacle. But none in the audience ever saw him without his wig. Louis had lumps—sebaceous cysts—on his scalp.

His Majesty's meals shall be brought in thus: two of the guards will walk in first, then the doorkeeper, the *matre d'hôtel* carrying his staff, the gentleman who serves bread, the controller-general, the controller's clerk, the squire of the kitchen, and the keeper of table settings.

—LOUIS XIV, HOUSE RULES, ARTICLE 21 (REVISED 1681)

(C) (F)

The words just used—audience, show, spectacle, pageant—suggest the resuming word *façade*. It is the means of ruling by keeping the mind entranced through the eye. Façade imparts grandeur, brilliance, power. It is the contrary of another artifice of government, the calculated mystery of dictatorships. The western world today wants the opposite of both façade and mystery—destroying them as soon as suspicion of either arises. We speak of the importance of "image," and the kind desired is one of anti-façade. It must dispel, not create, the aura of grandeur and power and even of dignity. Heads of state insist on being Tony or Jimmy; they grow in popularity when they are inarticulate. The plain man with the boyish, rather helpless look is the figure congenial to a democratic society (785>).

It might be thought that there was a likeness between the sun king's self-display in the bedroom and the photographs of our leaders jogging or the diagram of their organs after surgery. But Louis's exhibitionism fostered no intimacy; it was solemn and stylized; it implied that majesty permeated the least action, making it different from its analogue in you and me. The fact is that far from these antics making him (in our favorite phrase) "more human," they set him apart from the rest of mankind. The king has two bodies (<253) and the one on show was at all times the royal being.

The proof is that from his accession to his death, Louis terrified all who came near him. No source of pride or strength—great estates or wealth, fame as a soldier or genius as an artist—helped anybody to withstand his glance; all were reduced to humility. Physically, Louis was well designed for his role; he was of medium height and sturdy build. His features were regular, the mouth firm and eyebrows strongly marked over a wide-open glance. And as we see in the standard full-length portrait by Rigaud, which obviously makes a point of it, Louis had an athlete's legs. Nor

did Louis achieve this mastery by any form of thunder—he was said to have lost his temper only twice. He dominated by his stance and his gaze, his self-control and his vigilance about the minutest infraction of what he regarded as his due. This peculiar power is well illustrated by a remark on record: "I was almost kept waiting." It was part of his grand strategy to mention with a shudder his escape from that catastrophe.

—SAINT-SIMON, *MÉMOIRES* (n.d.)

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- 1) According to Barzun, what are the two major reasons why Louis left Paris?
- 2) What is the political strategy of "divide and rule?"
- 3) What are some of the things courtiers hoped to gain?
- 4) What is the blue ribbon's origin?
- 5) Name four "entertainments" in Louis' court:
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
- 6) What is Barzun's definition of a "court?"
- 7) How was Louis unlike Richelieu?
- 8) Why was Louis always wearing a whig?
- 9) How is façade used by Barzun to describe leaders of democracies?
- 10) How is Louis' façade different?
- 11) Describe Louis' power over the court.