

Age of Absolutism

Louis XIV. *Memoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*

I would not speak to you in this way, my son, if I had seen in you the least tendency toward cruelty, for a bloody and ferocious temper is despicable in a man, and beneath the dignity of a king. On the contrary, I will endeavor to acquaint you with the charm of clemency, the most regal of all virtues since it can only belong to kings; for clemency is one duty for which we can never be repaid...

Whoever pardons too often punishes uselessly the rest of time, for in the terror which restrains men from evil, the hope of pardon lessens the effect of pardon itself. You will not finish the reading the *Memoires*, my son, without finding places where I have conquered myself and pardoned offenses that I could justly never forget. But on the occasion when it was a question of state, of the most pernicious examples, and of the most contagious disorder for all my subjects, of a revolt that attacked the very foundations of my authority, I knew that I should overcome my scruples and punish these scoundrels rather than pardoning them".

Whoever is poorly informed cannot avoid poor thinking; and if you search past centuries for all the errors attributed to sovereigns, hardly one can be excused for not knowing something that he should have known, for so it is generally among men that one says "I did not know," or "I did not think."

Frequently after finishing an affair we learn something new and lament that if only we had known this sooner we would have acted differently; in short I believe if a man is fully informed he will always do what he should. Thus it is necessary that a sovereign take the greatest care to be informed of his own times.

But for me, I extended this reflection, for I was convinced that it was not enough to be informed of current affairs but also of ancient times. I consider that a knowledge of these great events, assimilated by a mature mind, can serve to fortify one's reasoning in all important deliberations; for the example of illustrious men and their unique deeds provides very useful perspectives for war and peace, so that a naturally great and generous soul, contemplating these actions, would be inspired by them and ensure that the lessons of history can inspire others as well.

I have heard it said that all the great heroes of the past were conversant with literature and that part of their greatness was due to their literary study. Particularly I found the study of the past to be very useful in becoming wise in the art of war...

But kings must learn not to permit their servants to become too powerful because, if they are promoted too quickly, they are obliged to constantly support them or painfully suffer them; usually only weak or clumsy princes tolerate these monstrous promotions.

I am not saying that we should not for our own interest and grandeur wish that our greatness is shared by those in our good graces, but we must carefully guard against their excess. My advice to guarantee this consists of three principal observations.

The first is that you know your affairs completely, because a king who does not know them is always dependent on those who serve him and cannot defend himself from their wiles.

The second, that you divide your confidence among many, so that each of those you have entrusted will check the elevation of his rival, ensuring that the jealousy of one will bridle the ambition of the other.

And the third, that even though you admit a small number of persons into your secret affairs or into your casual conversations, never permit anyone to imagine that they have the power to speak as they please of their good or bad impressions of the others; but, on the contrary, you must expressly maintain a type of association with all who hold important state posts, and give to everyone the same liberty to propose whatever they believe for your service; so that none of them would believe that they could not turn to you for their needs and they think only of your good graces; and lastly the most distant and the most familiar should be persuaded that they are totally dependent upon you.

But you should know that this independence upon which I insist so strongly raises more than anything the authority of the master, and that it alone shows that he is governing them instead of being governed by them: As to the contrary when it ceases, invariably intrigues, liaisons, and cabals enlarge the power of the court and weaken the reputation of the prince.

Answer the following questions pertaining to the above readings. Support your answers with examples from the readings.

1. What does King Louis XIV consider the greatest power of a monarch?
2. Describe Louis XIV's view of human nature. How did this viewpoint affect Louis XIV's governing principles?
3. What important advice does Louis give his son about the role of being an absolute monarch?

Primary Source: The Court of the Sun King

One of the most complete records of life at the court of Louis XIV comes from the writings of Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon (san-see-MoRN). As a French noble, Saint-Simon spent most of his time at Versailles and was often present at the elaborate ceremonies that were part of the king's routine. He wrote down in his memoirs all that he saw and felt about the reign of the Sun King. Read the passage below from his account. Answer the questions that follow.

Not only did Louis XIV notice whether the highest nobility constantly attended him, but he kept track of the lesser nobles also. He looked to the right and to the left at the ceremonies surrounding his rising and his going to bed, at his meals, in walking through the palace, and in his gardens of Versailles. He saw and noticed everybody; no one escaped him.

He marked down carefully the absences of any of those who were always at court. He found out the reasons for these absences, and he never lost an opportunity to treat these individuals according to what he had discovered. It was a mark against some, including all of the highest nobility, not to make the court at Versailles their home. For others it was held against them that they came only rarely; for those who never or scarcely ever came it was certain disgrace. When their names were mentioned or it was a matter of doing something for such a person, "I do not know them," was the king's proud reply. Such statements were final and were never reversed.

Louis XIV took great pains to be well informed about everything that was going on in public and in private. He had an infinity of spies of every kind. Some were ignorant that their information went all the way to him, others knew it.

The most cruel means by which the king was kept informed-for many years before anybody realized it-was by opening letters. It is impossible to appreciate how promptly and efficiently this was done. The king saw extracts from all the letters that the chiefs of the postal service judged should reach him. A word of criticism of the king or the government could ruin one forever.

1. At what times did the king check to see whether the nobles were attending him?
2. What did Louis XIV do when he noticed that someone he had expected to see was missing from court? How did he treat people after they had been absent from court?
3. Which people did Louis XIV claim not know at all?
4. According to Saint-Simon, what were two other ways the king had of keeping informed about the people at his court? What was likely to happen to a person who had criticized Louis XIV in a letter?
5. How might Louis XIV have defended his seemingly cruel actions? Explain.