



PRIMARY SOURCE READING 7

A Day at the Court of the Sun King

The luxurious and elaborate lifestyle of royal courts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems almost unbelievable today. The French court, especially during the long reign of Louis XIV, set the style for the rest of Europe. The colorful picture of court life in this selection was written by Louis de Rouvroy, duke of Saint-Simon, a noble whose *Memoirs* are considered a masterpiece of French literature. Saint-Simon's multivolume journals describe court life and personalities in the years 1694–1723, which include the final years of the reign of Louis XIV and the regency that followed.

Guided Reading In this selection, read to learn what a "typical" day entailed in the life of King Louis XIV.

At eight o'clock the chief *valet de chambre* [personal servant] on duty, who alone had slept in the royal chamber, and who had dressed himself, awoke the King [Louis XIV]. The chief physician, the chief surgeon, and the nurse (as long as she lived) entered at the same time. . . . At the quarter [8:15], the grand chamberlain was called . . . and those who had what was called the *grandes entrées* [greatest access]. The chamberlain (or chief gentleman) drew back the curtains which had been closed again, and presented the holy water from the vase at the head of the bed. These gentlemen stayed but a moment, and that was the time to speak to the King, if anyone had anything to ask of him; in which case the rest stood aside. . . . Then all passed into the cabinet of the council. A very short religious service being over, the King called [and] they re-entered. The same officer gave him his dressing-gown; immediately after, other privileged courtiers entered, and then everybody, in time to find the King putting on his shoes and stockings, for he did almost everything himself, and with address [attention] and grace. Every other day we saw him shave himself; and he had a little short wig in which he always appeared, even in bed, and on medicine days. . . .

As soon as he was dressed, he prayed to God, at the side of his bed, where all the clergy present knelt, the cardinals without cushions, all the laity [those outside the clergy] remaining standing; and the captain of the guards came to the balustrade during the prayer, after which the King passed into his cabinet. He found there, or

was followed by all who had the *entrée*, a very numerous company, for it included everybody in any office. He gave orders to each for the day; thus within a half a quarter of an hour it was known what he meant to do; and then all this crowd left directly. . . .

All the Court meantime waited for the King in the gallery. . . . During this pause the King gave audiences when he wished to accord any, spoke with whoever he might wish to speak secretly to, and gave secret interviews to foreign ministers. . . .

The King went to mass, where his musicians always sang an anthem. . . . The King amused himself a little upon returning from mass and asked almost immediately for the council. Then the morning was finished.

On Sunday, and often on Monday, there was a council of state; on Tuesday a finance council; on Wednesday council of state; on Saturday finance council. Rarely were two held in one day or any on Thursday or Friday. . . . Often on the days when there was no council the dinner hour was advanced more or less for the chase [hunt] or promenade. The ordinary hour was one o'clock; if the council still lasted, then the dinner waited and nothing was said to the King.

The dinner was always *au petit couvert*, that is, the King ate by himself in his chamber upon a square table in front of the middle window. It was more or less abundant, for he ordered in the morning whether it was to be "a little," or "very little" service. But even at this last, there were always many dishes, and three courses without counting the fruit. . . .



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Upon leaving the table the King immediately entered his cabinet [private room]. That was the time for distinguished people to speak to him. He stopped at the door a moment to listen, then entered; very rarely did anyone follow him, never without asking him for permission to do so; and for this few had the courage. . . .

The King amused himself by feeding his dogs, and remained with them more or less time, then asked for his wardrobe, changed before the very few distinguished people it pleased the first gentleman of the chamber to admit there, and immediately went out by the back stairs into the court of marble to get into his coach. From the bottom of that staircase to the coach, anyone spoke to him who wished. . . .

As he was but little sensitive to heat or cold, or even to rain, the weather was seldom sufficiently bad to prevent his going abroad. He went

out for three objects: stag-hunting, once or more each week; shooting in his parks (and no man handled a gun with more grace or skill), once or twice each week; and walking in his gardens for exercise and to see his workmen. Sometimes he made picnics with ladies, in the forest at Marly or at Fontainebleau [a chateau], and in this last place, promenades with all the Court around the canal, which was a magnificent spectacle. . . .

At ten o'clock his supper was served. . . . This supper was always on a grand scale, the royal household (that is, the sons and daughters of France [the king]) at table, and a large number of courtiers and ladies present, sitting or standing. . . .

The King, wishing to retire, went and fed his dogs; then said good night, passed into his chamber to . . . his bed, where he said his prayers. . . .

INTERPRETING THE READING

Directions Use information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

1. What members of the court and household attended the king in the mornings?

2. When did the king attend to government business?

3. What did the king do for entertainment and relaxation?

4. What part did religion play in court life?

Critical Thinking

5. **Making Inferences** From this account, does the king's life seem enjoyable? Explain your answer.

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