

That “Glostly Perpetuum Mobile:” Diplomatic Ceremonial in the Court Society

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Louis XIV has become famous or infamous for his territorial aggrandizement. His aggression was also illustrated by his deployment of what we would today call “soft” power and of ceremonial brinkmanship abroad. As Peter Burke has noted “Ritual, art and architecture may all be seen as the instruments of self-assertion, as the continuation of war and diplomacy by other means.”¹ The casting of celebratory coins, such as that for the seizure of Strasbourg, the orchestrated tour of the Versailles garden, or the layout of the palace itself were designed to proclaim the sun king’s power. Witness his humiliation of his father-in-law, Philip IV, in the French demand for a public *entrée* in Madrid or the scuffle in London. Louis XIV’s obsession with his *gloire* escalated the seemingly unending quarrels over precedence and protocol that plagued the peace conferences of Ryswick and Nijmegen. Those quarrels were not incidental to but rather reflective of the struggle for power. The minutely regulated and obviously manipulated ceremonies were part of what Duindam calls “the public presentation of power.”² Historians have come to recognize that “‘symbolics of power’ [were] not mere incidental ephemera.”³ For Louis XIV etiquette was an instrument of power: “Those people are gravely mistaken who imagine that all this is mere ceremony.” He acknowledged that his subjects “usually judge by what they see from the outside, and most often it is by precedence and rank that they measure their respect and obedience.”⁴ Those at the court became sensitized to “the status and importance that should be attributed to a person in society on the basis of his bearing, speech, manner or appearance.”⁵ Thus the king’s elevation above others.

¹ Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 65.

² Jeroen Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe’s Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.181. See also Ute Daniel, “Überlegunen zum höfischen Fest der Barockzeit,” *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 72 (2000): 45-66; Benjamin Marschke, “‘Von dem am Königl.Preussischen Hofe abgeschafften Ceremoniel’: Monarchical Representation and Ceremony in Frederick William I’s Prussia,” in *Orthodoxies and Diversity in Early Modern Germany*, edited by Randolph C. Head and Daniel Christensen, 227-252 (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2007); Milos Vec, *Zeremonial-Wissenschaft im Fürstenstaat: Studien zur juristischen und politischen Theorie absolutischer Herrschaftsrepräsentation* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), and Barbara von Stollberg-Rilinger, “Zeremoniell, Ritual, Symbol: Neue Forschungen zur symbolischen Kommunikation im Spätmittelater und Früher Neuzeit,” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 27 (2000): 389-405.

³ David Cannadine, “Introduction: Divine Rites of Kings,” in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, edited by David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 3.

⁴ Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 117-118

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

As an opponent of Louis XIV argued: “The king has usurped the place of the state, the king is everything....He is the idol... to which everything is sacrificed.”⁶ Not incidentally, the image of the sun king reflected the fact that the ceremony and court revolved around him. Ceremony was but one facet of what Burke calls the fabrication of Louis XIV.⁷ Even the nobility became caught in “the vicious circle of enforced ostentation,” “imprisoned by their own ceremonial and etiquette,”⁸ like an insect imprisoned in amber. This “incessant competition” meant that “everyone was running on the spot.”⁹ To “keep one’s place in the intense competition”, one had to cultivate the appropriate gestures, move in the rigidly mandated way, wear the right fabrics, choose the correct shoes. As Elias noted, “Even smiling is shaped by court custom.”¹⁰ A satire dating from the reign of Henri IV has one courtier explain to another the minutiae of dress (high heels, gilded spurs), what to say, when to laugh, how to move the head, when to fling the arms, when to shift from one foot to another, etc.¹¹ Jean de La Bruyère (d. 1696), the essayist, parodied the man who understands the court. He was one who was “master of his gestures, of his ears, of his image.” He dissimulated: he smiled at his enemies, disguised his passions, and spoke and acted against his sentiments. Any sign of emotion was seen as weakness.¹² A diplomat who was, nonetheless, not part of the courtly elite, Callières condemned the “vain ceremonies,” which he equated with a “play” in which the courtiers were “comedians.”¹³ They were comedians Shakespeare would have understood as he did that “idol ceremony.” In *Henry V* Act iv, scene 1 he asks: “And what have kings, that privates have not too? Save ceremony, save general ceremony?”¹⁴ François Gabriel, Comte de Bray (1765- 1832) who served Louis XIV as representative to the Diet of Ratisbon, found the etiquette a “labyrinth,” such that one cannot find one’s way once one enters: the number of steps to advance or to retreat, the number of bows was counted and predetermined. When to put on one’s hat and when to remove it was stipulated. “All this is almost as difficult to study as one of the most important rules of [the French mathematician] Bezout.”¹⁵ The magnificent clothing, the pompous ceremonial, the march that lasted two and half hours combined with visits, ceremonies, fêtes, dinners made him deplore the time lost. This is “an abominable business” with such “oppressive vanities.” He deplored the five hour ceremonial, the reception line that lasted 3

⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

⁷ Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*.

⁸ Elias, *The Court Society*, pp. 71 and 207.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 207-208.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 232.

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 231.

¹² Marc Belissa, “La Diplomatie et les traités dans la pensées des lumières: ‘Negociation universelle’ où école du mensonge?” *Revue d’histoire diplomatique* 13 (1999): 297.

¹³ *Letters (1694-1700) of Francois de Callières to the Marquise d’Huxelles*, edited by Laurence Pope (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 228.

¹⁴ Quoted in David Cannadine, “Introduction: Divine Rites of Kings,” in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, edited by David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), p. 1.

¹⁵ Comte F.-G. de Bray, *Mémoires du comte de Bray* (Paris:Plon Nourrit et Cie., 1911), p.103.

and 1/2 hours, the “fatiguing luxury.” In short, he found this way of life “miserable.”¹⁶

The monarchy was adept at what Oresko described as the “manipulation of...representational culture, the use of external signs, visual imagery, to express status and power...”¹⁷ This culture of the *ancien régime* was essentially “representational” by which is meant, according to Blanning, “the making present of authority by dress, ritual, painting, architecture, theatrical performance or any other form of display.”¹⁸ The absolutist and authoritarian *ancien régime* encoded hierarchy in a representational system. According to Elias “civilizing” behavior was “linked to the formation of the hierarchical social order with the absolute ruler and, more broadly, his court at its head.”¹⁹ Courtiers became entwined in that “ghostly perpetuum mobile,” the etiquette, the ceremonial, and the language of court society.²⁰ Diplomats were particularly vulnerable because ceremonial niceties both reflected and determined the status of their state.²¹ As members of the “distinctive diplomatic culture” that evolved in the long eighteenth century, they were part of an “independent society,” so termed by an official of the foreign ministry, Antoine Pecquet, in 1737.²² Drawn from an aristocratic elite, these individuals shared certain assumptions because “diplomacy itself assumed many of the characteristics of the aristocratic- courtly and cosmopolitan culture of the period.”²³ Not incidentally, court and embassy reinforced the ceremonial of each.

Koenigsberger pointed out that “Historical traditions and the generally royalist interpretation of Roman law had conditioned the thinking of educated Europeans to an almost universal acceptance” of “the legal and cultural preeminence of royalty.”²⁴ This mentality was so pervasive that even Venice, the Republic of Saint Mark, claimed royal status not because of its commercial success, its independence, or its constitutional structure but “because it ruled or had at some time ruled over

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 109, 111, 120.

¹⁷ Robert Oresko, “The House of Savoy in Search for a Royal Crown in the Seventeenth Century.” In *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe*. Edited by Robert Oresko; G.C. Gibbs; and H.M. Scott, pp.273-350. (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), p. 274.

¹⁸ T.C.W. Blanning, “Frederick the Great and German Culture.” In *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe*. Edited by Robert Oresko; G.C. Gibbs; and H.M. Scott, (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), pp. 529-530.

¹⁹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: State Formation and Civilization*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 4.

²⁰ Elias, *The Court Society*, pp. 86-87.

²¹ For a vivid discussion see Lucien Bély, “Souveraineté et souverains: la question du cérémonial dans les relations internationales à l’époque moderne.” *Annuaire-bulletin de la Société de l’histoire de France* 130 (1993): 27-43.

²² Hamish Scott, “Diplomatic Culture in Old Regime Europe,” in *Cultures of Power in Europe During the Long Eighteenth Century*, edited by Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), pp. 59-60.

²³ Scott, “Diplomatic Culture in Old Regime Europe,” p. 62.

²⁴ H. G. Koenigsberger, “Republicanism, Monarchism and Liberty.” In *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe*. Edited by Robert Oresko ; G.C. Gibbs; and H.M.Scott (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), pp. 43-74.

several kingdoms, namely Cyprus, Crete, and Euboea.”²⁵ The French monarchy predictably had not accepted this argument as definitive. To give but another example, the republic of Genoa claimed royal status on the grounds that the Genoese had proclaimed our lady as Genoa’s royal queen.²⁶ This obsession was shared by others. In its quest for royal status, the house of Savoy began using a silver vessel with moistened napkins because it was associated with sovereignty.

In the *ancien régime*, states manipulated etiquette to advance social status, just as the aristocracy did. Not surprisingly, such discussions dominated diplomatic manuals and legal treatises. The classic work *The Law of Nations; or, Principles of the Law of Nature Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* by Emerich de Vattel first appeared in 1758. That well known jurist noted that “at present kings claim superiority of rank over republics.” The Roman republic, he noted, had considered all kings beneath them but the monarchs of Europe “have refused to admit republics to equality.”²⁷ The jurist George Friedrich Martens, whose treatise appeared in French in 1789, included an extensive section on precedence. He also appended advice on how to avoid the disputes which bedeviled early modern diplomacy. He recommended that states 1) observe an equality where right of precedence remains undecided either by alternately taking the lead or by observing a strict equality in everything; 2) send representatives either incognito or a minister of a different rank; 3) order the representative to absent himself in order to avoid yielding the precedence or to insist upon written assurances that what is done shall not serve as a precedent.²⁸

As the historian Jeremy Black pointed out, diplomats used ceremonial and protocol “as a means of asserting and defending status and interests. It was perfect for a competitive world that wished to have an alternative to conflict.”²⁹ Diplomats were ordered to “defend and enhance the prestige of their masters.”³⁰ Precedence was so vigorously contested because it reflected a state’s power, what the Comte de Broglie called, the “interest of regard.”³¹ The courtiers were so obsessed with rank and with deportment because such maneuvering was “a zero-sum game: the gains of one entailed the other’s losses.”³² Probably no one played that game as well as the French. Jean Baptiste Colbert, marquis de Torcy, the secretary of foreign affairs under Louis XIV, an adept

²⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁶ Robert Oresko. "The House of Savoy in Search for a Royal Crown in the Seventeenth Century," in *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe*. Edited by Robert Oresko; G. C. Gibbs; and H.M. Scott (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), p. 294.

²⁷ Emerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations; or, Principles of the Law of Nature Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns*. (Philadelphia; T. and J.W. Johnson and Co., 1863), p. 149.

²⁸ George Friedrich Martens, *Summary of the Law of Nations* (Philadelphia: Thomas Bradford, 1795), pp.136-144. The French edition of 1789 *Précis du droit des gens modernes de l'Europe* was a revision of an earlier work in Latin.

²⁹ Jeremy Black, *British Diplomats and diplomacy, 1688-1800* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), p.97.

³⁰ Jeroen Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), p. 184.

³¹ H.M. Scott, *The Birth of a Great Power System 1740-1815* (Harlow, England, Pearson Longman, 2006) p. 124.

³² Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, p 187.

practitioner of the art, noted that these “trifles of etiquette” signaled the importance of a country, affirmed its power, and helped to establish its grandeur. When the king of Denmark announced that he would in the future receive the French envoys as Louis received his, that is, seated and covered, Louis XIV refused to accept this change. Torcy underscored that to accept an inferior ranking or even to consent under the “pretext of politeness or equality and the suppression of all prerogatives” would be to “recognize and admit the decline of the country.”³³ Through such ceremonial games Louis could inflict “political humiliation” and assert his *gloire*.³⁴

These “subtle games of ceremonial” undergirded what Lucien Bély dubs the “*société des princes*.”³⁵ In that “collective construction” ceremony served not only as a “political instrument in the relations between European states, but also as a mark of solidarity in the society of princes.”³⁶ The sovereigns, in Bély’s words, made up a rather “singular” family whose relations were ritualized to such an extent that even war did not hamper or impede “*une politesse internationale*.”³⁷ “*La société polie*,” that very strict code of manners, had evolved at the court society. It both underscored and reinforced the prestige of the upper classes. As late as the 1880s the Austrian foreign minister extended only two fingers when meeting with diplomats he dubbed socially inferior.³⁸ Almost 200 years earlier in 1788 a British aristocrat noted that Monsr de Luzerne though “sensible and I believe a good man has not fashion or manner enough to please here.”³⁹ His comment reflected the ideological underpinnings of that “universe of usage.”⁴⁰ The trappings of the aristocratic code had created the impression among Voltaire and others that the French were “both the most polite and the most social” nation.⁴¹ The aristocratic code mandated what the age called “honest dissimulation,” which meant “that whatever you felt or thought, you must behave according to the rules of politeness” and you must do so seemingly without effort,

³³ Jean Baptiste Colbert, *Journal inédit de Jean-Baptiste Colbert, marquis de Torcy*, edited by Frederic Masson (Paris: Plon Nourrit, 1884), pp. xiii- xiv.

³⁴ Lucien Bély, “Souveraineté et souverains: la question du cérémonial dans les relations internationales à l’époque moderne.” *Annuaire-bulletin de la Société de l’histoire de France* 130 (1993):41.

³⁵ Lucien Bély, *La Société des princes: XVIe et XVIIIe*. (Paris: Fayard, 1999), pp. 406 and 396.

³⁶ Bély, “Souveraineté et souverains,” pp. 43 and 28.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 28 and 35. See also Ute Daniel “Überlegungen zum höfischen Fest der Barockzeit,” *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 72 (2000): 45-66 and Barbara von Stollberg-Rilinger, “Zeremoniell, Ritual, Symbol: Neue Forschungen zur symbolischen Kommunikation im Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit,” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 27 (2000): 389-405.

³⁸ T. G. Otte, ‘Outdoor Relief for the Aristocracy’? European Nobility and Diplomacy, 1850-1914, in *The Diplomats’ World: A Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815-1914*, edited by Markus Mösslang and Torsten Rlotte (Oxford: University Press, 2008), p. 51.

³⁹ Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone, U269 Sackville MSS. , U269 C182 Lord Hawkesbury to duke of Dorset, private 4 July 1788.

⁴⁰ Bély, *La Société des princes*, p. 10.

⁴¹ David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France, Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.148.

with what Castiglione, the quintessential courtier, called grace or “*sprezzatura* [nonchalance.]”⁴² This theme of repression (and suppression) of emotions was epitomized at Versailles. The taste of courtly France had been partly forged by the cynical but brilliant maxims of François, duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680), published in 1665. For La Rochefoucauld civility was “a desire to be repaid with civility, and also to be considered well bred.”⁴³ In his world breeding was limited to a few. In this closed and self-reinforcing elite, he could opine that “A bourgeois air sometimes wears off in the army but never at court.”

Aristocratic society harshly judged those both inside and outside the courtly circle. Those on the inside had to meet certain criteria. The courtier who wished to be thought gallant must be able to “say flattering things in an agreeable manner.” Moreover, he should unequivocally reject any move toward nature: “Most young people think they are being natural when really they are just ill-mannered and crude”⁴⁴—an observation that could be made in our own age. His maxims reflected the hierarchical, absolutist, and aristocratic culture that the revolutionaries later jettisoned. They also rejected the implicit foundation of this cult of manners that divided society. La Rochefoucauld’s emphasis on artificiality and appearance instead of sincerity and transparency made him anathema to the revolutionaries. “The practice of honest dissimulation,” as Snyder has argued, “was dialectically linked to the Old Regime culture of display and observation.”⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, Callières who wrote the foundational text on *ancien régime* diplomacy argued in 1696 that that very *bel esprit*, the manners and wit of the court, “makes people ill-suited to the conduct of public business.”⁴⁶

Rousseau had seen its dangers. Civilized peoples, “happy slaves,” cultivate “that delicate and refined taste on which you pride yourselves; that softness of character and urbanity of customs which makes relations among you so amiable and easy; in a word, the semblance of all the virtues without the possession of any.”⁴⁷ Art, he fulminated, “molded our manner and taught our passions to speak an affected language.”⁴⁸ Civilized man had lost that transparency, that ability to see “through each other, and that advantage, [which had]...spared them many vices.”⁴⁹ In “this herd

⁴² Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), p. 120.

⁴³ François duc de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes suivies des réflexions diverses* (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1967), p. 68 #260.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67 #260; p.93 #393; p.29 #100; and p.89 #372. Also see La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), introduction. and pages 68, 83,47, 81.

⁴⁵ Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 47.

⁴⁶ Letters (1694-1700) of François de Callières to the Marquise d'Huxelles, edited by Laurence Pope (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 14. See François de Callières, *Du Bel Esprit* (Amsterdam: Pierre Brunel, 1695), p. 151.

⁴⁷ Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *The First and Second Discourses*, edited by Roger D. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

called society” man, whose soul had been corrupted, “no longer dares to appear as he is.”⁵⁰ Such a man followed the demands of propriety, of politeness, of usage, not his own inclinations. “Everything being reduced to appearances, everything becomes factitious and deceptive; honor, friendship, virtue and often even vices themselves...we have only a deceitful and frivolous exterior, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom and pleasure without happiness....”⁵¹

This obsession with the *accoutrements* of a court society lived on past the fervor of Revolution. Napoleon, who had vaunted his republican credentials, sought like Louis XIV to project his power both at home and abroad. The revolutionary diplomat Miot de Melito, who returned to France in 1802, found everywhere “monarchical customs” instead of “austere republican forms.” The Tuileries and Saint-Cloud were no “longer the seat of government, the abode of the first Magistrate of a Republic, but the Court of a Sovereign.”⁵² He admitted that “the first impression made on me by the novel pomp and display was disagreeable and painful.” His irritation only increased when he had to return, as he sarcastically remarked, “to pay my court.” He resented that access to this “punctilious Court” was rendered almost impossible because of the “rigid etiquette.” Miot noted that the first consul “diverged from Republican manners by small degrees, imperceptible at first, but becoming every day more marked.” “Austere Republican forms had disappeared. Gorgeous liveries, sumptuous garments, similar to those worn in the reign of Louis XV, had [displaced]...military fashions.” Boots, sabers, cockades were “replaced by tights, silk stockings, buckled shoes, dress swords and hats held under the arm.” He thought “the change was still more apparent in the reality of things than in their outward appearance....”⁵³

Once the empire was proclaimed, the ceremonial became more elaborate. Napoleon appointed a Grand Master of Ceremonies, Ségur, who published in 1805 *Etiquette du palais impériale*. In asking the grand master of ceremonies to draw up a report on the reception of ministers and ambassadors, he wanted to know what had been done at Versailles, and what was being done at Vienna and St. Petersburg but “Mon reglement adopte, il faut que tout le monde s’y conforme.”⁵⁴ Certainly a statement the Sun King would have applauded. In 1807 Napoleon looked back not to the revolution but to the *ancien régime* when he underscored the importance of regulating the ranks between the great number of foreign princes and the princes of his family with the caveat that “the armchair is uniquely reserved for the emperor and the empress.”⁵⁵ In a note tinged with irony, Metternich wrote from Paris that Napoleon wanted the marriage ceremony in 1810 to be observed

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 39 and 37.

⁵¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1971), p. 180. Also see Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 1:349. “It is impossible we could be sociable Creatures without Hypocrisy.”

⁵² R. B. Mowat, *The Diplomacy of Napoleon* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1924), p. 103.

⁵³ André François, comte Miot de Melito, *Memoirs of Count Miot de Melito*, edited by General Wilhelm August von Fleischmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1881), pp. 161, 247-249, 282.

⁵⁴ André Palluel, ed. *Dictionnaire de l’Empereur* (Paris: Plon, 1969), 913-914, Paris, 22 September 1807. Title XIII of the imperial decree of 24 messidor, year XII (1814) that regulated public ceremonial dealt with French and foreign ambassadors. *Bulletin des lois de l’Empire française*, 4th series, vol. 1, bulletin #10, #110.

⁵⁵ André Palluel, ed. *Dictionnaire de l’Empereur* (Paris: Plon, 1969), p. 913, Paris, 22 August 1807.

with great *éclat* and to follow the etiquette and protocol used for the marriage of Marie Antoinette, adding that “we know by experience how much the Emperor of the French thinks of these details.”⁵⁶ As he explained, he intended to impress foreign powers “par la spectacle de ma puissance,” which renders every negotiation easier.⁵⁷ Could Louis XIV have said it better?

⁵⁶ Clemens Wenzel Lothar, Fürst von Metternich, *Memoirs of Prince Metternich, 1773-1815*, ed. by Prince Richard Metternich (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), 2: 383-384, Metternich to Schwarzenberg, February 19, 1810.

⁵⁷ Madeleine Delpierre, “Les Costumes de cour et les uniformes civils du premier empire,” *Musée Carnavalet* 11 (November 1958): 2-22.