

A study of french court life under louis xiv assignment

[History](#)



The English word etiquette actually originates from a French word for ticket. A courtier of Louis XIV, Madame de Maintenon, is recognized as being the first to write using the word etiquette in reference to the formalities and ceremonies required at court in 1719. The French word did not begin to apply to polite behavior in general until 1778. This shows that the association was actually first made in England. How the word changed so much in its definition is not entirely known although there are many theories (Arditi 1-3).

Currently, etiquette is used to describe very prim and proper conduct, to be considered polite one must follow the rules of society. Many people nowadays consider these rules overbearing and outdated, indeed these guidelines change with the generations, but even now living a refined life is miles easier than it would have been in France under Louis XIV when the royal court was “ the paradigm of elegance and civil behavior, emulated by the other courts of Europe” (“ Blakeley Manor”).

Traumatized by the Fronde rebellion during his youth, when he was required to flee the palace for his own safety, Louis was the poster king of absolutism summing up his rule in his famous statement, “ L’Etat est moi” (I am the State). So as to better control the nobles and aristocrats of the royal court he built the magnificent palace Versailles and required the nobles to spend most of their time there with the threat of punishment.

Louis, in his craftiness, made the courtiers compete for his favors which could come in the land, titles, and expensive gifts. Instead of scheming and waging wars the nobles were vying for the honors. “[They] were so busy

mastering appropriate court etiquette, and competing for the prestige it gave, that they had no time to plot rebellions" (" Splendors of Versailles"). Life in the court of Louis XIV, like life everywhere, focused on the sun, or in this case, the sun king.

He compared himself constantly to the sun and called his throne room the " Salon of Apollo". To survive in the royal court the nobles had to be on top of every trend and be ready to change at the King's whim and fancy. " Louis XIV realized that fashion was a way to occupy his entourage" (Gramont 383). He held control over the courtiers by constantly changing the fashion styles, in fact many nobles went bankrupt from living in the court of Versailles, when this occurred the King would lend them money, gaining an even tighter hold over them. Court life would have been a vicious battle to gain the King's attention, Duke de Saint- Simon wrote in his memoirs: " He availed himself of the frequent festivities at Versailles, and his excursions to other places, as a means of making the courtiers assiduous in their attendance and anxious to please him, for he nominated beforehand those who were to take part in them, and could thus gratify some and inflict a snub on others.

He was conscious that the substantial favours he had to bestow were not nearly sufficient to produce a continual effect, he had therefore to invent imaginary ones, and no one was so clever in devising petty distinctions and preferences which aroused jealousy and emulation. " (Steingrad) Clearly Louis was aware of his affect and power of the nobles and they would have lived in constant anxiety over who would receive honors. These could be shown in any recognition by the king during his day.

Every single day in the court began with the king's Lever, an elaborate process in which he awoke and prepared for the day at court. There were actually two Levers, the petit Lever and the grand Lever, and while most of the court could come to the grand Lever the petit Lever was reserved for the special and important people. At quarter to eight the assistant who sleeps in the King's room puts away his cot, when it was cold the porte-bushon du roi would light the fire in the room, followed by the watchmaker to wind up the grand clock.

The royal wigmaker would bring in the King's dressing wig and his first wig of the day. After Louis had been awakened and taken care of by his physician, surgeon and old nurse, the Grand Chamberlain and the honored courtiers with a grandes entrees would enter. After the Holy Water is offered to Louis it is the time for the favored courtiers to ask carefully formulated and memorized requests of the King. The group of nobles left as the king recited the Office of the Holy Ghost and reentered for the honor of watching him put on his wig and dressing gown.

Afterwards the more common nobility would enter to watch him dress. If someone was very honored they would get the privilege of handing him a piece of his clothing (Lewis 48-49). Since water was thought to be hazardous the King would wash his face by rubbing it with diluted, scented alcohol (Kipar History). Most of the court would leave after the King had finished dressing and prayer. After they were gone he would discuss the plans for the day with his inner circle of courtiers.

The Court would wait until it was time to attend Mass and then follow the King into the Chapel. Dinner was usually eaten by the courtiers around eleven or twelve so that they would have plenty of time to prepare for the King's dinner at one (Lewis 50-58). For the rest of the day the King and the Court would be entertained. Balls were held weekly under Louis XIV's rule and he saw dance as an important part of French culture ("Blakeney Manor"). The courtiers had to amuse the King and take part in all of his activities while still remaining proper. [A lady invited to Versailles] attended a comedy, a ballet or a ball; she probably partook of two suppers and a roulette of cards, and, throughout it all, she had to observe the most rigid rules of etiquette." (Kipar History). After the night was over there would be Coucher, almost the exact opposite of the Lever in which the King was put to bed. In the 17th century women carried fans which were carried very precisely and used to accentuate points. In addition they had to learn all of the different variations on the curtsy, with one for accepting compliments and another for when they entered a room and yet another for their exit.

The styles of curtsy changed with the fashions (Kipar Etiquette). Women in the court of Versailles had a gliding walk in which they never lifted their feet and risked stepping on another woman's train. They also had some very specific etiquette rules; for instance, a lady could never allow a man to link arms or hold hands with her. Instead when they were walking she would put her hand on his bent arm. This was both for the practical reason that the hoops in her skirts would have made it nearly impossible and it was entirely in bad taste.

In the 1600's women were only allowed to touch their fingertips with the men and neither men nor women could cross their legs in public. The male courtiers also faced elaborate restrictions and guidelines. Men had to gently lower themselves into their chairs in fear of their tight trousers splitting. When passing an acquaintance on the streets they would have to hold his hat above his head until they had passed. People were not allowed to knock on the King's door; instead they had to scratch on it using their left little finger until permission to enter was granted.

In fact many courtiers grew out that fingernail (Atelier). Life in the French Courts would have been very uncomfortable, as illustrated by Lewis; " St. Simon had the best set in the chateau, which gives us a standard of criticism. His quarters consisted of three small rooms, looking out on a stinking courtyard, an entrance hall, very dark and low, and two little closets without windows; in the hall and closets you could just stand upright, these cubicles. In addition, in the courtyard outside he had the use of a kitchen which was, he tells us, a very rare convenience in the chateau...

St. Simon's study was one of the windowless dens... and yet so appreciated... that a royal duchess once begged the loan of it for a wedding reception... he thought himself happy to be the possessor of a couple of matchboard cabins under the roof, hot in summer, cold in winter, in which he could not speak above a whisper without being overheard by his neighbours, and permanently foetid with the stench of the neighbouring latrines. " (Lewis 47). Just having multiple rooms was a luxury at Versailles. Everything was determined by blood and rank.

When entering into a room only ushers were allowed to open doors and the people must enter in order of importance. During Louis XIV's reign, status was accompanied by the gratuitous need to offend and humiliate (Gramont 255). Rank determined the chairs in which one could sit and what duties they could perform for the King. People gained honors through their lineage and what lands they possessed. Both the old feudal titles and created titles were always associated with land and the titles could be bought and sold with the fiefs, however King Louis XIV was the first to create titles without land, or "titres de pur honneur" (Velde).

Etiquette is sure to exist for the rest of human civilization, probably never returning to the height the French took it too, but still helping people understand what is acceptable in polite society. The 17th century French royal court epitomizes etiquette as Louis XIV epitomizes absolutism. He remained a dedicated servant to appropriate manners and even on his deathbed "decreed the length of the trains the ladies of the court would wear at his funeral" (Gramont 301). Works Cited Arditi, Jorge.

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