

# Clio's Scroll



The Berkeley Undergraduate History Journal  
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## STAFF 2012-2013

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## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We are proud to present the Fall 2012 issue of *Clio's Scroll*, which focuses the politics and power dynamics of three very different periods and locations in European history. With topics ranging from the eunuchs of ancient Mediterranean to the witches of the Holy Roman Empire and the courtiers of the French Sun King, these authors contribute to our understanding of the inner workings of these historical communities.

Each work investigates a topic that required extensive research. The authors worked to surpass superficial understandings of such research, and were chosen for their ability to deliver a unique perspective. We feel that all three pieces delve into themes that have an air of mystery about them and we hope that you enjoy uncovering these ancient stories.

Lastly, we are incredibly grateful for the hard work and feedback of our excellent associate editors, as well as the talented authors and those at *Zee Zee Copy* for collaborating with us. We would also like to thank Leah Flanagan for all her guidance, and the UC Berkeley History Department for its support.

Sincerely,  
The Editors

SEX AND THE ANCIENT WORLD: THE  
ADAPTIVE & MALADAPTIVE NATURE OF  
EUNUCHS IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

By Reagen Dozier

Reproduction was so essential to ancient civilizations, particularly upper class citizens, not only because they needed the largest population attainable to win wars against each other, but due to the necessity of having heirs inherit social status and land. One of Megakles' charges against Peisistratos, the tyrant of Athens, for being a "bad" ruler was his deviant sexual practices with his wife.<sup>1</sup> According to Herodotus in his *Histories*, the sexual act was considered "indecent" because it made his wife unable to bear his children, and thus, have a legitimate claim for the inheritance of their father's social status and land.<sup>2</sup> Similarly to the Hellenes, the ancient Romans also viewed reproduction as a way to preserve their society through inheritance. Roman general, statesman, and censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus

1 Robert B. Strassler, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), (Hdt. 1.61).

2 Ibid.

asserted that, “Since nature has so decreed that we cannot manage comfortably with [our wives], nor live in any way without them, we must plan for our lasting preservation rather than for our temporary pleasure.”<sup>3</sup> And yet, large bodies of individuals, who were unable to contribute to procreation, and therefore should be seen as an unnecessary nuisance, were able to successfully survive within ancient civilizations due to the prevalence of the cultural practice of castration. These individuals were the eunuchs. This paper attempts to assert that the practice of castration in neither Herodotus’ account of Greek and Persian history nor ancient Roman history is a mode of punishment through humiliation, but rather a necessary competitive and exploitative cultural adaptation utilized by ancient societies to increase their fitness and their overall ability to successfully function in a patriarchal society. However as time passed, eunuchs became maladaptive as the ancient world began to face depopulation because upper class males initiated voluntary exclusion from reproductive activities. In order to assess eunuchs’ adaptability in ancient societies, patriarchy must first be defined and the reason for why the ancient Greeks and Romans practiced the cultural system of patriarchy must be established.

As Macedonicus implied in his statement, in order for the Romans to facilitate procreation, an entire cultural system had to be created around reproduction rather than pleasure. This system was patriarchy. Philip Longman in his article “The Return of Patriarchy” defines patriarchy as not simply a system in which men rule, but rather, “a particular value system that...requires men to marry but to marry a woman of proper station...to keep birthrates high among the affluent, while also maximizing parents’ investments in their children.”<sup>4</sup> Patriarchy is adaptive for ancient societies because it gave men and women clearly defined gender roles and responsibilities that would ultimately facilitate

successful procreation. Since patriarchal systems vary according to each civilization, the gender roles and responsibilities for the ancient Greeks and Romans will be simplified for this paper. Essentially, in their ancient societies, the male’s role was to be the dominant figurehead of the household while the female’s role was to be dependent on him. Although a comedy, Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* showed that women’s role in a patriarchal society was not simply to be subjugated by her husband: she had the essential responsibility of managing the household. This can be seen when Lysistrata was growing impatient waiting for the women to gather at their meeting place and Cleonice responded, “It’s not easy, you know for women to leave the house. One is busy pottering about her husband; another is getting the servant up; a third is putting her child asleep or washing the brat or feeding it.”<sup>5</sup> Upper class men, on the other hand, handled the public affairs of the family: joining military campaigns, participating in hereditary associations (phraties), and in elected or appointed office positions.<sup>6</sup> Both had the responsibility of reproducing as many times as possible but the cultural system of patriarchy would force females to procreate only with her husband since her husband would only invest his attentions to his legitimate children. The adaptation, as Longman points out, keeps a woman dependent on her husband and ensures she bears only his offspring.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, because the system entirely depends on males’ conception and inheritance of their fathers’ responsibilities, husbands would want their wives to bear children until a son is born.

But the creation of patriarchal societies as defined by Longman left castrated eunuchs, who were seen by the ancient Greeks and Romans as no longer being male, without a role in

5 Aristophanes. *Lysistrata*. <http://drama.eserver.org/plays/classical/aristophanes/lysistrata.txt>.

6 *Oxford Classic Dictionary*. s.v. “Children.” [http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/children?region=us&q=children](http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/children?region=us&q=children)

7 Longman, “The Return of Patriarchy.” 3.

3 Phillip Longman, “The Return of Patriarchy,” New America Foundation (2006).

4 Ibid.

their civilizations. In order to reconcile the prevalence of eunuchs in ancient societies with Longman's theory of a patriarchal society as the most adaptive cultural system to adopt, Walter Scheidel's male fitness-enhancing theory from his paper, "Sex and Empire" must be examined. Scheidel asserts "competitive and exploitative strategies were ultimately grounded in evolved fitness-enhancing behavioral propensities would on average tend to increase actual fitness."<sup>8</sup> This meant if a competitive and exploitative strategy facilitates male fitness that leads them to better reproduce then it is adaptive because it increased the probability of procreation.

Before castration can be assessed as being a competitive and exploitive strategy first the terms "competitive strategy" and "exploitive strategy" have to be defined according to Scheidel's male fitness-enhancing theory. For Scheidel, a competitive strategy is an action which allows an individual to successfully compete for mates since reproduction is the deciding factor for competition for resources.<sup>9</sup> He asserts that a successful competitive strategy must allow "males [to] increase their reproductive success significantly by depriving competitors of mating opportunities."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if a plan facilitates an increase in successful procreation by decreasing another male's reproductive opportunity then it would be considered a competitive strategy.

Similarly to competitive strategy, an exploitive strategy is also a plan that allows males to compete for females, but with the addition of being able to manipulate their power to gain mates.<sup>11</sup> For Scheidel, ancient imperialism led to access to females because the more power an ancient civilization had the more resources it was able to obtain; ultimately in exploitative strategies, "competition over females should give way to competition over

material resources."<sup>12</sup> Although Scheidel is accurate that there is a link between access to resources through ancient imperialism and access to females, he does not factor in humans as being resources. It can be reasonably assumed in ancient civilizations with large amounts of slaves that humans were an invaluable resource. So for this paper, the term exploitative strategy will include humans as resources rather than just materials.

It is important to also note that Scheidel's theory was created to assess why polygamous and concubine relationships were necessary in ancient societies. However, his theory can still be utilized with eunuchs since castrated males are also a part of this extra group of people who are outside patriarchal rules. Polygamous interactions are not necessarily outside of patriarchal rules since Longman does not mention the need for a male to have only one wife; however, concubine relationships were outside of Longman's theory of patriarchy because they result in illegitimate children that males would not feel the need to invest in. Therefore, Scheidel's theory of male fitness-enhancing can be utilized with eunuchs to attempt to explain their adaptive role in ancient societies. To assess if eunuchs were adaptive to ancient civilizations, first the competitive strategy it created must be determined.

When ancient societies competed against one another, castration was a competitive strategy because it deprived competitors from mating opportunities in three ways: fear, elimination of males from the gene pool, and it stimulated the non-castrated males "warlike virtues". In order to ascertain that castration was used to incite anxiety in civilizations, first the ancient societies' attitudes towards emasculation must be established. Castration was seen as the ultimate form of degradation for males in ancient civilizations. The ancient Romans, in particular, viewed eunuchs as unnatural since they went against their belief that the father was the root of "fertility

8 Walter Scheidel, "Sex and Empire: A Darwinian Perspective," *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, ed. Ian Morris, Walter Scheidel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 53.

9 Scheidel, "Sex and Empire," 3.

10 Ibid.

11 Scheidel, "Sex and Empire," 6.

12 Ibid.



and potency.”<sup>13</sup> Ancient Romans feared the practice of castration so much that when Cybele was accepted into the state cult in 204 B.C. the senate “took immediate measures to keep the cult tightly restricted. It was placed under close supervision of the priests who dealt with the Sibylline book, and no Roman citizens were allowed to become Galli” in order to protect their people from following this practice and willingly castrating themselves.<sup>14</sup> This fear of castration or the spread of castration could be used as a competitive strategy by threatening a foreign competitor with this action if they did not follow their orders.

Castration as tool to dominate foreign societies can be seen in Herodotus when the Persian generals stated to the Ionians, “We ask each of you to try to detach your former citizens from the rest of the allied Ionian force...But if they refuse to follow this advice and still prefer to engage us in battle despite our offer, then issue the following threat to them...we shall lead them into captivity as slaves, and we shall turn their sons into eunuchs.”<sup>15</sup> As Herodotus showed, the Persians had no problem with castration as a way to establish fear. The most interesting part about this passage would be the completely subjective way that Herodotus detailed the speech. He made the threat of castration seem like just a regular occurrence between the ancient societies because he ended the speech very simply with no outraged cry from the Ionian tyrants. Herodotus actually made the Ionians appear to be foolish for not heeding the Persians warning by stating that the Ionians “maintained a stubborn disdain and refused to turn traitor.”<sup>16</sup> Herodotus was slightly chastising the Ionians by insinuating that they should have cared more about their sons being turned into eunuchs and being unable to continue to reproduce rather than their pride. Due to the Ionians’ refusal to

subjugate themselves to the Persians, the Persians were able to gain three advantages from utilizing castration as a competitive strategy that would facilitate their society’s survival.

The first advantage was the elimination of males from the gene pool which would lead to the depopulation of the Ionians. With all the “handsome boys” castrated, the Persians made the probability of the upper class Ionians ability to procreate in later generations drop significantly if not entirely. This meant that the Ionians would be forced to base the survival of their ethnic group on the lower class Ionians or the older generation of upper class Ionian women to rapidly reproduce to replace the sons that had been castrated. By forcefully removing Ionian males from the gene pool this meant that the Persians would have more access to their females and the ability to further spread their ethnic group.

The second advantage was the spread of Persia’s ethnic group by taking the Ionians’ virgins. At first glance this does not appear to be an advantage related to castration as a competitive strategy, but it is. As the older males die from war or disease, the new generation of men have to be able to protect the upper class virgins from foreign invasions, but if that particular generation of males are removed from the patriarchal system by castration then it leaves upper class virgins available for pilfering. For the ancient Greeks, guarding women was so important that a separate magistracy for the state was created with the sole purpose of guarding women.<sup>17</sup> Without able-bodied men to protect the Ionians women then the Persians would be able to capture Ionian women whenever they needed. Essentially, eunuchs lower the amount of men who are now competing for female attention. The non-castrated males have a higher probability to procreate with the females that still reside in the society.

The third advantage the Persians gained from using castration was it made them stimulate their “warlike virtues.”

17 Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.38-7.40.

13 Walter Stevenson, “The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (1995), 498.

14 Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 399.

15 Strassler, *The Landmark Herodotus*, (Hdt. 6.9).

16 Strassler, *The Landmark Herodotus*, (Hdt. 6.10).

Aristotle asserted that laws that stimulate “warlike virtues” were an important aspect of ancient civilizations because they would help the societies’ soldiers to remain in a constant state of war preparation and honor would only be granted from their military conquests over competitors.<sup>18</sup> Castration was linked with increasing “warlike virtues” because it was the ultimate way to show that a civilization dominated their competitors by forcing their males to live, but in a subservient role. The amount of eunuchs that are left after a battle could be seen as a war trophy. This may seem vicious, but if the war trophies from other ancient societies are compared to eunuchs as trophies then it would be quite tame. Some war trophies for the Scythians, for example, were cloaks made from the skin of their enemies, skin handkerchiefs “which he proudly attaches to the bridle of his horse”, hands from corpses for quivers, and skulls as drinking cups.<sup>19</sup> Although the Scythians presented an extreme example of war trophies, the ancient Greeks, Persians, and Romans also took trophies to commemorate their battles. The war trophies they would take would be material resources, slaves, and women. It could reasonably be assumed that eunuchs could be seen as war trophies. Castrated males then could be used to display a non-castrated males’ fitness because it would show their military valor and strength in contrast. Both these traits are what upper class fathers look for when seeking mating opportunities for their daughters. Therefore, castration as a competitive strategy helped to increase non-castrated males’ overall fitness and enable them to gain more opportunities to mate with females. Castration was not only used as a competitive strategy, it was also used as an exploitative strategy.

Castration was also an important exploitive tool because it made men lose their identities in their patriarchal society. Walter Stevenson in his article, “The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity” emphasized the importance of males retaining their

reproductive organs when he stated, “Romans thought that the survival of the family, and hence the society, relied not only on the fertility of the father to generate children...but also for his fertility to infuse the crops, cattle, sheep and swine, this genius demanded the highest respect.”<sup>20</sup> As Stevenson pointed out, in a patriarchal society like ancient Rome, a male’s entire identity and his agriculture stemmed from his virility. By castrating a male, the opponent is essentially stealing his identity and destroying his way of life. This is an important adaptive practice because the males in the ancient societies controlled the socio-economic and political practices of their society. If the males are castrated after a battle then that society’s whole patriarchal system comes crashing down and internal warfare insures. With internal warfare occurring, the castrator’s society would be able to invade and conquer the society. Even Aristotle in his *Politics* warned against the “disproportionate increase in any part of the state” because it could cause political revolutions.<sup>21</sup> The disproportionate amount of males who are able to procreate in relation to the amount that are captured and made into eunuchs would disrupt the balance of the state and cause a revolution.

In societies that follow the cultural system of patriarchy, when a male loses his reproductive organs he is no longer associated with that gender and without explicit rules stating his responsibilities then he can be exploited and dominated by non-castrated males to fulfill a variety of roles that are outside sexuality rules. The practice of eunuchs undertaking responsibilities that were outside sexuality rules can be seen throughout Herodotus’ account. Hermotimos, a Padasian, “went to the King’s court along with other gifts being sent there and as time went on he became the most honored of the eunuchs in the court of Xerxes.”<sup>22</sup> Eunuchs were also expected to watch over the royal harem, “thus, 500 castrated boys were reportedly

20 Stevenson, “The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” 496.

21 Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, 5.34-5.35.

22 Strassler, *The Landmark Herodotus*, (Hdt. 8.105).

18 Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, 7.10-7.15.

19 Strassler, *The Landmark Herodotus*, (Hdt. 4.64-4.65).

included in Babylonia's annual tribute to the early Achaemenid court."<sup>23</sup> Considering how distasteful the act of castration was seen, it is interesting that the most prominent of responsibilities the eunuchs undertook was with royalty. Even the eunuchs in Rome were politically powerful as a high-ranking official under Caracalla named Sempronius Rufus was a eunuch.<sup>24</sup> Herodotus believed that the reason why eunuchs were able to become royal messengers or enjoy positions very close to the ruler was because eunuchs were seen as "more valuable than males with testicles because of their trustworthiness and fidelity."<sup>25</sup> For the ancient civilizations because the eunuchs did not have a family or the ability to make a family then the only person that a eunuch would be loyal to would be his master. The functionality of eunuchs would be that royalty could confide in the eunuchs without fearing an attempt on their life due to their own political agendas. Therefore, eunuchs were adaptive because they fulfilled the responsibility of loyal servant which allowed the non-castrated males to focus their attentions away from political betrayal by their servants, but towards revolutions caused outside their inner circle. Plus, the royalty would not have to worry about eunuchs impregnating their wives even though they had easy access to them. However as time passed, eunuchs functionality diminished.

The main maladaptive problem with eunuchs was that eunuchs could not reproduce to sustain themselves and the only way to create more eunuchs was to castrate males and remove them from the reproductive pool. This was not an issue until ancient civilizations began to be unable to reproduce successfully and depopulation became prevalent. The upper class ancient Romans, in particular, began to become depopulated as privileged Roman males wanted to remain a bachelor because of the responsibilities of being a patriarch were so immense.<sup>26</sup>

This meant that the ancient Romans were now deliberately removing themselves from the reproduction cycle rather than being forcibly removed like they were for eunuchs. Therefore, it was the voluntary removal of ancient upper class males from the act of reproduction that made eunuchs become detrimental to ancient societies.

In ancient societies, reproduction was essential for keeping populations high and for continuing lineages; however, the absence of the ability to have sex for procreation like in the case of the eunuchs also was an important cultural adaptation for ancient societies to successfully survive. The castration of males allowed foreign invaders to devastate the castrated society by leading it to depopulation and revolution. Furthermore, the acquisition of eunuchs proved to be an important tool because the eunuchs could serve a variety of roles that are outside the patriarchal societies defined gender roles and responsibilities. But as the upper class members of the ancient societies voluntarily began extracting themselves from the gene pool rather than being forced to leave, eunuchs became maladaptive since they could not contribute to the repopulation of a civilization. It is the voluntary reproductive exclusion that men began to practice in the ancient world that has made the need for eunuchs extinct.

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23 Scheidel, "Sex and Empire," 24.

24 Stevenson, "The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity," 506.

25 Strassler, *The Landmark Herodotus*, (Hdt. 8.105).

26 Longman, "The Return of Patriarchy," 5.

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## THE LANGUAGE OF POWER: HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS IN THE STORY OF VATEL’S DEATH

By Joanna Caytas\*

*Pour vivre heureux, vivons cachés.*<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian (Le Grillon)

(1755-1794)

### ABSTRACT

Absent encryption conveniently practicable in everyday life, and given ubiquitous informers and treachery by trusted recipients, even privileged courtiers of Louis XIV were at constant risk of losing royal favor – and worse – unless they strictly observed the language and spin reflective of how 17<sup>th</sup> century absolutist sovereigns, but most prominently Louis XIV,

\*I am grateful to Professor David Kornhaber, currently University of Texas at Austin, for advice and discussion on this article.

1 [*In order to live happily, live in hiding*].

pleased events to be projected. Such royal concern for uniform interpretation and presentation was an early implicit admission of one reality that, two sovereigns later, led to the revolution of 1789: “The pen is mightier than the sword.” Not until the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was theatrical, politically correct use of language and strict observance of party lines in ‘public transcripts’ of comparable importance to socio-political survival. The same was true of speech and of behavior in communication between different social classes. Understandably, this could not serve the purposes of meaningful and factually accurate communication. It needed to be supplemented by ‘hidden transcripts’ that at least conferred the information that the ‘public transcript’ was for official consumption only and deviated significantly from the truth, in matters that served royal or other dominant interests. Sophisticated analytical skills and contextual knowledge became requisites *de rigueur* to accurately read whatever was conveyed, where omissions became just as significant as affirmative statements. At the same time, constant negotiation flowed between public and hidden transcripts, increasing transaction cost in terms of time and accuracy of interpretation, presaging the events of 1879 with some inevitability. This paper shows these contrasts by the example of two letters of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné, to her daughter, Mme de Grignan, about a royal visit to Chantilly.

The story of the death of François Vatel, famous steward and chef of the Prince de Condé under the reign of Louis XIV,<sup>2</sup> is a noteworthy example of popular news that shaped the reality and discourse of contemporary French aristocracy but was not deemed worthy of mention in the state gazette. Very few primary sources reported the death of Vatel, and none of them belonged to the official publications of the seventeenth century. However, one account particularly stands out among them: the letters of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné,<sup>3</sup> to her daughter, Mme de Grignan,<sup>4</sup> concerning the royal visit to Chantilly. Mme de Sévigné’s approximately 1120 surviving

2 1638-1715, king of France and Navarra 1643-1715. See Bordonove, Georges. *Les Rois qui ont fait la France, Louis XIV, Roi Soleil*. Paris: Pygmalion (1983).

3 Born 1626 as Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, daughter of a somewhat impoverished officer of ancient Burgundy aristocracy who had married a banker’s daughter of recent nobility, she was orphaned early but inherited some wealth from her maternal family which allowed her to marry Marquis Henri de Sévigné, scion of old nobility from Brittany. After Mme Sévigné bore a daughter, Françoise, and a son, Charles, her husband died from injuries sustained in a duel. Mme Sévigné almost single-handedly created letters as a literary form of art beyond antiquity. Later, her epistolary oeuvre came to play a major role in Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Kraus, Gerlinde. *Bedeutende Französinen - Christine de Pizan, Émilie du Châtelet, Madame de Sévigné, Germaine de Staël, Olympe de Gouges, Madame Roland, George Sand, Simone de Beauvoir* (Mühlheim am Main / Norderstedt: Schröder Verlag, 2006); Freidel, Nathalie. *La Conquête de l’intime. Public et privé dans la Correspondance de Madame de Sévigné* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009); and FitzGerald, Edward. *Dictionary of Madame de Sévigné*. London: Macmillan (1914).

4 Françoise de Grignan was married to François Adhémar de Monteil, comte de Grignan, lieutenant governor of Provence, as his third wife and lived mostly at Aix or at château Grignan near Grignan by Montélimar. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, ed. by Chisholm, Hugh (11th ed., Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1911).

letters<sup>5</sup> came to be considered part of classical French literature. Interestingly enough, a comparison between two consecutive letters reveals two different angles to Vatel's story. On the very day of receiving the news, she presents Vatel as a hero and a man of exceptional honor. Yet, a few days later, he is just 'le pauvre Vatel,'<sup>6</sup> stripped of all glory. One question arises, then: What caused this change in Mme de Sévigné's written report? Michèle Longino Farrell sheds some contextual light on the realities of life at the French court under Louis XIV. Although, only the theory of James C. Scott<sup>7</sup> reveals that it was, in fact, the dynamic of the power structure of that era that forced Mme de Sévigné to write a very different story only two days later.

Mme de Sévigné was one of the political figures deeply entrenched in the daily intrigues surrounding the reign of Louis XIV. As such, she closely followed court news, especially those pertaining to the interactions of the king with former dissidents, some of whom tried to regain the favor of the sovereign, often by means of lavish displays of loyalty. The visit of Louis XIV to Chantilly was especially laden with political tension, because

5 Although only about 5% of her letters currently exist as autographs, extensive scholarship has been devoted to the remarkably prolific literary oeuvre of Mme de Sévigné. It was perhaps best summarized in recent years by Roger Duchêne and his wife Jacqueline. See, e.g., Duchêne, Roger. *Madame de Sévigné* (rééd. revue et augmentée de *Mme de Sévigné ou la chance d'être femme*). Paris: Fayard (2002); *Correspondance*, Nouvelle édition, éd. Roger Duchêne. Paris: Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' (1972-1978); Id., *Chère Madame de Sévigné*. Paris: Découvertes Gallimard (1995); also Duchêne, Jacqueline et Roger. *Qui êtes-vous Madame de Sévigné ?* Marseille: Centre Méridional de Recherche sur le XVIIe Siècle (1995); and Duchêne, Roger, réunies par Wolfgang Leiner. *La veuve au XVIIe siècle*. Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag; Paris: J.M. Place (1992).

6 [*poor Vatel*] Farrell, Michèle Longino. 'Writing Letters, Telling Tales, Making History: Vatel's Death Told and Retold.' *The French Review*, 66/2 (Dec., 1992), 229-242, at 236. Farrell apparently makes reference here to *Oeuvres de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, Lettres (1646-1696)* (Paris: première édition clandestine, 1725), 47. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

7 Scott, James C. 'Behind the Official Story', in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1-16.

the host, the Prince de Condé, and his steward Vatel had both been involved in previous political scandals that could still cause certain repercussions for their standing at court. Mme de Sévigné was a personal friend of both, and also a former member of the very same dissident group.<sup>8</sup>

The first story Mme de Sévigné related was part of her regular weekly letter relating court news to her daughter who was sojourning in Provence at the time. The missive talks first about royal travels and other court matters and even includes some compliments about the king. The evening amendment to the letter tries to continue in the vein of predictable royal ceremonies and describes the success of the celebrations held at Chantilly ('tout alla à merveille,'<sup>9</sup> only to break the news: 'the implausible (...) has happened.'<sup>10</sup> 'Le grand Vatel,'<sup>11</sup> a famous maître d'hôtel, a celebrity among nobles and a man of exceptional qualities ('cet homme d'une capacité distinguée de toutes les autres'<sup>12</sup>), has committed suicide. As a highly reputed and well-experienced organizer of major celebrations, Vatel could not bear to face the disaster of having no fish available for the royal banquet on a Friday, and preferred death to the impending disgrace for so utterly failing his duties to his master, the Prince de Condé ('... n'a pu souffrir l'affront qu'il a vu qui l'allait accabler'<sup>13</sup>). Mme de Sévigné then goes on to describe her own confusion ('je ne puis me remettre'<sup>14</sup>) and consternated desperation over the tragedy ('un si terrible accident'<sup>15</sup>). She also speculates about the ruinous

8 The *fronde* had attempted 1648-52 an aristocratic insurrection against Louis XIV's reigning (prime) minister Jules cardinal Mazarin, Duc de Nevers et Rethel. Cf. Bertiére, Simone. *Mazarin: le maître du jeu* (Paris: Fallois, 2007).

9 [*everything went wonderfully*]. Farrell, 'Writing Letters', 232.

10 Farrell, 'Writing Letters', 234.

11 [*the great Vatel*]. Farrell, 'Writing Letters', p. 232.

12 [*this man of extraordinary abilities*]. Ibid., 232.

13 [*He could not bear the indignity that was going to befall him*]. Ibid., 232.

14 [*I have trouble recovering from this*]. Ibid., 232.

15 [*such a terrible accident*]. Ibid., 232.

impact Vatel's suicide will have on the costly festivities in the king's honor: 'c'est une chose fâcheuse à une fête de mille écus.'<sup>16</sup>

The second letter of Mme de Sévigné on the same subject, however, takes a markedly different attitude towards the incident. It starts with a disclaimer that, in fact, it is not a letter, but a story ('Ce n'est pas une lettre, c'est une relation'<sup>17</sup>). Mme de Sévigné then provides a well-balanced narrative of the events of the day. This time, the festivities are not as spectacular as in the first description: 'le rôti manqué,'<sup>18</sup> 'le feu d'artifice ne réussit pas,'<sup>19</sup> and the king's person takes the center of the story. Vatel on his part is presented as an exhausted, overwhelmed, devout servant ('La tête me tourne, il y a douze nuits que je n'ai dormi'<sup>20</sup>), who takes his duties much too seriously, to the point of being ridiculed by his own assistant, Gourville ('Gourville se moqua de lui'<sup>21</sup>). Vatel's concerns appear almost obsessive, to the point where his master has to intervene to mollify him – 'ne vous fâchez point, tout va bien'<sup>22</sup> – though all to no avail. A minor incident of uncertain delivery of seafood supplies drives Vatel to the point of losing his mind altogether: he retires to his room and persistently stabs himself with his sword until he dies. The news reaches the king who takes control of the situation by pointing out the senselessness of Vatel's death to his entourage, and then issues a few directives to prevent future disruptions ('il ne devait avoir que deux tables'<sup>23</sup>). Vatel is replaced by his former deputy Gourville, and the celebrations continue uninterrupted for the next few days, as successful as ever: 'on dîna très bien,'<sup>24</sup>

16 [*that is an annoying thing at a feast {the cost of which ran as high as} one thousand crowns*]. Ibid., 232.

17 [*It is not a letter, it is a report*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 235.

18 [*there was not enough roast meat*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 232.

19 [*the fireworks did not work*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 233.

20 [*I feel dizzy, I did not sleep for twelve nights*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 232.

21 [*Gourville made fun of him*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 233.

22 [*don't be upset, everything is all right*]. Ibid., 233.

23 [*there should be no more than two tables*]. Ibid., 233.

24 [*they dined very well*]. Ibid., 233.

'[t]out était parfumé de jonquilles, tout était enchanté.'<sup>25</sup>

The stark contrast between these two versions cannot possibly be overlooked: In one letter, Vatel is cast as a heroic figure almost eclipsing the king, an embodiment of noble values such as honor and service ('... c'est enfin Vatel, le grand Vatel, ... cet homme d'une capacité distinguée de toutes les autres, dont la bonne tête était capable de soutenir tout le soin d'un État.'<sup>26</sup> In the other letter, Vatel is portrayed as just a pitiable pawn in the greater social scheme – his death a bothersome disturbance to the sublime enjoyment of royalty ('on ... blâma son courage'<sup>27</sup>). In fact, his suicide is deemed almost equivalent to disloyalty; his function, after all, had been to serve, not to scrutinize and judge. 'Thus suicide can be construed as an act of sedition:'<sup>28</sup> by inflicting death upon himself, Vatel, in a way, usurped an important part of the authority of the sovereign who is the fount of honor,<sup>29</sup> the ultimate judge of who is to be punished and who is to be rewarded.

Something most unusual must have happened during the two days between the writing of these two letters by Mme de Sévigné to cause such a drastic change in opinion? 'Given the pattern of her life as discernible throughout her correspondence, it is most unlikely that she spent the day alone in Paris and that she did not discuss the news.'<sup>30</sup> As a well-versed Parisian socialite and courtier of her day, Mme de Sévigné took quite an active interest in the salon scene and its fertile gossip. Farrell speculates that this period of time served not only to obtain more information about the incident, but also to confer with other nobles about a proper interpretation of the events: 'Hence, it is probable that

25 [*Everything smelled of daffodils, everything was enchanting*]. Ibid., 233.

26 [*this is, after all, Vatel, the great Vatel ... this man of distinguished ability above all others, whose fine head was capable of supporting all the cares of a state*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 232.

27 [*they blamed his courage*]. Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 232.

28 Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 236.

29 Which the crown is to the present day in Britain or in Spain.

30 Farell, 'Writing Letters,' 235.

in the interim of Saturday she has processed the story in the company of her friends, settled on a version, decided on an interpretation ...<sup>31</sup> In this manner, the aristocracy at court could agree on a uniform story before presenting it to the province. Yet we also learn that the outcome was in reality a version of the story decided upon by Louis XIV himself: 'It briefly caught the imagination of an aristocracy avid for nurturing stories of a fast-disappearing heroism of the individual, but was quickly and effectively repressed by the king.'<sup>32</sup> Thus, the second story related to Mme de Grignan was actually the official version of the events.

This raises the question why Mme de Sévigné sent to a person as close as her own daughter an altered, official account of Vatel's death. Farrell remains ambiguous about it ('Sévigné's position on this story is undecidable.'<sup>33</sup>). Either the mother now believed in the new version of the events as she relayed them, or else, as her ostentatious lack of comment suggests, she did not really agree with the correction, but for an unrevealed reason decided to forward it to Mme de Grignan:

I can read Sévigné as falling obediently in line with the world as it is structured around Louis XIV, and reporting the shape of that world to her daughter; or I can read her as engaging in self-censorship, biting her tongue, holding her peace where she might like to object more explicitly to the way the tragedy is swept under the carpet.<sup>34</sup>

Referring to James C. Scott's essay 'Behind the Official Story' may shed more light on the mechanisms at work behind Mme de Sévigné's decision. Scott analyzes at length the dynamics of power relations and introduces two notions: that of the public transcript and another, of the hidden transcript.

By his definitions, the public transcript is 'a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.'<sup>35</sup> Conversely '[i]f subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a *public transcript*, I shall use the term *hidden transcript* to characterize discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders [*sic*].'<sup>36</sup> Public transcript refers then to the acts of upholding the fictitious version of reality by both sides of the power structure, the rulers and the ruled. It is in the interest of the rulers to maintain the appearance of their superiority over the subordinates in order to preserve their own privileged positions; it is also in the interest of the ruled to adhere to the policy delineated by their dominants in order to avoid potential repercussions (such as loss of favor or punishment).<sup>37</sup> However, Scott argues that it is impossible for individuals to uphold the public transcript at all times, so the parties involved need an outlet for their real feelings and actions which happens in the privacy of the hidden transcript. That explains the behavior of the opposite class when out of sight: slaves conspiring, workers cursing, but also invaders relaxing and strict leaders indulging. Collective interactions between the dominant and the subordinate classes, or the exchange of their respective public transcripts, constitute the outward appearance of reality.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, all that is only a part of reality – the other portion occurs in the hidden transcript unavailable to the opposing groups. Thus, each group, the rulers and the ruled, know only their own half of the reality, and can at most suspect the reality or the hidden transcript of the opposite class. Only

35 Scott, 'Behind the Official Story,' 2.

36 Scott, 'Behind the Official Story,' 4.

37 See also Nies, Fritz. *Les lettres de Madame de Sévigné, Conventions du genre et sociologie des publics* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1992).

38 Where Émile Durkheim wants to explain social facts, he says metaphorically that the air is no less heavy because we do not detect its weight - one cannot escape from the material force of ideology. Nowhere is that paradigm less refutable than in absolutism, and in modern totalitarian regimes modeled after it.

31 Ibid., 235.

32 Farrell, 'Writing Letters,' 237.

33 Farrell, 'Writing Letters,' 238.

34 Farrell, 'Writing Letters,' 239.



an outside observer with intimate access to both groups can estimate the reality behind these theatrical public exchanges.<sup>39</sup> Scott finds particular significance in ‘the first public declaration of the hidden transcript’ and thereby creates a rather clear distinction between dominant and dominated discourse. At the outset of his work he comments that ‘the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle,’<sup>40</sup> but he does not proceed to analyze the matter further. Nor does he elaborate on the interactions between the public transcript and the hidden transcript. Still, if we look deeper, Scott’s analysis ultimately relies on Foucault’s view of dominant discourse and multiplicity of excluded discourses, and therefore on a plurality of resistances. Foucault says that discourse both ‘transmits and produces power,’ while discourse is also itself an ‘effect’ of power, and ‘where there is power, there is resistance.’<sup>41</sup> This is where Scott departs from Foucault. He does not take into account that ‘we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between ... the dominant discourse and the dominated one.’<sup>42</sup>

17<sup>th</sup> century French monarchy was an extreme rendition of an unequal power structure. One person had absolute authority unrestrained by laws or other human beings. The ruling class was, in fact, limited to a single individual,<sup>43</sup> and, although society was hierarchically structured, that one person could elevate people to positions of prestige and wealth at will or, on the contrary, deprive them of honors, privileges,

39 See Freidel, *La Conquête de l'intime*, 2009.

40 Scott, ‘Behind the Official Story,’ 14.

41 Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 95, 100, 101.

42 Ibid. 95-101.

43 For that it matters not that Louis XIV’s immortal dictum, ‘L’État, c’est moi,’ the summary of absolutism, is very likely apocryphal. For the longest-reigning king in European history (72 years and 110 days, followed by Franz Joseph I of Austria, 68 years, and Victoria of Great Britain, 63 years and 7 months) it was a fact in more than a figurative sense. See also Bordonove, Georges. *Les Rois qui ont fait la France, Louis XIV, Roi Soleil* (Paris: Pygmalion, 1983).

wealth and freedom.<sup>44</sup> In this way, the public transcript marred all interactions by and between the courtiers of the Sun King; they needed to observe official policy in order to preserve their status. In fact, the public transcript under Louis XIV became so conspicuous in its ritualized supremacy of the king that, ‘[a]s the dix-septième Jean-Jacques Demorest puts it: ‘le siècle lui-même s’est voulu théâtre.’<sup>45</sup>

The absolute aspect of the rule of Louis XIV meant that the private transcript of his subjects was limited to a minimum. Anybody could become an informant hoping for remuneration of his loyalty to the king; information could also fall into unscrupulous hands by chance. It is therefore entirely understandable that Mme de Sévigné would be very careful in expressing possible dissent in a written communication to her daughter.

Examining Mme de Sévigné’s letters from the perspective of Scott’s notions of private and public transcripts may help to remove some ambiguities left by the analysis of Michèle Farrell. Mme de Sévigné’s position was precarious in more than one respect: she, too, used to belong to the party of *frondeurs*,<sup>46</sup>

44 For Hannah Arendt, this is one of the origins of totalitarianism, but at the same time one is to assume that, even in 17<sup>th</sup> century absolutist France, there were at least some social constraints that could at least potentially be transformed by the acts of individuals, for example by the enactment and enforcement of privilege-conferring or oppressive laws, a modus that ultimately inaugurated 1789. In reality, there is a continuous comparison and exchange between the two transcripts that affects the form of any emerging social movement.

45 [*the whole century turned into theater*]. Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 230.

46 One of the witnesses to Mme Sévigné’s marriage had been Jean-François Paul de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz. After her husband’s death in a duel over the honor of one of his mistresses in 1651, Mme Sévigné lived in Gondi’s city palace. Soon after Gondi’s elevation to cardinal, Mazarin had arrested and incarcerated Gondi at Vincennes as a mastermind of the *fronde* in 1652. Another of her *frondeur* associations was her lifelong friend François VI, Duc de La Rochefoucauld, Prince de Marcillac, another writer of classical French literature. See Louis Madelin, *La Fronde* (Paris: Plon, 1931); and édition abrégée: *La Fronde* (Paris: Collection hier et aujourd’hui ‘Flammarion,’ 1936).

and, although pardoned by the king, she was still at risk of repercussions that would affect her whole family. She could not afford displaying anything but ‘the party line’<sup>47</sup> – and neither could her daughter. Therefore, an obvious private transcript had to be suppressed between the two.

In the first of Mme de Sévigné’s letters, the prevailing emotions are awe, distress, admiration, confusion, and an expectation of further complications. There, Mme de Sévigné takes a compassionate approach to the tragic death of Vatel, and expects others to react similarly (‘Vous pouvez penser l’horrible désordre qu’un si terrible accident a causé dans cette fête,’<sup>48</sup> and ‘Je ne doute pas que la confusion n’ait été grande.’<sup>49</sup>).

But by contrast, the second letter already assumes a considerably more neutral position. Here, Vatel’s death is just a minor incident in the greater scheme of things, an incident that does not in the least obstruct the continuing enjoyments of the ruling class. The festivities continue, and the inimitable genius of the maitre d’hôtel becomes disposable and instantly replaceable. The success of the royal visit at Chantilly is no longer attributed to the superhuman efforts of Vatel, but to the loyalty of the Prince de Condé to the king who is again the central figure of the narrative. Incidentally, it is significant to note that the public transcript was established and proliferated only once the ultimate authority had spoken. It is the interpretation of events presented by the king himself that becomes the official story. This profound remove in terms of levels of authority is further underscored by Farrell’s choice of words in commenting on this aspect of the account: ‘mere mortals’<sup>50</sup> follow the ‘majestic calm and generous prescience’<sup>51</sup> of their king.

Yet, Mme de Sévigné needed to find a way to forewarn

47 [You can imagine the horrible disturbance such a terrible accident caused at this feast]. Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 37.

48 [I do not doubt that the confusion was great]. Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 232.

49 Ibid., 232.

50 Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 237.

51 Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 236.

her daughter against committing political mistakes. Accordingly, she inserted the hidden transcript into an encoded message: she cautioned her daughter against other accounts of the story, and advised her to follow her mother’s version ‘not for its readability or even for its veracity, but for its simple legibility.’<sup>52</sup> Her lack of comment on the purported events is another clue that Mme de Sévigné used hidden transcript to communicate a message to her daughter. She ‘claims ... not to know how to end the story (‘Je jette mon bonnet par-dessus les moulins’).’<sup>53</sup> And yet, by warning against versions of the event that Mme de Grignan may hear from other sources, Mme de Sévigné uses her maternal authority to tell her daughter how to transmit the story to others. (‘Voilà ce que Moureuil m’a dit, pour vous mander’<sup>54</sup>).

It becomes readily understandable why Mme de Sévigné changed her account of Vatel’s death. She could not possibly risk discovery of her open disagreement with the version of history that had been presented by the king himself, and with the public transcript he expected his subjects – and certainly the members of his court and royal entourage – to follow. Mme de Sévigné’s own dissident past further weakened her position, and it even forced her to instruct her daughter in the current version of the story to keep them both safe in the intricate world of ongoing political intrigues. Through Mme de Grignan, her mother became a messenger of the court news to the provinces; she must have been aware that, even unwillingly, she was writing history – and it needed to be a version of history that her feared ruler had by now implicitly decreed. That does not mean, however, that Mme de Sévigné herself agreed with the public transcript. She was faced with an official version that left no place for individual effort and for suffering, indeed for any overt recognition of human value. The required report replaced focus on individualism with collective dedication of the subjects

52 Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 238.

53 [I am letting my hair down here]. Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 237.

54 [This is what Moureuil told me to convey to you]. Farrell, ‘Writing Letters,’ 233.

to the enjoyment of their ruler. Against individual feelings and opinions, the public transcript had been forced upon society, which also meant that Mme de Sévigné had to follow it – and in turn make others follow it as well.

Mme de Sévigné's conspicuous lack of personal comment becomes her hidden transcript, a mute protest against the callousness of despotism. She lived during a dangerous time when political correctness could, at least for someone in her position, turn into a question of survival, not just of mere convenience. Yet, even under the authoritarian regime of 17<sup>th</sup> century French monarchy, a careful observer could discern subtle signs of deeply muted dissent.<sup>55</sup> An analysis applying Scott's notions of hidden transcript as distinct from public transcript may prove an invaluable tool for studies of historic texts in general: considering not only what the sources say explicitly, but also how and to whom they say it, and, sometimes most importantly, what they choose to omit from their accounts may uncover depths of context and meaning buried in seemingly unambiguous reports. With this in mind, a historian can take into consideration how the existing power structure shaped public records, and read into the actual message's background and context hidden in the private transcripts of their sources.

Along with contextual background awareness, a contemporary reader needs to begin analyzing hidden transcripts of Louis XIV's era concerning its social, economic, political, military, technological, religious and educational environment – in short, the prevailing realities of its time. The standard method in comparative analysis, to assume that all factors unknown are to be presumed substantially similar to our own framework of reference, or similar to circumstances in other areas of occidental civilization, will likely fail us in this case. The 'golden age' was created by very few principals under the king; it was not found or

inherited, not coincidental and certainly not 'natural.'

In a culture that so completely divorced appearance from reality for the sake of the ultimately successful ambition to create a golden age, Louis XIV's personal provenance goes a long way to explain the events that resulted in the development of absolutism – dictatorship by divine right. Born out of the estranged marriage of Louis XIII and Spanish Habsburg princess Anna de Austria, he ascended to the throne barely age five upon his father's premature death 1643. His profoundly unpopular mother assumed regency until Louis reached majority and governed through Cardinal Richelieu's successor as prime minister, Cardinal Mazarin. Both Anna and Mazarin were viewed and detested as foreigners by French aristocracy and peasantry, a fact that led to the five-year insurrection known as *la Fronde*. The aristocracy rebelled against centralization of power in the hands of the sovereign engineered by Richelieu, while many members of the peasantry died from a serious famine. Louis was forced to flee the country several times and even saw his bedchamber invaded by a Parisian mob in 1651. He married his cousin, Spanish princess Marie-Thérèse de Austria to end a war with her father Philipp III that had predated his own birth by three years. Upon the death of Mazarin in 1661, Louis took all matters of government into his own hands at age 23, and over the next 15 years he divided and conquered the coalition of *frondeurs* by drawing the aristocratic element deeper into life at court which he turned into a chain of entertainment including regular gambling parties. Ostensibly in order to transform France into the center of intellectual, cultural, financial, military and industrial development of Europe, he kept actual and potential enemies busy by unending warfare against external foes, by building Versailles and numerous other royal palaces and castles to the near ruin of the treasury,<sup>56</sup> creating modern infrastructure that included a new road system, canals and ports for his ambitious economic restructuring to promote

55 The environment of 17<sup>th</sup> century Versailles had created a situation where everybody 'plays fool to catch wise.' Scott, 'Behind the Official Story', 3.

56 Compiled by Guiffrey, Jules. *Comptes des bâtiments du roi sous le règne de Louis XIV*. 5 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880-1890).

export of manufactured and artisanal goods at the expense of trading partners, and by reorganizing and expanding French naval forces, merchant marine and a pervasive and sophisticated network of police. Remarkably, he personally supervised every detail and controlled virtually everything of significance in France including public works, military campaigns, court fashion and even philosophical discourse. This led to the situation and general atmosphere so colorfully demonstrated in Mme de Sévigné's letters. In many ways, Louis' absolutist reign featured considerable parallels to modern-day post-Maoist China<sup>57</sup> that over the last 30 years produced a comparable 'economic miracle' through many of the same means generally characterized as mercantilism,<sup>58</sup> a unilateralist economic policy largely developed and perfected by Louis' finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert:<sup>59</sup> exploitation of an underclass toiling at minimum wages; export orientation at all cost; glamorous public works benefiting an upwardly mobile and increasingly sophisticated class that trades considerable increase in prosperity for acquiescence to far-reaching deprivation of liberty rights, particularly freedom of expression. The absolutist and mercantilist French *ancien régime* as well as the nominally 'communist' Chinese oligarchy accomplished this only at the expense of an enormous measure of inequality and, more importantly, by expending more on police, internal

57 Beginning with the "Beijing Spring" of 1977 inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping. Vogel, Ezra F. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011).

58 Mercantilism *inter alia* subsidized and encouraged exports while inhibiting or prohibiting imports, barred the export of gold or silver even for payment purposes, limited wages, encouraged the use of domestic resources, restricted domestic consumption, promoted industrial manufacturing including subsidies, pursued the acquisition of colonies while prohibiting their trade except with the motherland and on domestic ships to domestic staple ports. Robert B. Ekelund and Tollison, Robert D. *Mercantilism as a Rent-Seeking Society: Economic Regulation in Historical Perspective* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1981).

59 1619-1683, Minister of Finance 1665 - 1683. See Ames, Glenn J. *Colbert, Mercantilism, and the French Quest for Asian Trade* (De Kalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

security and the control of dissent than the amounts it devoted to military expansion, prestige and grandeur. However, as a result, French language, culture, etiquette and fashion became adopted by aristocrats all over Europe as the gold standard of sophistication, not only in its day but throughout centuries, extending its importance to whatever is left in present days. Voltaire<sup>60</sup> compared Louis to a Roman emperor, acknowledging 1751 that "his name can never be pronounced without respect and without summoning the image of an eternally memorable age."<sup>61</sup> It is no coincidence that Frederick the Great<sup>62</sup> who carried on for many years a most enlightened correspondence with Voltaire, himself a victim of Louis' censorship and confiscation of his own printed works, earned his place in history by one royal dictum in a letter to Voltaire that became the battle cry of the enduring struggle for freedom of expression in occidental civilization (and the First Amendment): 'Gazetten dürfen, so sie delectieren sollen, nicht genieret werden.'<sup>63</sup>

Looking at life at the court of the *roi soleil* as reflected in the vignette of Mme. de Sévigné's intimate correspondence to her daughter through the prism of James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts reveals that communication as an element

60 Voltaire, a.k.a. François Marie Arouet (1694-1778), spent much of his career under Louis XIV on the run. When he became the lover of renowned female mathematician and physicist Émilie du Châtelet in 1733, it was convenient that she was the daughter of the king's (at the time it was already Louis XV) introducer of foreign ambassadors.

61 Voltaire, *Siècle de Louis XIV.* Berlin: Henning (1751). *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. de la Beaumarchais, P., 70 vols. (Kehl: Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire Typographique, 1784-1789); Cronk, Nicholas and Mervaud, Christiane. *The complete works of Voltaire (Œuvres complètes de Voltaire)* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire and Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968).

62 Frederick II of Prussia (1712-1786) reigned 1740-1786. Giles MacDonogh, *Frederick the Great: A Life in Deed and Letters* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001).

63 ['If newspapers are to be worth reading, they must not be tampered with']. *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, ed. by Johann David Erdmann von Preuß, Johann David, 30 vols. (Berlin: Decker, 1846-1856), *Correspondance de Frédéric avec Voltaire*, vol. 21-23, Letter to Voltaire, August 13, 1756.

creating and conveying power depends above all on information, on understanding language in its subtle context, of analogies, presuppositions, eloquent silences, parerga and paralipomena – the metaphorical usages of its time, class, rank, and education.

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## THE ELITE'S WITCH: THE GREAT GERMAN WITCH-HUNT OF THE LATE 16<sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

By Saya Wallace

Witch-hunts were ongoing from the 14<sup>th</sup> century but varied over time in intensity. There is generally a cyclical pattern with each cycle lasting approximately 100 years. The height of the witch-hunts came in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Approximately 110,000 witches were prosecuted of which around half were executed. The German lands of the Holy Roman Empire were some of the most violent; an estimated half of all the prosecutions and executions took place in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Explaining the Great European Witch-Hunt requires examining both the effects of the intellectual and political elite as well as the influence of the local conditions. The historical context in which the witch-hunt takes place also helps uncover why the most intense phase of the witch-hunt occurred in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The elites laid down the essential intellectual

1 Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 27.

and legal framework needed for the rationalization and feasibility of witch hunts. The dissemination of information regarding witches initiated by the elite was necessary since the general population were often the ones who produced the pressure from below for witch-hunts. Furthermore, much of the geographic variation can be explained by local factors. Finally, it is important to understand that the tension caused by economic crises, wars, and the Reformation's social and religious tension can explain why the European witch-hunt was particularly intense in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The combination of the preconditions set by the elite and the local conditions ripe for social unrest all within the historical context of dramatic change generating great anxieties laid the ground for the intense and violent persecution of witches in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The intellectual and political elite played an important role in setting the theoretical framework transforming small acts of magic into witchcraft that was not only a simple affront to a neighbor but also a challenge to the Christian way of life. One of the keys in formulating this transition was turning a witch into a heretic.<sup>2</sup> This made any small magical act into an act of heresy that warranted the strictest punishment and the attention of both those in positions of power and the general masses. In order to make the witch a heretic, the elites added a new element to the standard profile of a witch. Now they no longer simply performed magic, they were making pacts with the devil.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the local people were not concerned so much about the pacts made with the devil as they were with any potential tangible threat to their person made by the witch through their magic; however, it was the elite who were able to shape the legal discourse through trials and new literature into a matter of heresy rather than simple magic.<sup>4</sup> In this manner, the elite played

2 Thomas A. Brady, *German Histories in The Age of Reformations, 1400-1650*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 336.

3 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 8.

4 Ibid, 10.

a crucial role in fundamentally changing the commoner's view of witchcraft.

Furthermore, the transition of witchcraft into a form of heresy turned it into a conspiracy, only heightening the fear of witches especially among the ruling elite.<sup>5</sup> In a time of unstable social circumstances, as proven by the Peasants' War and other rebellions, the greatest fear among political elites was of rebellion. The fear of a grand conspiracy of witches gathering together for the Sabbath was enough to gain the attention of the elites and form a consensus of the dangers of witchcraft and the need to root it out.<sup>6</sup> The result was what Po-Chia Hsia describes as a "national public opinion among the educated elite" that was consolidated in the many pamphlets produced at the time.<sup>7</sup> Without the elite establishing the connection between heresy and witchcraft and raising the fear of conspiracy, the witch trials would not have been such a widespread phenomena. As it was, soon manuals were being printed and spread to all of the local judiciary and, through the judicial process, to the local people. In other words, the original theoretical framework came from above and was disseminated to the rural and local populations through the process of the trials.<sup>8</sup>

The massive scale and severity of the witch-hunts would not have been possible without new innovations in the judicial process spearheaded and spread by the elite. Under the early system it was difficult to make charges of heresy because the system required the charges to be brought from the offended party and there was rarely a specific individual victim of heresy. However, the new system allowed for top down initiation of trials for the general crime of heresy.<sup>9</sup> While this made the trials easier to initiate, they also put in place harsher standards for conviction.

5 Ibid, 29.

6 Ibid, 64.

7 R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 124.

8 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 52.

9 Ibid, 72.

These standards made obtaining a confession essential to the conviction of witchcraft. The main impact of this on the witch trials was that it incentivized the use of torture.<sup>10</sup> Once again, the importance of the intellectual groundwork becomes clear in the resurgence of torture. It is only because witchcraft was now seen as a crime of the highest order that torture was rationalized. Had it remained mere small acts of magic against a neighbor, the use of torture to produce confessions would not have been warranted.<sup>11</sup> The local authorities were able to rationalize their own behavior claiming to restore harmony by ridding themselves of what they saw as rebels and misfits to create a more homogenous community free of some of the tensions that caused such great anxiety.<sup>12</sup> The use of torture was a particularly important because not only did it win confessions, but it also gained the names of supposed accomplices. The introduction of accomplices only fueled the belief that witchcraft was a grand conspiracy to be feared by the elite.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned earlier, the judicial trials were central to the dissemination of beliefs. One reason is because the confessions helped convince the local people that witchcraft in the form of pacts with the devil were more than just the elite's theory but a reality and thus witches must truly be conspiring to destroy Christian peace as elites claimed.<sup>14</sup> This was a necessary precondition to prepare the population to, in a sense, catch the fear that was originally only present in the elite.

While the elites were necessary in laying the intellectual groundwork as preconditions for the Great Witch-Hunt, the local conditions can explain much of the severity and timing of the hunt. The decentralized nature of the Holy Roman Empire failed to inspire confidence among the population who felt the need for greater security than the system could provide.<sup>15</sup> Arguably,

10 Ibid, 76.

11 Ibid, 69.

12 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 156.

13 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 84.

14 Ibid, 52.

15 Ibid, 346.

they felt the need to protect themselves without the aid of the empire and one manifestation of that was the rooting out of the marginalized communities who were rumored to be a threat. What would not have been a threat under a centralized system was perceived as a grave danger because of the lack of security. Evidence of this sentiment can be seen in the persecution of Jews that paralleled the witch-hunts. They were no longer merely a deviant community; they “imperiled the way of life and moral and social fiber of a Christian community in crisis”.<sup>16</sup> Witches were treated comparably because of the similar threat they posed as heretics to the perceived stability that unity of church provided the community and thus both cases warranted the full measures of the court. Moreover, because of the decentralized system, local judges were free to disregard the guidelines of torture created by the elite.<sup>17</sup> Brady raises a challenge to the importance of an elite framework when local judges executed witches “without reference to Roman law or theology”.<sup>18</sup> Soon the convictions were not being initiated top-down but rather they were welling up from below. Brady argues that it was personal everyday hatred that motivated the accusations and in the vast majority of cases the accuser was a neighbor of the rumored witch.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the objective of these local uprisings was the same as those instigated by elites; they were both attempts to protect the fragmented community’s fragile stability. Popular belief appropriated from elite prompting that the magical acts of witches were no longer merely threats to them as individuals, but should be treated as threats to the community as a whole. Therefore, even if the local judges were not relying on Roman law or theology, they were using logic adopted from the elites. Still unanswered is why the late 16<sup>th</sup> century marked a sharp rise in the number of trials. To explain why the local population’s

16 Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth* 84.

17 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 79.

18 Brady, *German*, 341.

19 Ibid, 341-342.

hatred seemed to boom in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century it is necessary to analyze the historical context of the Great Witch-Hunt.

The deeper societal explanation for why neighbors were accusing one another of such heinous crimes was the great anxiety that accompanied a period of many changes. Among the traumatic changes was the Reformation.<sup>20</sup> The Reformation did not have a direct effect on the witch-hunts in the sense that Luther did not explicitly call for the hunts nor did Protestantism specifically target witches. Rather the Reformation had two indirect impacts: firstly, it stoked new religious fervor and secondly, it fed the growing tension between communities in the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire. According to Levack, the Reformation created a “new personality type, a highly motivated, driven person whose moral energy could be diverted into political and economic activity.”<sup>21</sup> While some of the heightened religious consciousness was directed towards their own actions, it also put the spotlight on Christianity’s enemies, namely Jews and Witches.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the renewed religiosity induced a great deal of personal guilt in their own sins and an easy way of relieving this stress was to project their own faults onto a scapegoat. Those who were already marginalized in society, such as the old unattached woman, were the most convenient targets.<sup>23</sup> The second impact of the Reformation was that it created political tension by dividing the German lands into Protestant and Catholic territories. It has been found that the areas that experienced the most severe witch-hunts were in fact those regions that either did not have a clear majority religion or were surrounded by another region that was of the opposite religion.<sup>24</sup> The combination of personal guilt and regional tension made the Reformation an important explanation of why the Great Witch-Hunt did not take place earlier. However,

20 Brady, *German*, 345.

21 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 107.

22 Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth*, 57.

23 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 107.

24 Ibid, 114.



the Reformation was only one among several changes effecting society at the time.

The economic conditions also played an important role in inspiring discomfort among the local populations that motivated them to perform witch-hunts. Starting in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, there was a dramatic rise in Europe's population, which led to greater competition for land and, in many areas, increased poverty and economic hardship.<sup>25</sup> Levack describes the period from 1550-1650 as the "crisis of production" where "continued inflation, a transition to commercial agriculture, a series of famines, [and] an number of depressions in trade" was pervasive.<sup>26</sup> Similar to the effects of the Reformation, these bad economic times motivated people to search for someone to blame. Once again, the easy targets were witches and Jews. Just as Po-Chia Hsia claims, "to many Germans, Jews symbolized the troubles of the empire," witches too were less tolerated.<sup>27</sup> Poor single old women who had previously been supported by the community were now less tolerated. Their poverty became a vulnerability to accusations of witchcraft as the general people attempted to keep their fragile status comparatively above those in poverty by accusing them of witchcraft.<sup>28</sup> The combination of the religious political changes as well as the economic changes created a general "mood of anxiety" that made what might have made a small fear of magic into a much greater fear of the social stability of the community, both on the part of the elites and the local population.<sup>29</sup> The influence of the elites as a cause of the witch-hunts once more appears as the elites found witch-hunts, although violent, a way to temporarily relieve the divisions within society by identifying a common threat that the community must rally together to defend itself against.<sup>30</sup> The result was an extremely violent systematic persecution of women and Jews

25 Ibid, 151.

26 Ibid, 190.

27 Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth*, 46.

28 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 151.

29 Ibid, 157.

30 Ibid, 158.

often falsely accused of crimes and a mass panic that consumed both the elites and the rural peasants.

The Great European Witch-hunt that saw its climax in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and 17<sup>th</sup> century was caused by a combination of a theoretical framework provided by elites that elevated the crime of witchcraft and the local pressure from below to carry out these hunts. The proximate political, religious, and economic changes in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century created a general malaise that permeated both the elite and rural population explaining the spike in prosecutions. It is interesting to note that in many cases the elites were aware of the consequences of the witch hunts and the possibility of its inhumanity. This may be why at the same time that torture was rationalized and widely used, they also attempted to impose limits on the torture techniques. In a sense they were dealing with the same tradeoffs of security and liberties that we still face today. In the case of the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the total perceived failure of the Empire to provide economic and religious stability, led to the dramatic slide towards elites and popular masses together attempting to create perceptions of security within their own communities, even at the cost of many innocent lives.

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