



Germany in the Age of Louis XIV

Wolfgang Menzel

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THE century subsequent to the peace of Westphalia is distinguished as the age of Louis the Fourteenth, that monarch being the sun by which it was illumined, and whose splendor was reflected by all the courts of Europe. The first revolution against the middle ages was accomplished in him, by his subjection of the interests of the aristocratic and inferior classes beneath his despotic rule. He said with truth “l'état c'est moi,” for entire France, the country and the people, their arms, and even their thoughts, were his. The sole object of the whole nation was to do the will of their sovereign; “car tel est notre plaisir” was the usual termination to his commands. The magnificent chateau of Versailles, the abode of this terrestrial deity, was peopled with mistresses and a countless troop of parasites, on whom the gold, drawn from the impoverished and oppressed people, was lavished. The nobility and clergy, long subject to their lord and king, shared the license of the court and formed a numerous band of courtiers, whilst men of the lower classes, whose superior parts had brought them into note, were attached as philosophers, poets, and artists, to the court, the monarch extending his patronage to every art and science prostituted by flattery.

The French court, although externally Catholic, was solely guided by the tenets of the new philosophy, which were spread over the rest of the world by the sonnets of anacreontic poets and the bon-mots of court savants. This philosophy set forth that egotism was the only quality natural to man, that virtues were but feigned, or, when real, ridiculous. Freedom from the ancient prejudices of honor or religion, and carelessness in the choice of means for the attainment of an object, were regarded as proofs of genius. Immorality was the necessary accompaniment of talent. Virtue implied stupidity; the grossest license, the greatest wit. Vice became the mode, was publicly displayed and admired. The first duty imposed upon knighthood, the protection of innocence, was exchanged for seduction, adultery, or nightly orgies, and the highest ambition of the prince, the courtier, or the officer was to enrich the chronique scandaleuse with his name. A courtier's honor consisted in breaking his word, in deceiving maidens, and cheating creditors, in contracting enormous debts and in boasting of their remaining unpaid, etc.; nor was this demoralization confined to private life. The cabinet of Versailles, in its treatment of all the European powers, followed the rules of this modern philosophy, as shown in the conduct of the Parisian cavalier towards the citizens, their wives and daughters, by the practice of rudeness, seduction, robbery, and every dishonorable art. It treated laws, treaties, and truth with contempt, and ever insisted upon its own infallibility...

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