

TWO VIEWS OF VERSAILLES

1600s

Princess Palatine and Madame de Sévigné

The Palace of Versailles became a symbol for royal extravagance. King Louis XIV and his legions of flattering nobles lived in splendor at the French royal palace. Every meal was a feast, every evening a party. The following descriptions of life at the palace come from two eyewitnesses. The first eyewitness is Princess Palatine, a noblewoman and frequent visitor to Versailles. The second is Madame de Sévigné, a renowned letter-writer, who describes the return of the Marquis de Vardes to the good graces of the king.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Contrasting

Explain the differences between the two descriptions of life at Versailles.

An Evening at the Palace

The *appartement* [two large rooms at Versailles where the King played billiards and served refreshments] is an absolutely intolerable experience. We all troop into the billiard room and lie on our stomachs or squat, no one uttering a word, until the King has finished his game. Then we all get up and go to the music room where someone is singing an aria from some old opera which we have heard a hundred times already. After that, we go to the ball, which lasts from eight to ten o'clock. Those who, like me, do not dance have to sit there for hours without budging for an instant, and can neither see nor hear anything except an endless minuet. At a quarter to ten, we all follow one another in a quadrille [a dance popular at the time], like children reciting the catechism, and then the ball is finally over.

In the Presence of the King

He [the Marquis] arrived on Saturday morning, looking quite extraordinary, and wearing a [blue coat embroidered with gold and silver] in the style of those worn in 1663. On entering the King's chamber he went down on one knee . . . The King told him that he had not recalled him so long as his heart was wounded, but that he now recalled him with a whole heart, and that he was glad to see him again. M. de Vardes replied most eloquently and emotionally, and the gift of tears which God has given him was well in evidence on this occasion. After this first interview, the King caused M. le Dauphin [the King's eldest son] to be called, and presented [his son] as a young courtier [to the marquis]. M. de Vardes recognized him and bowed to him. The King said to him laughingly: "Vardes, what a stupid thing to do, you know quite well that you do not bow to anyone when in my

presence.” M. de Vardes replied in the same tone: “Sire, I no longer know anything, I have forgotten everything, Your Majesty will have to pardon me even thirty stupidities.” “That I will,” said the King, “you have twenty-nine left.” Later, when the King made fun of his coat, M. de Vardes said: “Sire, when a man is so wretched as to be banished from your presence, he is not only unfortunate, he becomes ridiculous as well.”

Sources: For Princess Palatine—Excerpt from *Secret Memoirs of the Court of Louis XIV* by Charlotte-Elisabeth, duchesse d’Orléans (London: H. S. Nichols, 1895). For Madame de Sévigné—Excerpt from *Letters of Madame de Sévigné* (Philadelphia: J. P. Horn, 1927).

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

The first account conveys the boredom of a noblewoman who has tired of the endless games and parties that visitors at Versailles were obligated to attend. It is an unflattering view of the king and palace life. The second account suggests that the king had a sense of humor. The picture of the Marquis de Vardes is one of a groveling nobleman overjoyed to be back in the good graces of the king.