15.3 Louis XIV: Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin

Louis XIV’s (1638–1715) view of kingship was influenced by his experience of the Fronde during his minority. The supporters of the Fronde led armed uprisings as part of their effort to limit royal authority. When the Fronde was defeated and Louis reached his majority, he committed himself to making the absolute power of the monarchy a reality.


I would not speak to you in this way, my son, if I had seen in you the least tendency toward cruelty, for a bloody and ferocious temper is despicable in a man, and beneath the dignity of a king. On the contrary, I will endeavor to acquaint you with the charm of clemency, the most regal of all virtues since it can only belong to kings; for clemency is one duty for which we can never be repaid.

Whoever pardons too often punishes uselessly the rest of time, for in the terror which restrains men from evil, the hope of pardon lessens the effect of pardon itself. You will not finish the reading of these Mémoires, my son, without finding places where I have conquered myself and pardoned offenses that I could justly never forget. But on that occasion when it was a question of state, of the most pernicious examples, and of the most contagious disorder for all my subjects, of a revolt that attacked the very foundations of my authority, I knew that I should overcome my scruples and punish these scoundrels rather than pardoning them.

Whoever is poorly informed cannot avoid poor thinking; and if you search past centuries for all the errors attributed to sovereigns, hardly one can be excused for not knowing something that he should have known, for so it is generally among men that one says “I did not know,” or “I did not think.”

Frequently after finishing an affair we learn something new and lament that if only we had known this sooner we would have acted differently; in short I believe if a man is fully informed he will always do what he should. Thus it is necessary that a sovereign take the greatest care to be informed of his own times.

But for me, I extended this reflection, for I was convinced that it was not enough to be informed of current affairs but also of ancient times. I consider that a knowledge of these great events, assimilated by a mature mind, can serve to fortify one’s reasoning in all important deliberations; for the example of illustrious men and their unique deeds provides very useful perspectives for war and peace, so that a naturally great and generous soul, contemplating these actions, would be inspired by them and ensure that the lessons of history can inspire others as well.

I have heard it said that all the great heroes of the past were conversant with literature and that part of their greatness was due to their literary study. Particularly I found the study of the past to be very useful in becoming wise in the art of war.

But kings must learn not to permit their servants to become too powerful because, if they are promoted too quickly, they are obliged to constantly support them or painfully suffer them; usually only weak or clumsy princes tolerate these monstrous promotions.

I am not saying that we should not for our own interest and grandeur wish that our greatness is shared by those in our good graces, but we must carefully guard against their excess. My advice to guarantee this consists of three principal observations.

The first is that you know your affairs completely, because a king who does not know them is always dependent on those who serve him and cannot defend himself from their wiles.

The second, that you divide your confidence among many, so that each of those you have entrusted will check the elevation of his rival, ensuring that the jealousy of one will bridle the ambition of the other.
And the third, that even though you admit a small number of persons into your secret affairs or into your casual conversations, never permit anyone to imagine that they have the power to speak as they please of their good or bad impressions of the others; but, on the contrary, you must expressly maintain a type of association with all who hold important state posts, and give to everyone the same liberty to propose whatever they believe for your service; so that none of them would believe that they could not turn to you for their needs and they think only of your good graces; and lastly the most distant and the most familiar should be persuaded that they are totally dependent upon you.

But you should know that this independence upon which I insist so strongly raises more than anything the authority of the master, and that it alone shows that he is governing them instead of being governed by them: As to the contrary when it ceases, invariably intrigues, liaisons, and cabals enlarge the power of the court and weaken the reputation of the prince.

**Question:**

1. Why did Louis XIV believe his son should study history?