

Monarchs and the Nobility as Patrons of the Enlightenment

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Abstract

The Enlightenment, stretching from the latter half of the 17th century to the start of the French Revolution, marks a philosophical turn away from the obscurantism imposed by the Church during the Middle Ages. Two major classes – the clergy and the aristocracy – wielded power over the mass of the people. The king served as a guarantor of the status quo, ideologically protected by the dogma known as the ‘divine right’ of kings to govern. The exercise of reason posed a serious threat to the established order. Given that the French Revolution may be seen as the culmination of enlightened thinking, it is odd to imagine that the very classes threatened by the enlightened thinkers were prepared to patronise them. It was in the interests of the privileged classes to curry favour with them out of fear of possible exposure in the press, and also to show them off as acquisitions which convey the prestige of the patron. This essay attempts to show how patronage varied throughout Europe.

Keywords: Enlightenment, patrons, monarchy, nobility, Church

Monarchs and the Nobility as Patrons of the Enlightenment

Although it is difficult to find a consensus of opinion on the exact meaning of the Enlightenment, for the purpose of this essay, we can present it as a philosophical turn away from the obscurantism imposed by the Church (both Catholic and Protestant) during the Middle Ages. Such obscurantism formed one of the pillars of societies where two major classes – the clergy and the aristocracy – wielded power over the mass of the people. The king served as a guarantor of the *status quo*, ideologically protected by the dogma known as the ‘divine right’ of kings to govern, but not necessarily protected from rival claimants to the throne. In temporal terms, the Enlightenment is generally seen as stretching from the latter half of the 17th century to about the start of the French Revolution in 1789. When Kant asked, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ his answer was: *Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!) (Kant, 1784). Enlightened thinking represented a challenge to the existing social order. While the clergy defended ‘divine right’, the exercise of reason could pose a serious threat to the established order. Given that the French Revolution may be seen as the culmination of enlightened thinking, it is odd to imagine that the very classes threatened by the enlightened thinkers were prepared to patronise them.

In 17th–century Britain, Locke had received patronage from various sources including the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury and Lady Masham, but the most prolonged patronage he received consisted of a royal studentship, which lasted for three decades at Christ Church College, Oxford. Locke and others later benefitted from royal patronage when they joined the Royal Society of London. But his most seditious work, *Two Treatises of Government*, was only published¹ after the deposal of James II. The studentship ended when Locke was thought to

¹ Strict vetting of publications existed under the Stuarts. In 1662, Parliament passed ‘An Act for Preventing the Frequent Abuses in Printing Seditious Treasonable and Unlicensed Bookes and Pamphlets and for Regulating of Printing and Printing Presses’.

be plotting against the King. Charles II, was not, however, a great patron. He granted the Society the Chelsea Hospital lands in 1669 but the buildings were in bad need of repair so, eventually, the Society had to sell the land back to the crown (Stimson, 1947, p. 288).

Patronage was abundant but, from the late 18th century, ‘formerly the minions of monarchy, the arts and letters were to become the consorts of commerce and the citizenry [...] Swarms of promoters, publishers, journalists and middlemen looked for openings, employment and profit not only, and certainly no longer primarily, to the King’ (Porter, 2001, pp. 34–35). And Shapin backs up this claim for Scotland: ‘Edinburgh culture in the eighteenth century, both literary and scientific, turned for patronage and legitimation to the established corporations and the established landed and professional classes’ (1974, p. 6). Hume writes of how he spent a year on the estate of the Marquis of Annandale and, later, worked for General St. Clair. Owing to his ‘frugality’, these appointments allowed Hume to acquire ‘a fortune’ (nearly £1,000). He later describes how he worked for Lord Hertford and how, when he returned to Scotland, he had ‘much more money, and a much larger income, by means of Lord Hertford's friendship, than [he] left it’ (2012).

The relationship between the monarch and the nobility is crucial to understanding why both monarchs and nobles acted the way they did. Why patronise the arts and letters? Why build great mansion houses? In what way does spectacle reinforce power? The monarchy in Britain seems to have taken a back seat as far as patronage was concerned and, given that Britain was producing some unequivocally enlightened thinkers – Locke, Hume, Smith, Bentham, etc. – the role of the monarch seems minimal in comparison to that of other patrons. In contrast, in France, the Académie des sciences, established by Louis XIV in 1666, was ‘the beneficiary of the most generous patronage of science known during the seventeenth century’ (Stroup, 1987, p. 1). He also founded the Académie des inscriptions et belles–lettres. Voltaire felt that Louis XIV had ‘patronized the arts much more than all of the other kings, his

contemporaries, put together' (1751/1901, p. 273). But along with his enlightened measures such as forbidding the courts to admit accusations of sorcery, he persecuted Protestants, increased censorship and spent fortunes on wars and on glorifying himself at Versailles.

The Palace of Versailles formed part of Louis XIV's solution to the problem of power. By compelling the nobles to spend at least part of the year living there, he could maintain control over them and keep abreast of any possible political adversity. Control over the courtiers was maintained by a strict code of etiquette, as favours could be bestowed upon those who followed the code most meticulously. The dress code meant that the nobility would spend fortunes trying to keep up with the latest fashion and have to borrow money from the King, thus deepening their dependence on him (*Courtiers*, n.d.). Louis XIV was not an enlightened despot; he was an absolutist committed to destroying the feudal power of the nobility.

The nobility were noble because they were men of taste, and that was in their blood. This may explain the need to display their taste and to patronise those artists, thinkers and musicians who could light up their living rooms. One woman, however, was important as a patroness of the arts and letters – the Duchess of Maine. In France, the need to demonstrate superior breeding through displays of taste may have come about as imitation of Louis XIV's behaviour. His favourite legitimised son, Louis-Auguste, the Duke of Maine, married Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon, who assumed the title of Duchess of Maine in 1692. After a three-year period of dullness, she tried to make up for lost time by dedicating herself to the pursuit of artistic activities (Figure 1) first at Châtenay and later at Sceaux Château: '*ce ne fut plus chez elle que divertissements galants, bals singuliers, fêtes et spectacles*' (Saint-Simon, 1710, tome 8, chap. 4). Wishing to adopt the mood of the *Grand Siècle*, the Duchess surrounded herself with old people who had participated in the glory of Louis XIV (Cessac & Couvreur, 2003, p. 9). The first performance of Voltaire's play, *Oedipe*, was at the home of the Duchess, and he

Figure 1

Dido and Aeneas by François de Troy, 1704.



Note. The Duke is playing Aeneas while the Duchess is Dido, surrounded by family and friends at Sceaux. Public domain.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Feast_of_Dido_and_Aeneas_by_Fran%C3%A7ois_de_Troy,_1704.jpg

later praised her for engaging Nicolas de Malezieu to translate *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides. The Duchess, initially, had an ulterior motive: she wished to attract notable figures from the world of arts and letters who might have a role to play in helping her husband influence the choice of successor to the throne (Cessac & Couvreur, 2003, p. 8). When Louis XIV died, however, the regent, Philippe II, Duke of Orléans, ordered the annulment of his will, thereby depriving the Duke of Maine of his status as a *prince du sang* and, consequently,

of any say in the succession.

Enlightened thinkers may be represented as posing a threat to established authority. In the *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie*, d'Alembert wrote about a tribunal which had become powerful in the south of Europe for condemning a famous astronomer for having supported the movement of the earth, and declared him a heretic. D'Alembert attacked the abuse of spiritual authority, united with temporal authority which forces reason to silence; just stopping short of forbidding the human race to think (1751/1894, p. 91). This was clearly an attack on the established authority of the Church, and the Church knew it. During the next twenty years, contributors to the *Encyclopédie* were subject to numerous attacks, so many submitted articles on condition that they were to be anonymous. But it was, then, in the interests of the monarch or the nobility to curry favour with the intellectuals for fear of being the butt of their scorn. One can speculate here on how it would have been in the interest of the monarch to be patron of the most talented thinkers of the day, as the aristocrats could well increase their prestige and power by patronising, and hence controlling, the critical writings of the time. But if the critics could not be bought off, they could at least be censored or imprisoned, and then it helped to have friends in high places. During the *Ancien Régime*, the task of royal censorship was carried out by the director of the *Librarie*. From 1750, that was the job of the lawyer Malesherbes. Malesherbes was, however, a friend of Diderot, and when he got wind of the *Parlement's* intention to retract the privileges of the *Encyclopédie's* editors and seize their documents, he alerted Diderot. In panic, Diderot asked him what he should do. According to the historian Guizot, Malesherbes told Diderot that he could send everything to his house as no one would come looking for the documents there (1876, p. 269).

Another friend in high places was the Marquise de Pompadour. Louis XV had acceded to the French throne in 1723, and though not generally recognised as an enlightened absolutist, he was influenced by his mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour, who supported the

parti philosophique, a reformist movement influenced by enlightened thinking. As a consequence, Louis XV supported fiscal reforms which would have imposed taxes on the rich, thus breaching the exemption privileges of the clergy and the aristocracy. This increased the antagonisms between the monarchy and the aristocracy. The failure to introduce an effective fiscal policy combined with Louis' excessive spending on wars prepared the ground for the overthrow of the monarchy. Significantly, it was in France, where Louis XV's and Louis XVI's reforms were seen as being ineffective, that the bourgeoisie was to effectively organise against the landed gentry and the Church and bring about the fall of the monarchy.

The main enlightened intellectuals, with the exception of Kant, are thought to be of French or British (mainly Scottish) origin. Although he managed to become rich through investments, Voltaire also seems to have been adept at gaining patronage from aristocratic quarters, as his relationship with Emilie du Châtelet testifies. His defence of Newtonian science against so-called Cartesianism led to the growth of his reputation and he became Royal Historiographer of France in 1745. It was the French intellectuals in particular who, having difficulties in France, sought and gained both financial support and protection from notable European monarchs.

One of those monarchs willing to patronise enlightened thinkers was Frederick II of Prussia. Frederick is a controversial figure. He saw himself as an enlightened thinker, wrote enlightened texts, and financed and edited two anthologies of articles from Bayles' *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Blanning, 2016, p. 52). He put into practice certain policies that reflected tolerant enlightened thinking such as providing the site for the building of a Catholic church in Berlin, banning torture, arguing for a uniform national criminal code and liberalizing control of the press. He was, in fact, an atheist so he had no particular interest in defending any religion, but Blanning argues that, in the secular enlightened world, orthodox religion was in retreat and that there was, consequently, a need for new forms of

spirituality. A sign of this secular tendency (or rather a tendency to hark back to pre-Christian times) may even be seen in the inscription Frederick had placed on the portico of his new opera house in Berlin – *Fridericus Rex Apollini et Musis* (dedicated to Apollo and the Muses by King Frederick). Blanning argues that the new opera house was also designed to impress his contemporaries so, in this sense, the enlightened ruler was no different from others. He uses the opera house to illustrate what he calls the ‘sacralization of culture’ that is ‘the emancipation of high culture from any representational and recreational function and its elevation to become a sacralized activity to be worshipped in its own right’ (2016, p. 153).

Frederick actively aided enlightened figures facing persecution. He recalled the banished Wolff to Prussia and provided sanctuary for enlightened thinkers fleeing unenlightened governments. The abbot, Jean-Martin de Prades, who, having contributed to the *Encyclopédie* found himself declared an outlaw by the Paris *Parlement*, fled to Prussia, where he became the king’s reader (Kafker, 1973, p. 123). He also gave asylum to Julien Jean Offray de La Mettrie, whose books had been burned. But he was also anti-Semitic and xenophobic (at least in regard to Poles); he ordered journalists to be beaten up, and referred to commoners as ‘vermin’ (Blanning, 2016, p. 435). He accommodated Voltaire at his royal palaces and gave him the office of chamberlain and an annual pension of 800 livres. In an article published in the *Encyclopédie*, Voltaire wrote that writers needed royal patronage to strengthen their independence or otherwise they would have to submit to aristocrats. But when Voltaire wrote a pamphlet attacking Maupertuis, the president of Berlin’s Royal Academy of Sciences, of which Frederick was patron, Frederick placed him under house arrest for five weeks and had his pamphlet, *Diatribes of Doctor Akakia*, burnt in public. It seems obvious that where there are patrons, whether aristocratic or royal, the independence of the writer is relative. Frederick, however, need not have been overly preoccupied to keep in the good books of the various segments of society. “A government, supported by an army of

180,000 men”, tersely commented the English traveller John Moore, “may safely disregard the criticisms of a few speculative politicians, and the pen of the satirist” (Porter, 2001, p.2).

Voltaire also enjoyed the patronage of Catherine II, but he was also jealous of the support she gave to others, particularly Diderot. When she learned of Diderot’s problems with the French authorities, she offered to have the printing of the *Encyclopédie* done in Russia. However, as a consequence of her intervention, the French government allowed it to be printed in France. Diderot’s financial troubles also prompted Catherine to buy his library while allowing the books to remain in his possession. He effectively became her librarian with an annual salary of 1,000 livres. For his part, Diderot recruited artists, scientists writers, engineers and architects to work for Catherine (Massie, 2012, para. 2.1072).

For a while Diderot and Voltaire had nothing but praise for Catherine. Voltaire wrote: Diderot, d’Alembert and I—we are three who would build you altars.... Would one ever have suspected fifty years ago that one day the Scythians [Russians] would so nobly recompense in Paris the virtue, science, and philosophy that are treated so shamefully among us. (as cited in Massie, 2012, para. 2.1073)

Inna Gorbatov sees Catherine’s flirting with the major Enlightenment figures in Machiavellian terms and is surprised that Voltaire could not see through it. She argues that Catherine’s ‘liberalism’ was a façade to disguise her real goal of establishing absolute and indivisible power, but that façade would fall away when ‘the revolutionary events that swept France instantly transformed Catherine from a ruler charmed by the new Enlightenment ideas into a reactionary autocrat, who ultimately broke up forever with Voltaire’ (2007, p. 381). George Rudé, however, places Catherine’s abandonment of social reform a little earlier – to the failure of Pugachev’s rebellion in the 1770s (1985, p.38.).

In an essay of this size, it is not possible to analyse in detail the role of other monarchs in patronising the Enlightenment. Although the two monarchs most commonly referred to as

enlightened absolutists are Frederick II and Catherine II, probably because of the relationships they established with the French enlightened thinkers, others should be mentioned if only in passing. While Rudé argues that “enlightened despotism”, insofar as it was “enlightened”, was almost universally a failure’, he points out that Joseph II of Austria seems to have been the most committed to introducing social reforms. Among other things, he abolished torture, dissolved the monasteries, promoted education and poor relief, made marriage a civil contract and permitted criticism of the Church (1985, p.38).

The Catholic Church was at least as strong in Portugal as in France. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 left the Church speechless to explain how God could have killed thousands of people, many of whom were worshipping at the time. Gabriel Malagrida, a Jesuit priest, blamed the catastrophe on divine intervention, while the prime minister, Sebastião de Melo, saw it as a natural catastrophe. Malagrida’s position called into question the authority of the King’s prime minister, who had Malagrida executed. In 1759 the Jesuits were expelled from Portuguese territory. Melo, who had had contact with enlightened ideas in Europe, persuaded the monarch to rebuild the city on geometric lines. He obviously had the King’s backing as, in 1659, he became Count of Oeiras and, in 1669, Marquis of Pombal. One of his other, enlightened, impositions was the abolishment of slavery in the Portuguese empire. This example is a rare case of enlightened ideas being enforced by the King’s authority against one of the most prominent classes in the 18th century.

In conclusion, it would be wrong to see monarchical patronage in black and white terms where the ‘enlightened’ rulers such as Frederick II, Catherine II, Joseph II and Melo are pitted against unenlightened despots – e.g., Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI. Much depended on specific circumstances, preferences and the intervention of third parties – Pompadour, Malessherbes, etc. – who at least in part represented the monarch. It also depends on what constitutes enlightened thinking or acting. For their part, the nobility had their own

reasons for patronising artists and intellectuals. The Duchess of Maine seems to have had a genuine interest in the arts and letters as well as a need to keep influential friends, and many of the nobility may have been as attached to their social status, reinforced through their patronage, as they were to their property. An onlooker observed that the abolition of titles during the French Revolution, 'seems to have affected many of the Noblesse more deeply than the loss of their property' (as cited in Doyle, 2009, p. 6). But although patronage was important in maintaining an intelligentsia throughout the two centuries, as printing grew, so too did the writers' incomes, thus making them less dependent on the wealthy.

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