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Robert J. Knecht, *The French Renaissance Court*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, 440 pp. \$45 (hb). ISBN: 978-0300-11851-3.

Review by Michael Wintroub, University of California, Berkeley.

The court in sixteenth century France was a wandering city; at its largest it may have had as many as 10,000 inhabitants, only twenty-five towns in France had larger populations. It was the peripatetic centre of French politics and culture, the locus where patronage and clientage networks intertwined with monarchical power, and where etiquette, fashion and ceremonial were produced and performed as a means of demonstrating the “power, good taste and munificence” of the king. Robert J. Knecht's *The French Renaissance Court* is a top-down, king-centered, political history of sixteenth century France as seen through the lens of the culture of the court. English speakers who are most familiar with the French court of Louis XVI will find Knecht's account a welcome addition to the historiography of the court for an earlier, much less well-known, period. Given its lucid and accessible style and its many interesting details about the Valois court, the book will have a wide appeal, both for a popular audience and for professional historians who will find it a valuable reference source both for teaching and for orienting future research.

Knecht skillfully recounts well-known events--e.g., the Field of Cloth and Gold, the tragic death of Henry II, and the Religious Wars--weaving them through an accumulation of anecdotes about the desires and pastimes of the court's elite inhabitants. We learn, for example, that in May of 1517, “Francis I and his courtiers, disguised and masked, frequented houses of ill-repute”; that Monsieur de Vieilleville, “who received Henry II at Durtal in 1550, in addition to providing the courtiers with food in abundance, placed his two wine cellars at their disposal. Each was given two bottles of wine, red and white, and even the meanest servant was able to drink as much as he liked”; that Cellini quarreled with the king's mistress, Madame d'Étampes, who favoured Primaticcio over him; and that in 1581 Catherine De' Medici “spent 8,898 *écus* on the Hôtel de la Reine and 760 *écus* on Saint-Maur.” Knecht's book is an encyclopedic *tour de force* that guides its readers across the intricacies of political, cultural and religious life of the court from Charles VIII to Henri III (though, the reign of Francis I receives by far the most attention).

Despite this wealth of detail, however, it is difficult for the reader to discern any overall argument in this book. To claim, as Knecht does, that the court was a reflection of its monarch's personality (pp. xxi, 295, 339) seems a curiously naïve position coming from an historian with the kind of detailed and erudite knowledge of early modern French culture and society as Knecht. Thus, for example, he concludes on the book's final page, that the increasingly rule-bound, secretive, and hierarchical nature of the court under Henri III was an artifact of the king's personality--no mention is made of larger structural forces, historical trends or socio-cultural developments. As he puts it: “(t)here is no doubt that Henry III, highly intelligent as he was, misused the court. Instead of following tradition and using it to gain the affection of his subjects, to foster and retain their loyalty, he used it rather as a plaything of his own; he sought to adapt it to the needs of his own autocratic, reserved and morbid personality. He tried to enhance his authority by distancing himself from the mass of his subjects while surrounding himself with a small group of intimate friends.” In 1939 Norbert Elias wrote--describing recent

historiography of medieval and early modern Europe—that numerous “studies describe, for example, how the French kings from Philip Augustus to Francis I and Henry IV increase their power, or how the Elector Frederick William pushes aside the regional estates in Brandenburg, and the Medici the patricians and senate in Florence, or how the Tudors do the same to the nobility and parliament in England. Everywhere it is the individual agents and their various actions that we see, their personal weaknesses and gifts that are described. And it is no doubt fruitful and even indispensable to see history in this way, as a mosaic of individual actions of individual people.”

Fruitful indeed. R. J. Knecht’s *The French Renaissance Court* is a carefully researched, painstakingly constructed, and beautifully put together descriptive history; yet seventy years after Elias ground breaking work on the sociogenesis of the French court, one expects more, especially from an historian of Knecht’s caliber. Indeed, one searches in vain—as one reads his vivid portrayals of well-known events and his fascinating collection of anecdotes about the deeds, character traits, hobbies and tastes of kings and queens, their favorites, and their clients—for a deeper more penetrating mode of analysis, one that addresses, for example, questions having to do with power relations, class dynamics, social change, political culture, and/or gender. But *The French Renaissance Court* is simply not this sort of book, and it is clear that these are not the kinds of questions that interest its author. It is a dazzling portrait—a richly elaborated and detailed picture; as such it succeeds brilliantly.

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