This paper is intended as a contribution to the study of the practice and discourse of politics in the development of the modern European state and seeks to assess the formation of practical political activity on the part of politicians and diplomats. The specific context is the debate on the role of political faction – especially at court - vis-à-vis the power of monarchy in Renaissance France and the objective is an attempt to map the continuities and discontinuities in patterns of political behaviour between the conventional late medieval and early modern periods. One pointer towards this has been Bernard Guenée’s remark that the ‘les institutions du temps de François Ier sont enracinés dans le Moyen Age et seules les guerres de Religion bouleversèrent assez les hommes, les idées et les institutions pour donner le sentiment d’une coupure.’ [1] Whether it was the debate about the origins of true nobility [2] or the evils and advantages of court life, there is good reason to see the discourse of the late sixteenth century as a continuation of that of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth. I will argue, therefore, that the findings of Jean-Philippe Genet’s group on the origins of the modern state between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries [3] can be replicated in examining the development of politics in France. That the pure description of politics expanded in the sixteenth century has often been taken for granted rather than explained and has tended to create the impression that the dominance of the court and of its particular kind of factional politics is in some ways a new phenomenon of the Renaissance period. It has always been tempting to think that the world as viewed through the prism of the powerful intelligences of Philippe de Commynes or Niccolò Machiavelli had become qualitatively different and even that they in effect ‘invented’ politics. [4] However, while there is a vast increase in contemporary comment on diplomatic affairs at court from the early sixteenth century, this does not necessarily provide a straightforward analysis of politics. Ambassadors were still primarily employed to transmit accounts of negotiations rather than reflect widely. When the more reflective relazioni of the Venetians become available for France in the second quarter of the century (and it should be emphasised that Machiavelli’s 1512 account is earlier than most of them ; there is no good reason to suppose that any were ever preserved for the medieval period) they give highly static judgments, more concerned with broad structures of politics and government. [5] Many modern accounts of early modern politics share some of the characteristics of kremlinology and often depend only on a single source. Nevertheless, it is the case that political comment is infinitely more varied for the sixteenth century than for previous periods ranging from ambassadors to memoranda on the court such as that drawn up by Catherine de Medici for Henri III around 1574 [6] and major literary work such as that of Agrippa d’Aubigné. This has many implications for the discussion of political history but may also have created a false impression.
In terms of literary stereotypes there was a continuation of the late medieval preoccupations with courtly court corruption in book II of course, in the reign of Henri III when Agrippa d’Aubigné started his savage indictment of mignons and destabilisation of the normal or routine processes of government. This was particularly the case, of became imperceptibly assimilated as the notion of royal acts of endearment or criticism.

Jean Clerée had inveighed against the immorality of the ‘bragard thought that the term only became one of abuse around 1575, though early in the century the preacher on his riots through the streets of Paris in 1517, to the disapproval of ‘le populaire.’ Pierre Champion favourites like the ‘jeunes gentilzhommes de ses mygnons et privez’ who accompanied Francis I, masked, fifteenth century. By the first quarter of the sixteenth, it was more frequently used to describe royal acts of without the connotations of undue advantage. The word translation of Guevara. In the sense of one particularly singled out by his authority by Jacques de Rochemore in his 1555 first and augmented editions of Robert Estienne’s Dictionnaire françoislatin appeared much before the mid-sixteenth. Le Roux suggests it developed as such some time between the fourteenth century, the specific usage to designate a royal favourite does not seem to have survived the early fifteenth century. Though the words ‘favoriser’ and ‘faveur’ were in common use which, for a marshal Boucicaud for instance, offered a straightforward ‘frame of values’ in a complex world. The Songe du Vergier relates how when the prince might say « J’ay grant chaut, il dira “Je sue.” “J’ay fret”, “je tremble”. » [13] This was the common coin of anti-court literature through the centuries, many of its motifs indeed going back to classical times. In the late fourteenth century Philippe de Mézières regularly employed the term ‘Mahomet’ for the royal favourites whom he criticised for improper exercise of private influence. He remarked that ‘s’il y a par adventure aucun preudome en la court qui die verite, duquel ilz ayent aucune douteance, jamais ne fineront ou par une voye ou par l’autre tant que le preudomme sera chacie hors de la court’ and, while he acknowledged they had always existed, thought they should only exist for the good of kingdoms. [14] The term was closely related to the more widely known ‘Marmousets’ (initially grotesques, by extension favourites, a term brought into wider currency by Michelet, based on a remark of Froissart’s at the time of the attack on the constable de Clisson in 1392). [15] These terms seem not to have survived the early fifteenth century. Though the words ‘favoriser’ and ‘faveur’ were in common use by the fourteenth century, the specific usage to designate a royal favourite does not seem to have appeared much before the mid-sixteenth. Le Roux suggests it developed as such some time between the first and augmented editions of Robert Estienne’s Dictionnaire françoislatin in 1549 and 1584. It may be that the Italian form of favorito began to influence French usage from around 1500 and it is certainly used in the sense of one particularly singled out by his authority by Jacques de Rochemore in his 1555 translation of Guevara. [16] Until the mid-sixteenth century, though, it has a largely positive charge without the connotations of undue advantage. The word mignon already had been used to describe the trusted servant of a great aristocrat in the fifteenth century. By the first quarter of the sixteenth, it was more frequently used to describe royal favourites like the ‘jeunes gentilzhommes de ses mygnons et privez’ who accompanied Francis I, masked, on his riots through the streets of Paris in 1517, to the disapproval of ‘le populaire.’ Pierre Champion thought that the term only became one of abuse around 1575, though early in the century the preacher Jean Clerée had inveighed against the immorality of the ‘bragard mignon de court.’ When the word minion came into Scots and English in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, it could imply both endearment or criticism. [17] In France during the later sixteenth century, the mignon and the favori became imperceptibly assimilated as the notion of royal acts of grâce came in some senses to imply the destabilisation of the normal or routine processes of government. This was particularly the case, of course, in the reign of Henri III when Agrippa d’Aubigné started his savage indictment of mignons and court corruption in book II of Les Tragiques.

In terms of literary stereotypes there was a continuation of the late medieval preoccupations with courtly
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[p. 4]

As I hope to show below, the main characteristics of Renaissance court life were already apparent in the

[p. 5]

Clearly, then, language mutated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries but does this indicate

fundamental changes in attitudes? Renaissance and medieval historians have tended to give some very
different meanings to the concept of a court. Though the term 'la cour' for the royal entourage was well

established and appears in the writings of Philippe de Mézières and Christine de Pisan, some have argued

that the court was the creation of the Renaissance era and there was no 'court' (in the sense used by early

modernists) in the middle ages, just an assembly of vassals in which the king's household was often

overshadowed by those of the great princes. In this, they were no doubt influenced by the powerful

tradition of viewing the court as an extension of the king's *maisnie* (retinue) or *familia* (household) as a

place of government and of domestic service. Francis Decrue, for instance, thought it took on its modern

sense only in the sixteenth century, a view followed in modern times by J.-F. Solnon and even by Ellery

Schalk, for whom, while he has stressed the build up of the king's *clientèle*, the court was 'simply the

enlarged household of the king'. [26] One recent thesis has followed this tradition in asserting that 'la

cour fut l'invention de l'époque moderne'. [27] As Malcolm Vale has reminded us, in comparing the

princely courts of England and the Netherlands in the fourteenth century, the influential argument

disseminated by Norbert Elias's vast panorama on the civilizing process, has reinforced the stereotype of

political modernity as essentially created by the court society between roughly 1450 and 1600. [28]

As I hope to show below, the main characteristics of Renaissance court life were already apparent in the

fourteenth century. In the first half of the sixteenth century, a period in which the crown was relatively

successful in containing political threats, patronage was sought and politics played out in the royal

entourage. There is no reason to suppose that some kind of court factional politics was in any way new in

the reign of Francis I but how did developments in the structure and role of the royal household influence

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inconveniences of a nomadic life where village lodgings provided only 'Quelque propos de leur pays de

d'entourage. There is no reason to suppose that some kind of court factional politics was in any way new in

the reign of Francis I but how did developments in the structure and role of the royal household influence

this? [19] Castiglione's handbook for courtly life appeared as *Le courtisan* in 1537. It repeated the

traditional notion that the court of France was hostile to the study of letters, though Francis I was praised

as a patron. Machiavelli had made the point in his sour aphorisms of 1512 which included the observation

that the French were enemies of Latin culture and only favoured Italians who had nothing to lose (and by

implication were completely dependent). [20] In Castiglione's book II, though, Federico Fregoso does at

least defend the French courtier against the accusation of arrogance by saying he is courteous and

modest, though given to 'a certain liberty as well as unceremonious familiarity.' [21] However, it was

Castiglione's supposed praise of dissimulation, in fact the cultivation of manners in order to serve the

prince in the interest of truth and virtue, that immediately evoked a hostile response from the

rhétoriqueurs working in the French anti-court literary tradition set in the early fifteenth century by Alain

Chartier's *De vita curiali*. Chartier, though, was being to some extent supplanted in fashion in France by

the Spanish bishop Antonio Guevara, whose *Menosprecio de la Corte* appeared in Antoine Alaigre's

translation as *Mespris de la cour* in 1542, while Claude Chappuis was about to publish his rather flat

eulogy of the court of Francis I, *Discours de la cour* (1543). Guevara's work went through at least nine

editions, many of them bound up with Antoine Heroet's *Amy de la cour by way of contrast. [22] The

*Mespris* neatly juxtaposed, backed by copious examples from Seneca, the pleasures of country life that

were to be brought to life by Noël du Fail in his *Propos Rustiques* of 1547, with the miseries of the court

vividly described in his *Eutrapel* of 1585. [23] Du Fail's description of the court in chapter 18 owed much

to Guevara's examples and deployed the stereotypes of the 'jeu de boute-hors', office seeking courtiers

'tendant le gland qui tombe', brokers 'vendant en detail … les faveurs et fumees de la cour.' [24] Yet

even as critical a writer as Guevara, whose other work was published in French in 1555 as *Le favory de

Court*, dedicated by Jacques de Rochemore to the supreme favourite Anne de Montmorency, deployed a

frankly cynical and practical guide to how to survive in courtly politics while retaining some integrity. [25]
institutionalisation as a household and its ‘protean’ character as a political and cultural force. In the latter terms it was virtually impossible to define. As a household, its institutional character is apparent in the fact that, technically dispersed from reign to reign, its shows remarkable continuity in administration. One of the most important developments of the fourteenth century – and one which occurred in a number of countries – was the change on the role of the chamber from that of being one of the administrative métiers to being a highly charged if informal collection of inner royal servants. [30]

[p. 6]

Those servants - those of the chambre - are now seen as central to the court politics of the sixteenth century, yet this body was long established. In the chambre, which gave the tone to the whole court, the nobility dominated and indeed by the fifteenth century formally included all the great officers; the Constable, the Admiral, grand Bouteiller and the like. Whereas Mézières at the end of the fourteenth century was concerned about excessive numbers and thought the ‘magnificence and glory ... of your court will shine forth not in large numbers but in silence and good regulation pleasant to wise men’ [31], Robert de Balsac in the 1490s suggested that one of the finest ornaments of a prince’s rule was to have a ‘mass of fine knights, men of experience and clerics at his court’, so that visitors would see that he was a ‘sufficient prince and his household one of prudence and good government.’ [32] The Chamber was both a central department of the household and a location, the king’s bedroom which, as continued to be the case down to the seventeenth century, constituted the bulk of the king’s living space and was widely accessible. Its staff were called the king’s ‘familiers’, members of his ‘famille’ and ‘maisnie’, stressing the personal relationship. Under Charles VII, the king’s closest confidants, people like André de Villequier, Guillaume Gouffier and Raoul de Gaucourt were called his ‘mignons.’ From an early date, the post of master of requests of the household had been a stepping stone to higher positions in the officialdom for rising men and still in the fifteenth century remained in the household to sift the cases to be retained by the king’s direct justice. The career of Enguerrand de Marigny as chamberlain to Philip IV is an interesting indicator. By the mid-fourteenth century more and more nobles were seeking appointment as chamberlains for the access the post gave to the king; Mézières suggested that this had happened under Charles V ‘because of the weakened state of the ship of France and to win over the love of the knights whom he needed.’ [33] One of the main signs of this development was the growth in numbers of court chamberlains from a handful in late Capetian times to 45 in 1387, when it was reduced to 20. The chamberlains, in daily contact with the king because they ‘protected the king’s body’ [34] and slept in his chamber, were present at his lever and coucher, held his confidence, knew his secrets and (much as the gentlemen of the chamber in the renaissance) were used to convey his will. They were what the Religieux de Saint-Denis called the king’s ‘familiarissimi’.

[p. 7]

At this stage to be ‘conseiller et chambellan du roi’ was not, as it was to become by the end of the fifteenth century, an honorific sign of royal trust enjoyed by a wide range of regional officials; it conveyed real power. Bureau de La Rivière, first chamberlain to Charles V and in whose arms the king died on 16 September 1380, [35] owed his substantial power to household influence and only became a royal councillor later. The chambellans did not look after the bodily needs of the king; this was done by the valets de chambre, 52 of them in 1378, regarded by Mézières, who thought no more than six were needed, as ‘men of low estate ... who will not be very loyal or discreet.’ [36] They should not for that to be underestimated; present at the king’s lever and coucher, they heard many of his secrets and they too could aspire to be ‘curials’.

Like the chambellans, the maîtres d’hôtel - 13 of them in the late fourteenth century - held a leading position in the chamber, were both administrators at court and military men at need; Robert de Boissay (appointed 1383) was killed at Agincourt. The grand maître d’hôtel could sometimes, as in the era of Jean de Montaigu (1401-9), hold serious political power as well as a dominant role at court. The post of maître d’hôtel was highly prized and conveyed real influence; hence the tendency for a limited hereditary transmission to appear in the fifteenth century. Boissay’s cleric son became maître des requêtes, grand maître d’hôtel to the dauphin Charles, conseiller et chambellan and ambassador. A minor post at court could lead on to great things. Pierre de Fenin, a minor nobleman of Artois, began as panetier to Charles VI and ended as prévôt of Arras in 1433 [37]. Raoul de Gaucourt, son of a Picard noble who was also royal chamberlain, at 13 was valet tranchant to Charles VI (1384), became governor of Dauphiné and captain of
Rouen in 1449.

The structure of the court as a household, then, was deeply conservative and by the mid-sixteenth century had changed relatively little for two centuries. In the main the old ordonnances for discipline were only modified in marginal matters like the arrangements for the king’s table service. However, in its quality as a protean centre of politics and magnificence, it undoubtedly grew in terms of numbers from the late fifteenth century. Those on the payment role of the maison du roi alone increased three times between 1461 and 1495-6, when they stood at 366, and nearly doubled again by the later reign of Francis I when they reached just over 600. Though Francis I did not issue any new ordonnances, he did formalise service by quarters and, crucially, instituted on his accession the body of gentilshommes de la chambre, a title used in his household as duke of Valois but hitherto unknown in the court of France.

Though there is some uncertainty over their origins, its seems reasonable to conclude that this formalised and increased the prestige of the group of those vaguely referred as ‘de la chambre du Roy’ in the late fifteenth century, the sort of men in whose presence the duke of Cleves in 1461 voiced his complaints about Louis XI, ‘lesquils il veoit que c’estoient gens pour luy rapporter ce qu’ils orroient dire’ or the young gentlemen of Charles VIII’s chamber present at his funeral. The gentilshommes de la chambre grew in numbers during Francis I’s reign from 21 to 55 and again under Henri II from 64 to 99. The title may be viewed partly as an honour, though attendance at court was frequent and the head of the company for much of the time a figure of prime importance like Anne de Montmorency or marshal Saint-André. There has been a great deal of emphasis on both sides of the Channel concerning these developments, yet as I have tried to show, in principle not much was new here. The gentilshommes de la chambre were very similar in origins and functions to the chamberlains. If anything, they extended their purchase on office and patronage in the sixteenth century. The gentilshommes were undoubtedly courtiers who held local power. Of the 128 under Francis I, at least 70 were significant in central or provincial administration, holding the posts of 33 baillis or sénéchaux, 27 governors and 28 ambassadors. These, with the activities of the maitres d’hôtel in provincial administration and as ambassadors indicate that the royal entourage concentrated a powerful body of men.

Office was not everything, however. The answer to factions, from the royal point of view, was the favourite. As Nicolas Le Roux has put it, ‘favour’ in royal courts can be seen as a regime of informal power not resting on social status, nor on offices held but rather on an act of choice, stemming from the king’s personal and emotional selection of servant. It was signified by the extent and number of acts which singled out an individual for favour, forming part of a process, running from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, whereby the crown sought to associate the nobility with political power by acts of grace. Examples of favour included inclusion in the king’s company at privileged moments, public displays of ‘good cheer’ or ‘caressing’ and the allocation of the best lodgings at the royal château. The best kind of favourite, as Brantôme made clear, was a public person who would offer his master sage advice, the worst those unworthy of trust.

There is, then, a powerful element of the ancient aristotelian and medieval concept of rule by ‘good counsel’ in all this, exemplified at the start of the sixteenth century by Claude de Seyssel and at the very end by an anonymous advisor to Henri IV who argued that counsel was the only answer to the myriad affairs ‘ausquelz ne le loyer ne l’admirable esprit d’aucun prince ne seroit bastant de vacquer.’ But no prince could cope with the many counsellors ‘qui sont en trop mauvaise ou plustost en trop bonne intelligence ensemble, se contredisant et cabalisant ensemblement au prejudice de leur seigneur.’ The answer is to repose trust in an honest and prudent ‘confidant’ who owed everything to him in the sense of being rewarded fittingly so as not to be diverted into lining his own pocket and above all to support him against all envious combinations. If this were not done (Henri II and his sons are singled out for criticism here) ‘on luy mettroit à la queue en ung instant ung vallet de chambre quy, luy fermant la porte, le rendroit le plus petit et miserable de son royaume.’

Le Roux tends to the argument that the constable Anne de Montmorency is in some sense a new kind of figure in the faveur that he enjoyed. Basing himself on early seventeenth-century writings, he suggests that Montmorency was regarded as the first true ‘favourite’ in the history of the kingdom; before him ‘the fortunes of courtiers had always been mediocre while the houses of the great feudatories .... owed their
position to their alliances and not to the largesse of kings.’ Cedric Michon’s study of Jean Cardinal de Lorraine has led to the re-evaluation of the dominance of Montmorency as a favourite in that Lorraine was certainly closer to the King in emotional terms. It could also be questioned whether the role of the favourite is such an innovation in the sixteenth century. We might think of Enguerrand de Marigny in the early fourteenth century or Bureau de la Rivière in the early fifteenth. The royal affinity that developed in the reign of Charles VII also poses questions. This included families whose names recursed generation after generation in council and household posts: families like Gouffier, Amboise, Chabannes, Batarnay, Montmorency or, on the lesser level, the Saint-Gelais of Poitou, servants of the Orléans-Angoulême dynasty over four generations between the late fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries. Among humbler families, the Vendômois Ronsard family included Olivier, échanson to Louis XI, a supporter of the Public Weal but taken back by the king after 1465, his son Louis a follower of Louis XII as duke of Orléans and his son, the poet Pierre, who entered the Dauphin’s household in 1536.

With the accession of Orléans and Angoulême branches in 1498 and 1515 new groups of fidèles entered royal service without substantially displacing those already established. The king therefore chose his confidants from a range of suitable men whose loyalty to the crown or to his immediate family was well established. Montmorency and his successors as royal favourites under the later Valois plainly emerged very much from this milieu.

How innovative were changes in the physical setting of the court during the Renaissance? Few historians would deny the role of the Renaissance as the setting for royal display devised to deploy a vision of power and the duties of obedience. However, the fourteenth century court was also, to use Guenée’s term ‘the theatre of royal magnificence.’ Though his evidence from France is limited, Vale’s assertion of the highly developed and complex nature of medieval court ceremonial seems irrefutable. After the grandeur of the later fourteenth century, material provisions certainly shrank in the era of the kingdom of Bourges and took on a decidedly sombre aspect at the time of Louis XI’s retreats to Plessis-lès-Tours. The first half of the sixteenth century saw a significant augmentation in the ‘magnificence’ of the court’s theatrical context in comparison with Louis XI’s reign. The acquisition of the houses of the Orléans apanage added to the splendour of the residences in the Loire, as did Chambord built by Francis I. Francis’s move towards the Ile-de-France in the 1520s was to add not only Fontainebleau but also Madrid with substantially transformed residences at Saint-Germain-en-Laye and the Louvre. Formidable fortresses fitted out for domestic use were available west of the capital at Saint-Germain and east at Vincennes. In the city itself there was the rambling hotel Saint-Paul near the Bastille as well as the Louvre. Formal ceremonies of state took place in the Palais at Paris, of course, much as in England Westminster retained such a role after the fire of 1513.

All this increased magnificence did not, though, substantially transform the simplicity of the king’s daily routine or his accessibility to his courtiers. One observer in 1544 said that he who had not seen the court of France knew nothing of grandeur. Isabella d’Este, on the other hand, remarked in 1517 that the disorder of the French court was ‘stupenda e mirabile.’ The king in France was by tradition more open of access to his subjects than the kings of England or Castile, simply in terms of the layout of his apartments. However, the material setting of royal power was notably more grandiose in the later fourteenth century than it was to be a century later.

When Charles V re-fitted his logis in the north wing of the Louvre, he had seven rooms at his personal disposal. After the great break of 1418 the court transferred its centre to the Loire, first of all at Bourges and then, even after the recapture of Paris, to Tours, though not in the city itself but at the country manor of Montilz. The logis of the king in the later fifteenth century seldom involved more than a salle, chambre and retrait. Elaborate court ceremonial had been formalized in the ‘Estats de France’ by Charles V and then transmitted to the Burgundian court. Georges Chastellain, visiting the court in 1454 was struck by the envy that the luxury of the Burgundian nobles provoked, while the Milanese ambassadors received by Louis XI remarked that ‘in this court there is no pomp.’ The upheavals of the Armagnac-Burgundian wars led to a return to simplicity in the manners of the French court which by the sixteenth century was elevated into an ideology of frankness and liberty in the relations between the French kings and their nobles. By 1562, the Venetian Suriano observed with astonishment lackeys freely entering the
Recent work on the increasing privacy and secrecy of the royal apartments in Tudor England stands in some contrast to what we now know from the work of Monique Châtenet about the accessibility of the royal apartments in French palaces, where the king’s private space was restricted to two or three cabinets leading from his semi-public chambre. This was normal in the mid-fifteenth century. Louis XI called the Milanese envoy into his chamber after dinner in 1466 to discuss news. When the English agent John Boon was received by Louis in his chamber at Amboise, he recalled years later that the King had sat with him on a bench discussing Edward IV’s dealings with the count of Armagnac, while the royal favourites du Lude, Craon and Tanneugy du Chastel sat on the bed reading the English king’s letters. The importance of the denial of access is shown, when, in the year 1461, the duke of Cleves felt aggrieved with Louis XI and decided to withdraw from the French court. Chastellain records that he could gain no access to the King’s chamber, either by asking or knocking, though ‘plusieurs de petit estat, gens de toute sorte, il en vist saillir et entrer.’ He left without further leave. The question must be asked whether this informality meant that less importance was attached to exclusive access to the monarch’s presence in the politics of the French court. Commentators seem still to have thought attendance on the king vital; any politician hoping to control affairs preferred to be with the king. The French translation of Guevara underlined the difficulty of acquiring ‘la grace des Princes’ and the even greater problem of retaining it.

In this sense, access was crucial, since, as he put it, ‘la fortune n’a point accoustumé remunerer de telles graces et avantages ceux qui vivent et demeurent en oysiveté en leurs maisons et encore moins les Courtisans qui ne vivent en Court’. Another contemporary wrote that he is a poor courtier who ‘ne sait ni quand le roi se lève, ni quand il se couche’. In consequence, greater openness of access meant that, in France, the privileged times of the lever and the coucher were crucial for influencing royal decisions (and, incidentally moments of the royal routine far less susceptible to visual depiction that the le diner, la messe and la chasse). Louis XI frequently held audiences at his lever and urgent news frequently reached the king at that time. In June 1466, he was brought urgent news from Italy by the Milanese ambassador while having his boots taken off for bed around midnight. More than sixty years later, Jean du Bellay described his attendance at the lever of Francis I in 1530, at which ‘la bouche ne m’a fermé jusques à cette heure.’ ‘Ledit seigneur, auquel ay parlé en son lict, seul, plus d’une heure, a trouvé tous mes propoz si bon que rien ne s’en pourroyt souhaiter davantaige’. A confrontation between du Bellay and the premier président over heresy charges in late December 1530 actually took place in the king’s chamber after a council meeting. Again, in 1535 Du Bellay recalled a royal order given for the payment of a gift to Gian-Francesco Orsini, ‘il me souvient bien que le Roy le dist ung jour à Rue, en se deshabillant, que tous ceux qui estoient à la deshabiller l’oyrent.’ News of the conclusion of a truce in Artois reached the king at his lever on 1 August 1537. Castillon gentilhomme de la chambre recommended by Montmorency, returning from embassy to England in March 1539, reported to Francis in his chamber ‘sayeng on tyme he was in his bed, an other tyme he was out of his bed sytteng by the beddes syde’. The informality of decisions and discussions is shown by many sources. The messenger from the beleaguered marshal du Biez at Montreuil made the difficult journey through enemy lines to find the king at Iternay ‘et le trouva ... en sa garde-robe et le dîner, la messe et la chasse’. A confrontation between du Bellay and the premier président over heresy charges in late December 1530 actually took place in the king’s chamber after a council meeting. Again, in 1535 Du Bellay recalled a royal order given for the payment of a gift to Gian-Francesco Orsini, ‘il me souvient bien que le Roy le dist ung jour à Rue, en se deshabillant, que tous ceux qui estoient à la deshabiller l’oyrent.’ News of the conclusion of a truce in Artois reached the king at his lever on 1 August 1537. Castillon gentilhomme de la chambre recommended by Montmorency, returning from embassy to England in March 1539, reported to Francis in his chamber ‘sayeng on tyme he was in his bed, an other tyme he was out of his bed sytteng by the beddes syde’. The informality of decisions and discussions is shown by many sources. The messenger from the beleaguered marshal du Biez at Montreuil made the difficult journey through enemy lines to find the king at Iternay ‘et le trouva ... en sa garde-robe et le dîner, la messe et la chasse’. The question must be asked whether this informality meant that less importance was attached to exclusive access to the monarch’s presence in the politics of the French court. Commentators seem still to have thought attendance on the king vital; any politician hoping to control affairs preferred to be with the king. The French translation of Guevara underlined the difficulty of acquiring ‘la grace des Princes’ and the even greater problem of retaining it.

Proximity to the king at crucial moments rather than simple access to him was thus regarded as vital. In England, this has given rise to a serious debate over the influence of personal access to the monarch, the extent of his freedom of choice and consequently the role of faction in the reign of Henry VIII. Machiavelli in the early sixteenth century noted that ‘whoever wishes to carry a point at court must have plenty of money, great diligence and good fortune.’ In the first part of Francis I’s reign, we can instance the importance of access in the role of two crucial patronage brokers for the venal trade of offices in the Parlement were the royal councillors Odet de Foix-Lautrec and Thomas de Foix-Lescun, with the details handled by Florimond Robertet. Though the transactions were obscure and complicated,
Lesun was expecting to net 48-50,000 écus from one deal. [65] Robertet, as principal royal secretary, knew what he was talking about when, discussing the duke of Albany’s plans in May 1527 and whether he should come to court, remarked that ‘à vous parler franchement, peu de choses se font pour ceux qui sont absens’. [66] This was a recurrent theme. Jean du Bellay pointed out to Anne de Montmorency in June 1530, when the grand maître was busy negotiating for the return of the king’s children from captivity in Spain but attacked at court behind his back, that he should bear with the king’s moods: ‘c’est grande chose que l’absence’. Marshal Brissac’s brother wrote to him when he was governor of Piedmont under Henri II, ‘Tachez de vous en venir aux meilleures et plus grandes journées que vous pourrez afin de ne point laisser enveillir le bien et le service que vous avez faicts au roi duquel il est plus mémoratif en souvenant que personne qui soit près de lui’. [67] In 1546, admiral d’Annebault, while chief minister, during a treaty negotiation with the English near Calais, became tetchy at the delay. William Paget reported he ‘had rather leave all this matter in doubt then to be so long from his masters sleve and specially if he should go home without bringing it to passe to his maistres satisfaction’. This would leave him in the position of the Constable in 1540, as a minister who failed to deliver what he had promised. It was an opinion confirmed by Ippolito d’Este, cardinal of Ferrara and royal councillor that: ‘Mons. Ammiraglio non sta molto volentieri fuora,’ and by the bishop of Arras in September 1544, describing the way Annebault kept him waiting at an early morning meeting from 7 until 9 in order to attend the king in his chamber ‘et qu’il entroit seulmente en la chambre du Roy pour savoir ce qu’il faisoit’. [68]

By the 1540s, factional conflicts at court were a reality widely observed. [69] How far, though, does this go back?

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Here we have to be careful about terminology; can we always compare like with like? Does the supremacy of Montmorency as the first true royal favourite, already noted in the discussion of Le Roux’s notion of faveur, betoken something rather new in terms of court faction? As we have seen the requirement of the favourite to offer wise counsel was a traditional one. Personal antagonisms, of course, are immemorial, As Erasmus remarked in 1517 of princely courts in general, they were the abode of ‘factions and secret dissensions’ and ever the source of conflict. [70] We know relatively less about earlier periods, of course. As in England, the personality of monarchs was decisive in the form factions took and dictated an oscillation between what has been seen as the ‘open’ and ‘closed’ competition for power represented by the regimes of Henry VIII and Henry VII. In France this oscillation swung between court faction and party strife which involved political action outside the court, a pattern which continued until the mid-seventeenth century. The interplay between these two forms of activity constitutes the essence of early modern politics.

The mid-fourteenth century saw a move towards heightened party strife as a result of the weaknesses of the early Valois regime and military defeat. Combinations began to form, as they had in the early fourteenth century, around the idea of ‘reform’ but the importance of the mid-fourteenth century lies in the continuities of political action and discourse then established. The first point worth making here is that the political factionalism of the fourteenth century in some ways has more in common with that of the era of the Wars of Religion rather than the period of the Renaissance [71] but even in the latter case there are some continuities. Here the role of the house of Valois-Evreux-Navarre was significant. By coincidence, kings of Navarre who were also major princes within France played crucial roles in rebellions in 1350s-60s and the 1560s-80s. Charles of Navarre started in the 1330s to give pensions to the leading noble families of northern France - Coucy, Poix, Raineval, Fiennes - and gathered a substantial military following in Normandy and Picardy in the 1350s as well as using the Collège de Navarre in Paris as a base for reform ideas. [72] Apart from his personal ambitions, Charles of Navarre assembled around himself a group of nobles and bourgeois who advanced the idea of “reform” and the elimination of corruption. This came to a head in the Estates-General of 1356 with the demands for the elimination of coteries in the government, the submission of the choice of all royal officials to the Great Council controlled by the Estates and the dismissal of 22 counsellors.

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The reign of Charles V saw a swing back to interior court politics. Many of the Navarrist nobles were won over to the Valois cause in the late 1350s and 1360s and would dominate the Council through the Melun bothers down to the mid-1370s. From about 1375, another combination of figures, many of them of non-
The Marmousets were excluded from power in 1388, but their influence did not end there. Under Charles VI, they continued to hold positions of power, maintaining a web of alliances and clientage. The queen mother, Isabeau of Bavaria, was a key figure in this period. The Marmousets' political influence was rooted in their aristocratic background and their long-standing service to Charles V. Their rise to power was a result of the instability and political turmoil of the late fourteenth century, including figures such as Bureau de La Rivière, Jean de La Grange, and Enguerrand de Coucy.

In the early fifteenth century, the Marmousets were challenged by the issues of warfare and financial instability. The regime of the uncles, who sought to maintain the status quo, was undermined by the growth of opposition, particularly from the Navarrese, who were former Navarrists but shared a common point of view on public affairs. The Marmousets' fall from power in 1392 was perhaps inevitable given the lack of opposition to the royal uncles and the strength of their financial resources. However, the period from 1388 to 1392 was characterized by a wave of anger against those who controlled the bureaucracy, leading to the collapse of the Marmousets' influence.

The key concept is that of "reform" which did not exclude the king's consultation of the three estates of his subjects. The form of Philippe de Mézières' Songe du Viel Pèlerin, they had at their disposal a work of political thought of the first order. It is the case that they were severely damaged by the accusation that they had been lining their own pockets (not entirely untrue) and they did not manage to assure the stability of royal finances (though they did build up something of a reserve). However, though they failed in many of their objectives, Henneman has suggested they were the 'architects of the French state' and Autrand their rule 'consolidated decisively the foundations of the state.' Such comments always have to be treated with caution, of course and are closely paralleled by J.W. Allen's 1928 assertion à propos the sixteenth century that 'the Politiques were the founders of the “modern state.”'

The Marmousets' fall from power after the onset of Charles VI's madness in 1392 was perhaps inevitable given the lack of opposition to the royal uncles. The fall of the Marmousets was a result of the combination of personal enmity and the desire to control the court from outside, a period now brought much more clearly into focus in terms of court politics in the light of the work of M. Nordberg and Robert Famiglietti on court politics, Bernard Guenée on party strife and a number of important studies of Isabeau of Bavaria. Charles VI's brother Louis d'Orléans had well before this been establishing ties of clientage with Marmouset officials by appointing them to his household so there was already an overlap.
Gradually, the Marmousets shaded into a new combination in public life, that of the Orléanists. From the late 1390s, Orléans - ever in need of greater funds in view of the smallness of his appanage - was exercising much more pressure on the financial officialdom in order to sustain his policies and incurring the unpopularity for which he was to pay dearly. It was here that the clash with Burgundy really became venomous. The costs of political stability in the period were enormous. Payments, pensions and one-off presents to courtiers, great officers of the crown and great nobles could not have amounted to less than 500,000 francs in 1400, a substantial portion of yearly revenues. Hence the venomous competition for control of the revenues.

There are of course problems of terminology if we are to talk about ‘parties’ in this period. Jacques Heers, for instance, wished to exclude the term ‘party’ from medieval politics as too anachronistic, while that of ‘faction’ also implies an ideological content which has to be defined. Can we talk of the Armagnacs and Burgundians in these terms? Françoise Autrand described these factions as akin to political parties with programmes and territorial roots but was careful to stress their fragility, particularly in resources. Both of them depended on the control of the royal financial administration and that is their dominating characteristic. M. Rey has estimated that the dukes drew an average of 800,000 lt. p.a. from the royal finances throughout the reign of Charles VI. These funds, recognition by the crown of princely independence and collegiality, allowed them to construct clienteles consisting of both gentilshommes and bourgeois who hoped to gain a myriad of minor offices and benefits from their patrons’ political clout. Thus one of the salient characteristics of the factions was that the princely leaders sought to succeed by ‘colonizing’ the royal administration as far as possible (in that respect the Orleanists were more successful).

But to this were added two further dimensions. After the death of Orléans the Armagnac party which emerged from his clientele was cemented by formal oaths which made the grouping both a private alliance and something akin to a treaty. Finally both ‘factions’ sought to appeal to public opinion by distributing political programmes in the form of letters to great institutions and pamphlets, songs and pasquils for street distribution which stressed the good of the kingdom, the control of abuses and “reform”. This was even more apparent at times of great upheaval such as after the murder of Jean sans Peur in 1419, when both the Burgundian and Dauphinist leaderships issued batteries of letters to the towns of their obedience in order to gather and maintain support; in effect an attempt at news management.

Symbols came into their own; for instance the white scarf of the Armagnacs which even the King was made to wear during his brief return to sanity in 1414. In this game the duke of Burgundy came out as the champion of the ancient French liberties and made good his case by ensuring (1411-12) the restoration of self-government to Paris which had been removed in 1383. Already by 1411 there was talk of the “Armagnac” party even though the formal leader of the cause was the young duke of Orléans. Count Bernard d’Armagnac, father-in-law of Orléans was an old ally of duke Louis but more importantly in a position to produce real military clout from his Gascon power-base. At Paris, so often assumed to be a Burgundian redoubt, the Armagnacs could count on the milieu of the financiers and the money changers and those linked to duke of Berry’s clientele in the royal administration. This to some extent explains the failure of the Burgundians to maintain their control of Paris. The programme they represented has been described as the “debris” of the Marmousets’ cause, the idea of sound finance being replaced by that of heavy taxes raised without consent. The Burgundian ‘party’ is much better known; it firstly represented the cause of the extended Burgundian family clan backed more or less solidly by the domains of the dukes in France and the Low Countries as well as Picardy and other parts of northern France. Burgundy began to bring in another factor, the streets of Paris, against his enemies, with the result being the Cabochienne uprising of 1413. In Paris, the world of commerce and of the street was largely Burgundian, while from 1409 the party made advances in the Chambre de Comptes and the Parlement. Their programme ostensibly involved economies in government and the reduction if not abolition of many taxes; hence its popularity, so often denounced by French historians as demagoguery. The popular reform movement later called the ‘Cabochiens’ after the slaughterman who played a leading role in the street movements of 1413 was not an adjunct of the Burgundian party and its excesses in fact lead to the collapse of Jean sans Peur’s rule in Paris in 1413 and the inception of 5 years of Armagnac control of the government.

Factional disputes take on another dimension when the royal court begins to outstrip those of the
magnates in political dominance. It is possible to glimpse elements of court politics in the reign of Charles VII and even more so in that of Louis XI. Between 1418 and 1422, Charles VI had been nominal king in the hands of the Burgundians with the dauphin Charles self-proclaimed Regent.

The latter’s entourage was dominated by Armagnacs who had counselled the murder of John the Fearless and hope of peace only lay in some sort of reconciliation with the Burgundians. But not even the exclusion of the Armagnacs from power in 1425 could do this. It was the fall of Georges de La Trémoille from favour in 1433 that opened the way - under the influence of ‘Angevin’ councillors - to the negotiations that culminated at Arras in 1435 and allowed steps to be taken for the reconquest. Upheavals such as the Praguerie and the War of the Public Weal seemed to presage the return to party strife as in the early fifteenth century but were checked and politics returned to the channels of court intrigue. It has been argued that, after the crisis of 1425 in Charles VII’s entourage (the removal of the Armagnac counsellors on the pressure of the King’s mother-in-law Queen Yolande anxious to reconcile the King with Brittany), the fall first of Richemont (1428) and then of La Trémoille (1433) and the Treaty of Arras in 1435, a process of ‘osmosis’ went on between the Armagnac and Burgundian factions and that this was achieved with relative ease [89]. This may well have been the case as far as the Parlement and other sovereign courts are concerned. But as far as the Council was concerned, even after 1435, there were very few Burgundian adherents allowed in [90]. Most groupings kept some sort of contact with the house of Burgundy for insurance purposes but had no interest in seeing Burgundy triumph. What comes across more clearly about the strenuous battles for dominance at the court of Charles VII is that the political groupings no longer have much ideological content to them. In fact, they have been more properly described as ‘alliances’, particularly in evidence during the period when La Trémoille was getting rid of the Constable de Richemont in 1428, or in the series of dangerous conspiracies aimed at kidnapping and murdering La Trémoille between 1428 and 1434. These saw constant realignments of interest with the underlying objective of building up territorial power-bases which would ensure an ability to control the power of the crown in the interest of a particular alliance. [91] So we see Richemont and John V of Brittany linked to Louis d’Amboise and the house of Anjou while La Trémoille had the ‘alliance’ of certain western feudal powers, the Craon, Laval and Gilles de Rais.

Bernard Chevalier thought that it was not possible to write the history of the court under Louis XI (presumably in the absence of extensive ambassadorial reports and the anecdotes of memoir writers which might shed light on factions).

The extensive reports of the Milanese, though important, tell us relatively little about the secret inner workings of the royal entourage and are more concerned with the impact of aristocratic pressures on the court from outside. [92] This is an important element of the problem. The richness and diversity of the sources for politics in the sixteenth century reflect a more diverse agenda of reportage rather than a change of activity. Commynes, who paints such a complex portrait of his master, is generally reticent about power struggles among his servants. However, Arlette Jouanna, in discussing the courtiers of Henri III, has argued that Henri’s mignons, as a group of middle-ranking nobles upon whom the king could rely in order to balance the power of great aristocrats, were prefigured by the emergence in the late fifteenth century of the composite oligarchy called by Mikhail Harsgor ‘les maîtres du royaume’. [93] Yet while Harsgor gives full scope for patronage and the relentless pursuit of power and offices by his oligarchy, his outline of factions within it is rather unclear. His work draws attention to a situation which remained the norm throughout the sixteenth century: that both the immediate royal entourage and the council were avenues of power and favour and, of course, often overlapped. The power struggles of the late fifteenth century also involved an important element of grandee politics: the attempt to impose their will on the king from outside his court by provincial magnates and princes of the blood that is characteristic of the Public Weal and the power struggles of the 1460s and 1480s and was to be so again from the 1560s. The important point here is that the development of a composite royal affinity, out of the fidèles of the houses of Valois, Orléans and Angoulême, effectively, though not permanently, isolated the court in some periods from grandee pressure and gave the king a greater degree of political freedom. Regional aristocratic courts did not disappear but declined in relative importance.

It is perhaps obvious that the demeanour and grip of the ruler were the most important aspect of high
politics and a certain consciousness of this may be seen in Brantôme’s remark that:

Nous trouvons que nos roys, et mesmes de nos modernes, ont estés fort subjectz à changer ainsi la fortune d’aucuns leurs favorys, et les faire rouer autour de sa roue, ainsi qu’il leur a pleu et l’humeur leur en prenoit, ou selon les subjectz qu’il leur en ont donnez. Le roy Louys XI s’en fit appeler le maistre ; peu ou nullement le roy Charles son filz ; de mesmes le roy Louys XIIe. Le roy François en fut bon changeur, plus qu’un changeur ne faict en sa bancque, ainsi qu’il le fit parestre tout à coup à M. le connestable, l’admiral de Brion et chancellier Poyet. Le roy Henry ne le fut nullement, ny mesmes les roys François et Charles, ses enfans. Mais Henry Ille et M. d’Alençon, ilz en ont esté bons maistres ceux-là, ainsi que j’espère l’escrire amplement en leurs vies. [94]

Louis XI may have achieved a posthumous reputation for making himself master but the fear he undoubtedly inspired did not necessarily create a harmonious entourage. Between 1461 and the 1490s many struggles in the royal household resulted from the unusual general upheavals stemming from the change of reign. Charles VII’s reign was notable for the turnover of favourites. Louis XI, however, was remarkable for his combination of intelligence and poor ability to handle men. In dismissing so many of the councillors of the previous reign, he provoked a major aristocratic coalition against himself and alienated many useful servants. Trusted advisers of Charles VII such as Pierre de Brézé and Antoine de Chabannes, ‘que plus héoit et reputoit son ennemy’, were dismissed and those, such as Jean de Montauban, the bâtard d’Armagnac and Georges de La Trémoille, who had been with Louis as Dauphin, appointed in their place. [95] The treaty of Conflans (1465) may have envisaged the restitution of the disposessed but there is little sign that Louis accepted his enemies into his confidence unless he had bought them over. His entourage gradually became a composite one of his old retainers and Burgundians like Comynes, Esquerdes and Piennes. Both Dammartin and the Constable of Saint-Pol were formally restored to favour but the suspicions between the latter two ran deep and, in the climate of fear and suspicion that gripped public life by the 1470s grew worse. One of the Constable’s extenuating claims made after his arrest for treason 1475 was ‘ses besognes n’estoient pas bonnes en court’, that his interests were constantly crossed by enemies around the King. [96] Despite Louis XI’s evident mental agility and strength of will, foreign observers sometimes tended to view even him as dominated by advisers. Thus, the Milanese Malleta described the Admiral de Montauban as one who ‘in tutto governa al Re’ while the bâtard d’Armagnac, marshal of France was ‘el tuto’ to the King and ‘alter Rex.’ [97] The King’s dominance of his own household did not exclude and even promoted the personal influence of men who were essentially favourites like his ‘mignon’ Louis Bastet, sieur de Crussol, his grand écuyer Alain Goyon, sieur de Villiers, member of the Matignon family, great servants of the state in the sixteenth century, Jean Wast, first valet de chambre, conseiller et chambellan, bailli of Rouen, whose grand-daughter was to marry a prince de La Roche-sur-Yon in the following century; above all his secretary Jean Bourré and Olivier Le Daim. [98] The latter rapidly took on the very traditional appearance of the ‘evil councillor’ and suffered appropriately.

Count of Meulan and captain of numerous fortresses, placed sixth in the hierarchy of power by a parlement lawyer in 1480, he was described by another in 1487 as having ‘grant accez entour la personne du dit feu roi et estoit fort mal renommé comme chacun scet’. His supposed diabolical powers are to be seen in the context of general incomprehension at the favour and power of such a spectacularly low-born man. [99] Such ‘access’, routinely attacked by Louis’s enemy Thomas Basin, was characteristic of a secretive and devious ruler. The reign of his successor, Charles VIII, was more the norm, though, again, the political upheavals resulting form the royal minority and opposition to the Beaujeu regime took their toll. In that case, however, there was more continuity between reigns at first. The debates which were observed in the late 1480s over policy towards Brittany or in 1493-4 over intervention in Italy certainly seem to be contained within the closer royal entourage, though certainly divided councillors of different origins. [100] In Italy during the campaign of 1495, foreign envoys reported the division of the royal entourage between the youthful protagonists of la guerre à l’outrance such as the ‘camberlani gioveni’ Trivulzio, Gié and Foix, protagonists of Louis d’Orléans’s military operations, and the ‘sapi et antiqui’ Comynes, Saint-Malo, La Trémoille and Piennes, most of them councillors inherited from Louis XI. [101]
On the accession of Louis XII it has been argued that a similar mistake to that of Louis XI in 1461 was avoided by the extended ritual arranged by the grand écuyer Pierre d’Urfé for the funeral of Charles VIII. The consequence was a greater degree of continuity in the royal household than might otherwise have been expected. The struggles unleashed by the determination of Anne of Brittany to destroy marshal de Gié between 1504 and 1506 involved also the enmity towards him of Georges d’Amboise and the intervention in his favour of admiral de Graville, who launched extensive counter-accusations against the Tours financiers. The basic determinant was an impending political crisis caused by the king’s illness in 1504 and the consequent jockeying for position under a potential new regime. There are thus signs of factionalism here, though the main themes of the crisis were the dislike of Gié by both Anne of Brittany and Louise of Savoy and the difficulty of securing Gié’s conviction for treason. It was sparked off by the denunciations of Pierre de Pontbriand, whom Gié had placed in the Angoulême household in his capacity, much resented, as governor to the young Francis.

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To outsiders, issues may have been rather unclear, as is shown by d’Auton’s description of all this as ‘somme, c’est ung dangereulx laberinthe que bien souvent les plus advisez s’i trouvent esgarez’. For Machiavelli, writing in 1512, it was Etienne Poncher and Florimond Robertet who ‘governano il tutto’ in a term which echoes Malleta’s judgment on the early 1460s. Competition for influence, the existence of favourites, sometimes very powerful ones, were, then, the norm in the late mediaeval political system. How did this gel with the authority of theoretically absolute monarchs who could, like Louis XI or Francis I, know their own mind? For the late mediaeval political observer, the commonplace notion was for a courtier to be an adviser for good or ill. This to some extent complemented the concept of rule by ‘good counsel’, indeed was essential for it. Thus, for Philippe de Commynes, some princes could be playthings in the hands of their advisers, like Louis XI’s brother Charles de France while others, though intelligent nevertheless through want of training - ‘faulde d’estre bien nourrirz’ - could not make use of advice even if it were good. At all events, the task of the adviser was central for him; it had been essential for him as counsellor to mollify and possibly divert the anger of Charles the Bold against Louis XI at Péronne in 1468. When Chastellain observed the arrest of Pierre de Brézé in 1461, he noted that Louis was surrounded by those ‘qui n’estoient point gens de si grand poix que on pourroit bien dire’, who, knowing their master’s ill will towards Brézé, ‘boutèrent de leur vénin avecques le sien et boutèrent le plus que purent pour l’enverser.’ This is one form of faction throughout the period—what may be called the vulture effect—and one which could exist in the entourage of an energetic or wilful ruler.

The greatest political crisis of the early part of Francis I’s reign, the treason and flight of the constable de Bourbon, has as much in common with the upheavals surrounding the fall of his predecessor, Saint-Pol, in 1475 as with the intrigues and rivalries dissected by foreign envoys later in the reign. The widely noted discontent over war taxes, the observed calls for the king’s replacement and the constable’s personal grievances against the court were a manifestation of the discontent the Constable was able to show by 1523. Bourbon was in an unusual position. A great minister by the early sixteenth century was both a repository of public funds and a source of supply for the king. Bourbon was in some ways too independent in his resources. Thus, from 1516 his pensions and emoluments were unpaid. Relations with the king were already strained by 1519 and the quarrel over his wife’s inheritance and the affront of command of the army in Picardy being denied him in 1521 were the last straw.

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Here, too, the failure of a clientèle to follow its chief is crucial. Though there is little evidence that Bourbon, who counted on his popularity in the army, tried to establish a foothold by placing friends in the royal entourage he may well have done so with those in the Parlement of Paris who resented royal ‘tyranny’. Yet he was unable to activate this in his interest. The closest the threat came to the king’s entourage was in the person of Saint-Vallier, captain of a company of the household guard. It must also be remembered that the first half of the sixteenth century saw the consolidation of aristocratic provincial governorships, held either by members of the king’s entourage like Montmorency in Languedoc or Chabot in Burgundy or by princes like the Bourbons and Lorraines. These civil and military commands naturally conferred on their holders vast patronage powers and capacity to milk the royal finances, though their relations with the crown were in some ways substantially different from those of the magnates of the
The fall and execution of Semblançay in 1527 is a case in which power struggles within the royal entourage might be thought to come into play much more directly. The traditional story recounted by Spont and Doucet has it that a whole range of officials and courtiers felt threatened by Semblançay and combined against him. [110] Philippe Hamon’s acute re-evaluation of the affair seeks to show, however, that the number of Semblançay’s open enemies was small: Louise of Savoy and Jean de La Barre using the former Semblançay agent Jean Prévost. The involvement of chancellor Duprat in a plot against him seems to have little substance, while there were many, including La Trémoille, the duchess of Nemours and the Italian bankers of Lyon, who stood to lose by his fall. Ultimately, Semblançay fell, despite the weakness of the case against him, because no one of stature spoke for him and the events occurred in the context of Francis I’s serious drive to regain the upper hand after his return from captivity. [111] Hamon draws a general conclusion from all this on the nature of faction in the period: Semblançay fell because the King decided he must go (partly to liquidate debts). In such a court, once the prince’s mind had been made up, the matter was closed and there was no further discussion. Faction in the reign of Francis I, for Hamon therefore, exists in the interstices, where the King has not yet formulated policy. Thus, Montmorency may be viewed as primarily an assistant to the King, even though an immensely significant administrative agent and one who could build up an immensely complex clientèle (as revealed by his well preserved correspondence). [112]

Cedric Michon’s recent re-evaluation of Jean cardinal de Lorraine in the 1530s and 1540s as a ‘favourite’ much closer to the King in personal terms add further depth to this point. [113] Faction is a matter of struggles over matters other than ‘great affairs of state’, where the king arbitrates rather than acts as master. One of the most well-informed narratives of French politics in the reign of Francis I, the joint memoirs of Guillaume and Martin du Bellay, are extremely reticent on matters of faction, maintaining the image that the king decided everything. For Guillaume, writing in the 1530s, only the briefest glimpse of any other view is allowed, as for instance when he hints at the fostering of Francis I’s sense of grievance over the treaty of Cambrai of those ‘qui, par occasions et opportunitez’ reminded him of it. As Montaigne later observed, their memoirs showed too little of ‘la franchise et liberté d’escrire’ of some of their predecessors (notably Commynes), said little of the overthrows of Montmorency and Chabot ‘voire le seul nom de madame d’Estampes ne s’y treuve point.’ [114] Du Bellay did, though, offer the clearest outline of the role of advisers: à propos of the king’s defensive stance against the Emperor in 1536, he reports that, though some argued in favour of a ‘pre-emptive strike’ policy, others were more cautious ‘joinct qu’ils sçavoient plus intrinsequement que les autres la finall intention et resolution du maistre.’ [115] They are thus eager to anticipate what they know to be the king’s own view. The notion of the ‘all powerful favourite’ or a routinely manipulable king emerges as a construct of foreign ambassadors. Similarly, we have already seen that in reign of Louis XI Jean de Montauban was described by the Milanese ambassador as ‘quello che in tutto governa al Re’ in 1463 and the bâtard d’Armagnac in 1465 as ‘alter Rex.’ [116] “Faction” might therefor easily coexist with a strong-minded king and is essentially a different matter from manipulability. In addition, mediaeval and early modern polities placed the highest emphasis on routine and predictability: government by whim was anathema. Thus both in political theory and practice there were devices - for instance, government by “good counsel” - to institutionalise power and limit caprice. This always produced a tendency to imprison princes in the routine of their courts. Rulers may therefore in part be assessed according to the extent to which they were able to free themselves from the constraints of routine and decorum and introduce an element of unpredictability in their handling of their advisers.

As has already been noted, the rather obvious fact is that much of our understanding of Renaissance factions is shaped by the reports of foreign ambassadors, whose accounts ranged from the static institutional analyses of the relazioni to gossipy accounts of ‘behind the arras’ intrigue. They certainly expected to deal with factions but were habitually deceived by their hosts. Wolsey seems to have practised systematic deception on Jean du Bellay in the England of the late 1520s, creating the picture of a cardinal beleaguered by enemies at court such as Norfolk because he was the only reliable friend of France. [117]
In turn, ambassadors were always eager to seek out the hidden sources of power and found the idea of combinations of individuals highly convincing. Machiavelli in 1512 had underlined the malign schemes at work in France and that ‘he who wins is often received by the king; he who loses seldom.’ For Nicolas Wotton in 1546, the French court was ‘a place where is usidde goode shouldering and liftinge at eche othere’. They also tended to exaggerate the power of ministers and did not spell out what, for them, was obvious: that in the monarchy of their time the authority of a minister depended overwhelmingly on the approbation of the ‘master.’ But awareness of factional combinations should also be seen as part of the increasingly voracious appetite for political analysis. Nicolas Le Roux has pointed out that the court of Henri III was at once a point of intersection between the prince, his kingdom and the court society while at the same time a screen which masked the king’s person or represented him ideally. In his study of the politics of the early 1570s, Denis Crouzet has usefully drawn attention to the fact that, in this sort of polity, the King was in theory the sole possessor of inner knowledge. He is thus ceaselessly observed by courtiers and ambassadors who seek to divine his intentions through the minute observation of his demeanour as well as to influence or anticipate his decisions. The ruler, for his part, must keep his own counsel while seeming transparent in order to maximise his freedom of action; Rochemore’s translation of Guevara advises kings to reveal to their favourites alone ‘privement les plus peculiers et profonds secrets de leurs pensées.’ The point was in fact made by the young Estienne de la Boetie, following the anti-courtier tradition in the 1550s, when, in the Discours de la servitude volontaire or Contr’un, he castigated courtiers who shaped their interests to please the prince: il faut qu’ils se prennent garde à ses parolles, à ses voix, à ses signes et à ses yeulx, qu’ils n’aient oeil, ni pied, ni main que tout ne soit au guet pour espier ses volontés et pour discouvrir ses pensées. The two sides are therefore locked in a ceaseless game of hide-and-seek.

But while Guevara’s text points up the burdens of favouritism, notably the incessant requirement for the favourite to intervene on behalf of and promote the interests of his clients, so La Boetie deplores the tyrannical implications of a network of universal clientage which enables the king through his favourites to control the whole realm. Though the games of politics became much more overt during the late-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as the necessary instruments for observation became available and as an ‘audience’ for politics crystallised, what we have seen in the political structures and discourse of the late middle ages prompts a re-evaluation of the novelty of court politics in the Renaissance. The role of faction has been oversimplified in the sixteenth century and not placed adequately in medieval context. There is little reason to suppose that the political culture of the renaissance was substantially different from that of the later middle ages. Indeed, the pre-suppositions and assumptions of political life were largely created as the French polity itself was consolidated from the late thirteenth century onwards. In this respect the conventional line between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance evaporates. To return to my original point about court politics and the origins of the modern state: Malcolm Vale’s interesting suggestion that the medieval court did not provide the model for modern bureaucratic government is in some ways a matter of semantics. It is abundantly clear that princely households provided the personnel for all kinds of military and financial administration from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. More directly for the subject I have dealt with in this paper, the conventions and clichés of political life - the oscillation between court faction and party strife - developed within courts from the fourteenth century into the full-blown court politics of the Ancien Regime.

**Abbreviations**

ABSFH : Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de France
AN : Archives Nationales Paris
ASM : Archivio di Stato Modena
BEC : Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des Chartes
BN : Bibliothèque Nationale Paris
HHSA : Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna
LP : J. Brewer, J. Gardner et al.(eds), Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII
MD : V. Ilardi & P. M. Kendall (eds.), Despatches with Related Documents of Milanese Ambassadors in
France and Burgundy, 1450-1483, 3 vols. (Dekalb, 19..-81)
OED : Oxford English Dictionary (I have only referred to this once under note 16 – is it necessary ?)
PRO : Public Record Office
SP : State papers of King Henry VIII (Record Commissioners, London, 1830-52)

Notes


[29] Vale, _Princely Court_, p. 16.


[34] Guenée, _Un Meurtre_, p. 133.


[38] Louis XI was doing no more than his predecessors over the previous two centuries by modifying the court’s _services_, for instance, in separating the _chambre_ from the responsibilities of the _maître de la chambre aux deniers_ or revising his changes in a way that led to the creation of the department of the _menus plaisirs du roi_ in 1483. L. L. Borrelli de Serres, _Recherches sur divers services publics du XIIIe au XVIIe siècle_, 3 vols. (Paris, 1895-1909), p. 200-01.

[40] This is confirmed by Chatenet, La cour, ch.1, p. 22-.


[42] Chatenet, La cour, ch. 3, p. 75-80.

[43] Le Roux, La faveur du roi, p. 11-12, 41.


[47] Ibid., p. 57-60. On the Saint-Gelais family see H.-J. Molinié, Mellin de Saint-Gelays (Rodez, 1910), p. 3-44 ; C. Sauzé, ‘Correspondance de M. de Lansac (Louis de Saint-Gelais), Archives historiques de Poitou 33 (1904).


[51] Chatenet, La cour, chapter 5, p. 159-.


[57] On the lever see the audience given by Louis to envoys from Compiègne at Creil in 1478, Archives municipales Compiègne, BB 5, fo.11r-12r (25 July 1478). For the midnight audience, see Panigarola, 4 June 1466, Milanese Despatches III, p. 291-3.


[61] Breton to Dubourg, 1 Aug. 1537, AN, série J 968 no.12/35 ; Bonner to Cromwell, 6 March 1539, SP, VIII, p. 171.


[66] Robertet to Albany, Vincennes, 25 May [1527], AN série J 966 no. 40/19.

[67] Du Bellay to Montmorency, 30 June [1530], Scheurer, Correspondance, I, p. 175 ; Solnon, La cour, p. 22, quoting C. Marchand, Brissac, p. 299.

[68] Paget to Petre, 19 May 1546, London, PRO SP 1/218 fo.185r ; Lisle, Paget, Wotton, 21 May, SP1/219 fo. 5-6 ; Card. of Ferrara to Ercole II, 9 May 1546, ASM, Casa e stato, Principi Estensi B 60/147. On Annebault’s role, see also the report of Arras on Francis I’s oath to the treaty of Crépy, Compiègne, 24 Sept. 1544 : HHSA, Frankreich, Varia 5, fo. 169v.

[69] See my article, ‘Politics and Faction at the Court of France under Francis I : Montmorency, the Dauphin Henri and the Faction of Mme d’Etampes.’


Attrand, Pouvoir, p. 42.


Attrand, Pouvoir, p. 205.


M. Nordberg, Les ducs et la royauté. Études sur la rivalité des ducs d'Orléans et de Bourgogne 1392-1407 (Uppsala, 1964) ; R. Famiglietti, Royal Intrigue : Crisis et the Court of Charles VI (1392-1420) (New York, 1986)

Guenée, Un meurtre, cited above.


M. Rey, Les finances, p. 589-607, 608.


Guenée, Un meurtre.


Of Brézé, Georges Chastellain commented that ‘le roy ne le voulut oncques voir ne ouyr.’ Chastellain, , Oeuvres, IV, p. 25-6. Dammartin was in the early 16th century described as ‘mignon’ to Charles VII : H. de Chabannes, Preuves pour servir à l’histoire de la maison de Chabannes 4 vols. (Dijon, 1872-7) I, p. 50. On Louis’s favourites as Dauphin, Chastellain, , Oeuvres, III, p. 213. Jean de Montauban, when he died in 1466, vacated the offices of Admiral, governor of La Rochelle, captain of 100 lances and maître des eaux et forêts (Milanese Despatches III, p. 190). In November 1464, Louis is described as hesitating over a decision ‘atende senon a queste sue de le quale continuamente fa consiglio con el bastardo d’Armignac, con lo Admiraglio, et adesso con el grande Cancelleri.’ (DM II, p. 356).


Chastellain, Oeuvres, III, p. 214. The description of Crussol ‘dauphinois, qui avoit esté son mignon par delà’ is one of the earliest of such usages. He was described as ‘primo in camera con la Maestà dil presente Signor Re’ (MD III, p. 183), ‘con el quale Soa Maestà comunicha molto li soy secreti’ (ibid., p. 187). Villiers (d.1490) was bailli of Caen and succeeded his father Jean as Grand écuyer, while in the XVIth century two members of the family, sieurs de Matignon, were governors of Normandy and Guyenne. Jean de Montespedon, dit Huaste/Wast ‘son premier vallet de chambre de viel temps, qui estoit son tou et son seul secré, et signoit mesmes toutes lettres en son nom’ (Chastellain, Oeuvres, III, p. 214) ‘che hé uno de più fidati che quella habia’ (Milanese Despatches III, p. 174). To these could be added Josselin du Bois, sr. de Montmorillon and maréchal de logis at court, ‘molto accepto et he molto gagliardo in parlare a sua Maestà.’ (Malleta to duke of Milan, 15 Dec.1464, DM II, p. 364-5.


[107] Reports on discontent in France, 1522-3, see LP III, II, 2549 ; IV, I, 68 and 789.


[112] See above all Thierry Rentet, Anne de Montmorency, grand maître de François Ier (Rennes, 2011).


[115] Du Bellay, Mémoires, III, p. 3.


[119] SP, XI, p. 278.

[120] Le Roux, La faveur du roi, p. 11.


[123] La Boetie, Discours, electronic version of MS de Mesme by Claude Ovtcharenko text at http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/la_boetie_etienne_de/discours_de_la_servitude/discours_servitude_volontaire.pdf, p.72-4 : «Ce sont toujours quatre ou cinq qui maintiennent le tiran ; quatre ou cinq qui lui tiennent tout le pays en servage ; toujours il a été que cinq ou six ont eu l’oreille du tiran, et sy sont rapproché d’eus mesmes, ou bien ont esté appelés par lui, pour estre les complices de ses cruautéts, les compagnons de ses plaisirs, les macquereaus de ses voluptés, et communs aus biens de ses pilleries. Ces six addressent si bien leur chef qu’il faut pour la société qu’il soit meschant non pas seulement de ses meschantés, mais ancore des leurs. Ces six ou six cent qui proufient sous eus, et font de leur six cent ce que els six font au tiran. Ces six cent en tiennent sous aeus six mille quils ont eslevé en estat, ausquels ils font donner ou le gouvernement des provinces, ou le maniement des deniers, afin quils tiennent la main a leur avarice et cruauté, et quils executent quand il sera temps, et facent tant de maus d’ailleurs, quils ne puissent durer que sousb leur ombre, ni s’exempter que par le moien des loix et de la peine. Grande est la suitte qui vient aprs cela, et qui voudra s’amuser a devider ce filet, il verra que non pas les six mille, mais les cent mille, mais les millions par ceste corde se tiennent au tiran. »