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The busybody: the Duc de Saint-Simon remembers

by [Joseph Epstein](#)

On the memoirs of Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon, newly translated by Lucy Norton.

We know a vast amount of what went on in Versailles at the court of the Louis XIV, especially between the years 1691 and 1723, when the French monarchy, having reached the apogee of its power, was descending and slowly wending its way to the murderous French Revolution. Much of what we know comes from a little man with a perhaps exaggerated sense of *amour-propre* named Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon. From his somewhat shaky position at the middle-distance from power, he was sedulously taking the most careful notes. In his retirement years, between 1723 and his death at the age of eighty in 1755, he turned these notes into his *Memoirs*, the most extensive, richly amusing, and literarily most impressive memoirs ever written.^[1]

Some 1,500 people (servants included) lived within the walls of the grand palace Louis XIV built for him ...

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