

Dancing, Dueling and Decorum: Ordinance of a Renaissance Royal Celebration

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Historians and other scholars have begun to pay much greater attention to the element of play, games, and ritualistic behavior now than in the past. Natalie Zemon Davis' book and film, "The Return of Martin Guerre", recent writings of Le Roy Ladurie and other members of the French **Annales** school of historical research; and even a theological explanation by Jurgen Moltman, "Theology of Play," not to mention Michael Novak's exuberant "The Joy of Sports" - all these scholars together have re-emphasized the liberating quality of ritualistic celebrations in our day, as in the distant past.

Scholars of chivalric literature, especially the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, have noted the important role which formal celebrations and chivalric tournaments played in the Renaissance court life. The great medieval tournaments, with their knights in shining armor, prancing horses, and brightly clad ladies applauding on the sidelines, were part of a great transformation that saw tournaments evolve from military game to chivalric spectacle, already in the 12th century. By the time of the Renaissance, the tournament was little more than a stylized ritual. Yet an examination of how this ritual was carried out can shed light on and yield important insights into the society in which it took place.

Fortunately, we possess some detailed descriptions of these Renaissance royal celebrations. One of the least-known but nevertheless interesting of these ordinances is contained in a complete description of the wedding celebration which Duke Christoph of Wurttemberg, in Southwest Germany, held for a week in May 1563. The occasion was the marriage of Christoph's eldest daughter (one of eight girls in the family), Hedwig, with Philip of Hesse's elder son, Ludwig. The two-hundred-page wedding description is found in the Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, the official state archives for Baden-Wurttemberg. It contains many ordinances and detailed directions for the various parts of the tournament, as well as for the evening dancing and presenting of prizes which followed. The role of women, as objects of knightly attention yet also as admiring onlookers, is especially fascinating in these documents.

The wedding festivities began with the entrance of the groom and his party into the city to the loud cadence of fifes and drums. In a formal ceremony before the local Estates, the bride renounced all legal claim to her father's lands and received her future husband's reciprocal gift in exchange for the dowry which her father presented. Among the strange rituals which accompanied the week-long wedding festivities was one called "die Deckhin beschlagen," in which bride and groom sat fully clothed in a bed in a public hall, while all the guests trooped by to "strike the covers" and drink a glass of wine on it. Every aspect of the ceremony was regulated with an ordinance, including who danced with whom at the evening dances. Ordinances similarly regulated the tournament on horse and the foot tournament.

Another wedding description in the Stuttgart Archives concerns the Bavarian court wedding attended by Hedwig's brother, Prince Eberhard, in February 1568, in Munich.

This wedding featured an elaborate masquerade for horses and riders as well as some intriguing ordinances intended to restrain this prince's well-known weakness for the games and fruit of Bacchus. In Huizinga's words, for Renaissance man (and woman) "every event, every action, was still embodied in expressive and solemn forms, which raised them to the dignity of a ritual. "