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THE IMPERIAL COURT OF MAXIMILIAN II: TWO EXCERPTS
FROM *HERCULES PRODICIUS*

Howard Louthan

The past twenty-five years have seen a remarkable rise in the number of books and articles examining European courts of the Renaissance. Much of the credit for the new groundswell of interest must be given to Norbert Elias, whose *Die höfische Gesellschaft* was rediscovered in the late sixties.¹ Perhaps more important than the actual reappearance of Elias's study was the fact that he was not an historian but a sociologist. Following his lead, scholarship on the courts of Europe thus crossed traditional boundaries between disciplines, and became a collaborative enterprise. Historians, musicologists, sociologists, art historians and others worked together on a common project. Today, with Elias's legacy still intact, scholars have scoured the libraries and archives of Europe, searching for manuscripts which would yield new treasures for the study of court culture in the Renaissance.

Hercules Prodicus is one such document. Chronicling the travels of a young German prince, a large portion of the text is devoted to life at the Viennese court of Emperor Maximilian II (1564–1576). The author, Stephen Pighius, was a representative figure of late sixteenth century humanism. Born in the Low Countries in 1520, he studied rhetoric and philosophy at Louvain, then spent the following eight years in Italy continuing his education, where he formed a close friendship with Cardinal Corvini. His future seemed promising, as Cardinal Corvini was elected Pope Marcellus II in April 1555. Pighius's opportunity for ecclesiastical advancement suddenly ended, however, when Marcellus II died only one month after ascending to the papal throne. Pighius then returned to the Netherlands, where he served as secretary to Cardinal Granvelle for the next fourteen years. He left Granvelle when William, Duke of Cleves, asked him to serve as tutor to his eldest son, Charles Frederick.²

From 1571 to 1575, Pighius accompanied Charles Frederick on a

journey from Germany to Rome. The Duke of Cleves had married Maria, the sister of the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian II. Charles Frederick and his tutor spent almost three years (1572–1574) at his uncle's court. After their stay in Vienna, Charles Frederick and Pighius moved on to Rome, where Pighius's young ward died of smallpox in February 1575. Pighius returned to the north after Charles Frederick's death, and in 1582 he commemorated his four years with the prince in *Hercules Prodicus*.³ Rich in descriptions of Maximilian's court, Pighius's book is more valuable than many of the archival and manuscript sources we have of festivities during the emperor's reign. *Hercules Prodicus* gives the account of an insider at the imperial capital. Through a stylized and heavily mannered prose, Pighius narrates the observations not only of an observer but also of a participant in daily life at the Habsburg court.

The book's title is a reference to the Greek sophist Prodicus, a contemporary of Socrates. Prodicus' major work, the *Horae*, contained an allegory entitled "The Choice of Hercules." In this story, the hero is confronted by Virtue and Vice, between whom he must choose.⁴ Describing the education of the eldest son of a princely family, Pighius details Charles Frederick's intellectual journey, for his charge must make similar decisions through his travels.⁵

The following two selections from *Hercules Prodicus* are set at the imperial court of Maximilian II. The first passage is an account of a tournament held outside of Bratislava in honor of the coronation of Rudolph II, who received the Hungarian crown of St. Stephen in September 1572. A significant dynastic celebration, this festival was the first at which Rudolph appeared as a ruler. Originally, the military aspect of a tournament was its most important feature.⁶ Jousts, foot combats and an occasional full-scale mock battle would normally have formed the central part of such proceedings; but by the end of the sixteenth century these festivals had more cultural than military significance. As this text reveals, pomp and ostentation overshadowed the actual combat.⁷ Habsburg pageantry owed much to its Burgundian heritage. It was in Burgundy in the fifteenth century that participants in tournaments had assumed scripted speaking parts. Thus tournaments gradually became dramas, in which feasting, combat, costumes, music, set design and poetry were combined.⁸ Pighius's description of this 1572 festival contains these elements, which by his time had become standard features of Habsburg tournaments. Though his account of the festival's proceedings is selective and far from complete, it is still an interesting introduction to Habsburg pageantry in the late sixteenth century.

The second selection describes the visit some two years later, in summer

1574, of Catherine de Medici's son, Henry of Anjou, to Maximilian's court in Vienna. Henry had been elected king of Poland in 1573, but reigned for less than two years, and was actually in Poland for little more than four months. The reason for his hasty departure was the death of his elder brother, the French king Charles IX. Receiving these unexpected tidings, Henry hurried home to secure the French crown. Pighius details the warm welcome Henry received in Vienna on his way back to Paris. For Emperor Maximilian, cultivating a close relationship with the future Henry III of France was important for two reasons. Henry originally intended to remain head of both of the kingdoms. Sigismund Augustus, his predecessor in Poland, had pursued an anti-Habsburg policy, allying himself with the Turks. For their part, the Habsburgs were keenly interested in winning Poland's support in their struggle against the Ottomans. Forging an alliance with Henry would have been a first step. When the Poles did declare an interregnum due to Henry's neglect of their kingdom, Emperor Maximilian became a serious contender for their throne, and might actually have gained it were it not for his untimely death in 1576.⁹

On the other side of Europe, Maximilian was seeking to steer a course of moderation in a troubled sea of religious conflict. France was embroiled in its religious civil war, but the Habsburg emperor sought to support the *politique* maneuverings of Catherine de Medici. Maximilian had earlier given his daughter Elisabeth in marriage to Charles IX. He was now pledging his support to the man who would become France's new king. By narrating events from the perspective of his young charge, Pighius in this section illustrates the importance that Maximilian assigned to Henry's visit.

Part I: *Hercules Prodicus* (183–187)

Nevertheless, all these games would be surpassed in celebration, magnificence and expense by the public festival of the Hungarian coronation.¹⁰ These games in all their magnificence lasted three days in 1572 when Rudolph, the eldest son of the Emperor and King of Hungary, Maximilian, was crowned by the Estates of that kingdom in place of his father. With one accord and with great praise [the coronation took place] in Bratislava on September 24.¹¹

Around him gathered a great crowd of people, conspicuous by their clothes, refined style of dress, and different customs and languages. Knights of Hungary and Bohemia, the best equipped troops, were encamped in spacious fields on both sides of the Danube; and about thirty cohorts of

Austrian infantry camped before the walls of the city under [their] flags. Cannons were carried on the Danube by pontoon down [from Vienna] to the place of contest. Along the military road which stretches from Bratislava to Buda, at the first milestone, a most splendid racetrack for cavalry maneuvers was constructed by carpenters on a level plain between the river and the nearest hills. Likewise an arena was enclosed by a fence for holding infantry drills. Triumphal arches ornamented with statues were erected. A fortified city with ramparts, entrenchments and turrets was built. It was large enough not only to hold the cavalry and the infantry for defense but also to arrange [the troops] for the battlefield and to pour them forth through the town gate into combat.

For two days after the coronation, the emperor conducted his sister's sons, Wilhelm and Ferdinand, the Dukes of Bavaria, and all the other princes who had come to the solemn coronation festival, to magnificent feasts. On the third day the games began at noon. The Agonarches (whom they now call the challenger)¹² was Archduke Charles, the full brother of the emperor and paternal uncle of the new king. He had also come with a select and splendid court of nobles. On the first day, in accordance with the rules of the games, the masked princes and nobles who wished to fight came before the public. Each entered with his own retinue, preceded by troops of singers and lutanists with a choir. At the theater, the contestants then presented themselves to the superintendents of the games and the assembly of the people. A program with a few verses was distributed.¹³ On it each expressed in whatever language he wished his name, his lineage, the reason for his coming, and the scene being presented. They [the contestants] then sought to be included among those who were going to fight. A theatrical regulation stipulated that on the first day each masked and unknown [contestant] should parade ostentatiously and should show some new invention not previously seen by the spectators.

That beautiful, remarkable and pleasant day was marked by pomp and fanfare; by the immense expenses of the princes and illustrious men attending the spectacle; by the magnificence of the masks, the regalia of the horses, the various inventions of the sculptors, the most elegant of which received a reward. It would take too long to describe individually the amusing mimes of the actors, the exotic costumes, the lavish military equipment, the monstrous appearance of the masks, the huge eagle brooding over the giant egg and the mail-clad knight being hatched in the arena and soon to run down into the ring. It is sufficient to have related these remarkable things which seem to be worthy of mention.

Accompanied by well-equipped troops of illustrious knights, King Rudolph, in order to appear popular and benevolent to the nobles and his

subjects, proceeded into the field with a great din of trumpets. Along with him came his own brother Archduke Ernst in sturdy attire and Pannonian armor. They seemed to represent the troops of Attila the conqueror, with weapons and costumes of the provinces . . . And among the various insignia of highborn nobility and military virtue, huge outspread wings of eagles, either on enormous shields or engraved on golden helmets, surpassed [the others]. This was an ancient sign of dignity among noble Hungarian families and the distinguished insignia of martial courage for future generations. For they consider it the highest reward to receive an eagle feather for each head of a dead enemy brought back from the battlefield and then to increase these by numerous victories. It is glorious to bear back into battle many feathers attached to shields and helmets or hanging from lances and javelins; to wear these on the head through camps and cities, indeed at times even to display them pierced through the skin of their foreheads.¹⁴

This was the triumphal entrance of King Rudolph into the arena. But the two princes, brothers Wilhelm and Ferdinand, the Dukes of Bavaria, prepared an illustrious land procession of Satyrs, Nymphs, Pans and Sileni. They displayed by various symbols and titles the four stations of the year which the Greeks called the seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The princely brothers, themselves masked as Castor and Pollux, followed the retinue and the preceding crowd of singers and lutanists in great splendor, on most beautifully adorned horses.¹⁵

Not wanting to be counted among the last, and desiring zealously to honor the solemn day of the king, Prince Charles, united to him both by blood and a close bond of friendship, stopped at no cost and spent four thousand gold pieces on the games and the equestrian procession. He led forth into the arena the most beautiful, magnificent, and agreeable [procession], in a manner most appropriate to his own generation, estate and noble class. Based on the advice of Giminicus, the supervisor [of the games], and his own [tutor], Stephen Pighius, he chose from the ancient mysteries of Roman learning the theme most fitting to stimulate a young prince to the love of virtue. It was decreed that he should accept the attire and weapons of a young Roman knight and the title, the "Prince of Youth." Such an aspiration was appropriate to his age and position. For in the equestrian order of the Romans during the age of the republic, a "Prince of Youth" was designated by common judgment. Due to his virtues, and the splendor of his appearance, this one was considered most worthy, and the greatest hope and promise [of Rome]. Moreover, by Roman custom it was appropriate that he be named. So before the supervisors of the games he used the fictitious name, Julius Clivimontius.¹⁶

Part II: *Hercules Prodicus* (197–202)

But to return to Charles, he spent two years at the court of the emperor about whom we have been speaking. He flourished, and almost always enjoyed good health. In the third year, however, in the month of February, he suffered for almost twenty days from smallpox, from which he died in the same month of the following year in Rome. It seems that he was never fully cured then, either by natural means or by medicine, since at the same time in the following year the same disease reappeared more violently. But as he matured every day, he profited from interaction with the greatest of princes and the most illustrious of men and so was equipped with every good quality, except that he was more devoted to exercise than his body allowed.

In the three years which (except for two months) he spent in the court of the emperor, he saw many very powerful and excellent princes of the Christian world. With some of these he formed close bonds of friendship, especially with the two uncles, Archdukes Charles and Ferdinand, the full brothers of Emperor Maximilian, and with his in-law, Duke Alphonso of Ferrara.¹⁷ And not long before his own departure, by a fortuitous coincidence, he saw in the same court the most Christian king of France and Poland, Henry III. Having been called by the Estates [of France] to the succession of the kingdom on account of the death of his brother Charles IX, Henry abandoned Poland. He continued with a small retinue through the lands of the emperor into Italy in order to return through the Cisalpine region into Geneva and from there to France.

The unexpected arrival of so great a prince was announced to Emperor Maximilian rather late, when Henry was hardly two days' journey from Vienna. Therefore preparations were quickly made in the court for the reception of such a great guest. Now some time ago, the emperor had sent his elder sons, King Rudolph and Archduke Ernst, to Bohemia to hold the assembly of the nobles and settle the affairs of his kingdom with the Estates.¹⁸ Therefore, he immediately sent his two younger [sons], Mathias and Maximilian, along with the court steward and the great nobility, to meet the king. They then accompanied and escorted him. The next day [the emperor] wanted to meet Henry with his entire courtly retinue. Since he had none of his sons with him, he joined Prince Charles, the son of his sister, in the same carriage. A great procession of four-horse chariots and horses proceeded beyond the bridge of the Danube. There, near the second milestone from the city, he welcomed the arriving king as kindly as possible.

Having invited him to sit on his left, he brought him back in his own carriage to the city, and into the palace. Meeting the king in the first hall with

her procession of illustrious virgins and ladies, the empress welcomed his happy arrival with charm and courtesy. Although the emperor was sick and carried by foot soldiers in a sedan chair, he even accompanied the king to his bedroom. He ordered his [servants] to serve the king and his retinue in every way, to let nothing fall short, and to administer all things splendidly and with regal magnificence. Learning from the emperor that Prince Charles was the son of his sister and of Wilhelm, Duke of Cleves, he courteously greeted him once again. Having been addressed in a warm and friendly fashion, [Henry] entreated [Prince Charles] to follow in the footsteps of his father and ancestors, and support and maintain the friendship that they had always had with the kings of France and the Valois house. As [Charles] was about to return home from his journey, he should make the trip through France. He should cross the most beautiful cities of his region and visit him [Henry] and his mother, the queen.¹⁹ He should realize that in that kingdom [France] many princes desired the goodwill and friendship of his father and the family of Cleves.

Charles thanked the king with fitting reverence, and nobly presented his patronage and respects and that of his parents. He responded that, upon his return from Italy (should time allow), he would gladly submit to the royal will. When King Henry had spent four days in familiar and friendly conversation with the emperor, he desired to continue his trip. After expressing his thanks and being granted freedom [to depart], he left on the thirtieth of June. He was going to proceed directly to Carinthia, so that he might also greet Archduke Charles, the brother of the emperor. From there he journeyed through Udine to Venice and Italy.

By order of the emperor, two of his sons accompanied the king. Prince Charles, with the imperial nobility and a great crowd of chariots (as is often the custom in these regions), escorted him to the fourth milestone. Then, having affectionately parted company with the king, to whom [they] wished an auspicious and cheerful journey, they returned to Vienna before nightfall.

A little earlier, Rudolph, King of Hungary and his brother, Archduke Ernst, had arrived from Bohemia. They were very disappointed that their belated arrival had robbed them of the opportunity to see and greet the great king. Therefore, since their father the Emperor did not disapprove, they soon prepared themselves again for a journey. Taking Prince Charles along as a companion, who [himself] had scarcely descended from his carriage, they pursued the king through the night with swift four-horse chariots. They did not rest until the following morning at dawn, when they were not far away from the lodging of the king. Clearly the king was very pleased by the diligence of the young princes. Astonished [at their arrival], he welcomed the

unexpected ones most kindly. Dispensing with all apologies and superfluous courtesies, he led [them] to Mass, and then invited them to breakfast. Having been restored by pleasant conversation, he sent them away most courteously when the hour of departure was at hand. He intructed them to offer their father the Emperor all [greetings] in his name, and to wish [him] all auspicious and pleasant things.

That summer was therefore pleasant and opportune for Prince Charles to become acquainted with distinguished young French nobles and to form friendships with the many princes of high rank who had either come with the king or had been left in Poland and [later] returned [to France] by the same road through the emperor's court.

Howard Louthan is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at Princeton University. His dissertation examines the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II. The translator would like to thank Professor Anthony Grafton for his helpful comments and criticism in the preceding translation.

NOTES

1. Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (Hermann Luchterhand Verlag: Neuwied and Berlin, 1969). This work was written originally in the early 1930s as his Habilitationsschrift.

2. For information on Pighius see *Biographisch Woordenboek der Nederlanden*, vol. 15, (Haarlem: J. J. van Brederode, 1872), 313–315. Also of use is H. de Vocht, *Stephani Vinanadi Pighii Epistolarium*, (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1959). Using Hercules Prodicus as a source, Robert Lindell examines the festival honoring Rudolph's Hungarian coronation: "Hercules Prodicus and the Coronation of Rudolf II as King of Hungary" in M. Chiabò and F. Doglio, *Mito e Realtà del Potere nel Teatro: Dall'Antichità Classica al Rinascimento*, (Viterbo: Centro Studi sul teatro medioevale e rinascimentale, 1988), 335–354.

3. In 1582, Pighius presented the manuscript of *Hercules Prodicus* to Charles Frederick's brother, John William. The volume was actually printed in 1587, by Christophe Plantin in Antwerp. My translation is based on Plantin's text, and refers to its page numbers.

4. Michael Grant, *Greek and Latin Authors, 800 B.C.-A.D. 1000*, (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1980), 363–364.

5. The most obvious overtones are religious. In a Germany increasingly marked by confessional strife, the right decision for Pighius's ward was following the road to Rome and the Catholic church.

6. Thomas Kaufmann, *Variations on the Imperial Theme in the Age of Maximilian II and Rudolf II* (New York: Garland, 1978), 17–18.

7. In this tournament, however, these proceedings may have had actual military significance. Hungary was a war zone, and its new king would become involved in a long protracted armed struggle with the Turk. The mock battle described in the text may have served the dual functions of entertainment and military maneuvers.

8. Kaufmann, *Imperial Theme*, 18.

9. The Habsburg's flirtation with the Polish throne would finally be quashed in this period, after the election of 1587. Maximilian II's son, Archduke Maximilian III, was one of the candidates for the throne. In January 1588 a Habsburg army supporting him was annihilated at the battle of Byczyna. The archduke was captured and held prisoner for two years.

10. Pighius here refers to a mock sea battle held on the Danube near Vienna on the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul, in the end of June.

11. During the occupation of Buda by the Turks, Bratislava served as the capital of Hungary and the site where the Habsburg rulers received the crown of St. Stephen. For other descriptions of the 1572 Hungarian coronation and the tournament, see *Le Solennissime Feste et Gloriosissimi Trionfi Fatti nella Città di Possonio. Nella coronation del Serenissimo Principe Ridolfo . . . Re di Ungaria* (Venice, 1572) and in Vienna, Hofkammerarchiv, Reichsakten, Fascicle 202, fol. 47r ff. Also see "Descriptio Coronationis...Rudolphi Archiducis Austriae...in Regem Hungariae inaugurati Posonij 1572", Hofkammerarchiv, Reichsakten, Fascicle 203/I, fol. 26–49.

12. It seems that the Greek term *Agonarches* had been recently replaced by its Latin equivalent, *provocator*.

13. The iconography of such festival programs was often so complicated that written explanations had to be issued to the spectators. See Lindell, "Coronation of Rudolf II," 343.

14. The wearing of feathers in a triumphal procession, perhaps a reference to the New World, is a motif which recurs in Habsburg pageantry. For one later example, see Ferdinand Anders, "Der Federkasten der Ambraser Kunstkammer", in *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, vol. 61 (1965): 119–132, where he describes the 1582 marriage festivities of Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol and Duchess Anna Katharina of Mantua.

15. Kaufmann, *Imperial Theme*, 33, claims that the 1570 Prague festival designed by Giuseppe Arcimboldo introduced into Central European tournaments "the novel idea of having noble guests and the Emperor participate in disguise as mythical heroes". In the Vienna festival of 1571 the same brothers, Dukes William and Ferdinand, dressed up as Pluto and Proserpine on a tournament float which represented Mount Etna.

16. The name that Charles Frederick assumed for the festival, Julius Clivimontius,

was of course a reference to the three united territories of his duchy, Julich, Cleves and Berg.

17. Archdukes Charles and Ferdinand presided over active courts at Graz and Innsbruck respectively. For more information see Alphons Lhotsky, *Die Geschichte der Sammlung*, Festschrift des Kunsthistorischen Museums zur Feier des Fünfzigjährigen Bestandes (Vienna, 1941–1945), 179–212. It is also interesting to note that Duke Alphonso of Ferrara was considered as one of the candidates for the Polish throne vacated by Henry of Anjou. See Victor Bibl, *Maximilian II: Der Rätselhafte Kaiser*, (Hellerau bei Dresden: Avalun-Verlag, 1929), 387.

18. For an account of the proceedings of the Bohemian Landtag over which Rudolf and Ernst presided see Jaroslav Pánek, *Stavovaská opozice a její zápas s Habsburky 1547–1577*, (Prague: Academia, 1982), 98ff.

19. Henry is referring of course to his mother, Catherine de Medici, who served as regent until Henry returned home in August 1574.