Bad government in all its many forms has held the attention of many philosophical schools through the ages. Disaster, Montesquieu asserted, was the ultimate fate of the monarch “who through bad advice or indolence, ceases to enforce the execution of the law.” For the Renaissance scholar Alberti, the way any authority (whether householder or king) spent his money was the true mark of his fitness to hold power. Thus, “thrift is good and prodigality bad” and any unnecessary expenditure was sheer madness. These maxims, though originating from different epochs, reflect a set of ruling standards which betray a distinct class viewpoint; that is, an aristocratic concern for the protection of the law and a bourgeois demand for the sensible management of money. No case in the legal annals of the later Middle Ages better exemplifies this bipolar vision of how a kingdom should and should not be run than does the trial of 1396-1398 in which a whole government, that of the Aragonese king Joan I (1387-1396) was brought into the dock for every shade of political malfeasance known to man. Though this proceeding was significant because it caught in its web one of Catalonia’s leading literary figures, Bernat Metge, it was
far more important as a social fault line between the royal court and the “country”
(*patria*), a vague term for which many parties, but especially the maritime cities of
Barcelona and Valencia, presumed to speak.

As an agency of government, the royal court of Iberia was very long in the
making. As a reflection of the itinerant monarch it served, the *aula* or *curia regis* grew
from its earliest Visigothic form as a loose circle of servants and retainers to become,
by the thirteenth century, a complex, though still nascent organization of legal and
fiscal experts as well as a sizeable support staff. Inside this arc of government, the
king’s “household” (*casa*) persisted very much unchanged. It was the “new men”
rather than the core of royal body servants that caused a backlash among all the
estates of the Crown of Aragon who feared their customary norms were falling
under the lush shadow of Roman law. Even when this opposition, which had
solidified in 1265 into the *Unión*, was defeated at Epila (1348) by the ruthless ruler
Pere III (1336-1387), a tradition of governmental activism remained in the
parliaments (*Corts, Cortes*) of eastern Spain.

Despite, or perhaps because of its efficiency in making and enforcing royal law
and in squeezing tax revenues from the populace it served, the royal court from the
late thirteenth century acquired a particularly foul reputation among the realms it
served. In Pere’s long reign, the court became the site of viperous infighting between the king’s relatives and a party of political newcomers led by a middling Pyrenean noble, Bernat de Cabrera, who was executed in 1364. This curial instability was replicated in Pere’s last decade, centering on his young and extremely jealous fourth wife, Síbia de Fortia. When Joan I assumed the throne, he quickly experienced this smouldering discontent at his one and only Cortes, the general assembly of Monzón in 1388-1389, in which the deceased Pere and his officials (many of whom continued their court careers with the new king) was accused of a treasonous malfeasance. Shaken by this public rebuke, Joan acted to defuse parliamentary wrath by not again summoning a large assembly, but also by putting in place a “clean government” plank which forbade any curial employee from frequenting bordellos or “knowing...a public woman.”

Joan’s urban enemies, whose complaints provided the raw material for the legal attack on his very way of ruling, had a long and extremely complicated relationship with the Crown. From the mid-thirteenth century, the cities of Barcelona and Valencia had made gentlemen’s agreements with one Aragonese sovereign after another to attain increasing autonomy from clerical and aristocratic
lords. During the great unionist revolts of the late thirteenth century, the two cities run by small and relatively weak councils of “good men” (probi homines) and jurates transformed their municipal authority with the establishment of “councils of 100” (consells de cent), organizations which paralleled royal government in policies and personnel. Though these bodies theoretically “recognized no superior,” their relationship to the king was normally friendly. Barcelona, especially, used its connection to the Crown to further its economic dominance which by Joan’s reign had climbed to such heights that it virtually constituted a “state-city” rather than a city-state. Though a powerful financial engine in his own right, Valencia, the southern capital of the Unión, was clearly second in power and royal favor.

Despite the symbiotic relationship of Pere’s expansive geopolitical ambitions with the cities’ apparently bottomless pockets, the long reign of war in the last decades of Pere’s life and Joan’s ruling profligacy would begin to fracture the alliance between the king and his largest municipalities. Inheriting from the father a distrust of his Catalan capital because of its avarice, experience at sharp dealing, and downright hatred of his other realms, Joan often looked on Barcelona as a rival that could only be won over to his side by threats or bribes or both. With Joan, a hypochondriac from a long line of hypochondriacs, Barcelona had another strike
A Clash of Cultures

against it: it was subject to the outbreak of the plague. Thus when an eruption of the 
edema de glanoles occurred in the summer of 1395 in both Valencia and Barcelona, 
he escaped his dangerous cities and transported the entire court to Majorca.

Though it had been a site of unionist rebellion as late as 1348, Joan’s 
relationship with Valencia began on a much friendlier footing. With Pere’s death in 
1387, the Valencian city fathers offered formal prayers for the old king’s soul and for 
the recovery of his son from a lingering illness. As late as 1395, they were still 
wishing Joan “long and good health and life.” Below this facade of Valencian good 
feelings, the city was a welter of fear and frustration which would soon entangle the 
king. Once so secure that they held all of the Barbary coast as tributaries, the 
Valencians had been allowed by the Crown to fall into such a shameful debility that 
their shipping and coastline were subject to constant Muslim attack and their most 
secret plans uncovered by countless “secret spies” of the infidel enemy. Even if Joan 
was not fully responsible for this new threat from Saharan Africa, his prodigal rule 
and the myriad of rumors it engendered undermined Valencia’s confidence in the 
Crown’s ability to promote and advance its economy. The Valencian consell 
increasingly viewed “the badness of the time” marked by the destruction of the royal
patrimony and burgeoning taxation, as a sure sign of governmental devolution. This general feeling of malaise was personalized for the Valencian city fathers in 1392 when Joan ejected from his daughter’s wedding several of the councillors who were foolish enough to attend without an invitation or in the next year when the king skirted the suburbs of the capital seeking out his favorite amusements but never paying for them.

By 1395, the evils of Joan’s court had become so blatant that “everyone knows of it.” Even foreign visitors openly characterized Joan as “only a sheep disguised as a king.” By Epiphany, 1396, he could not avoid the full-fledged rebellion brewing in Barcelona and Valencia. To mute these strident calls for reform, he established a special tribunal to investigate alleged government abuse and placed this body under the supervision of his “faithful Secretary, Bernat Metge.” When this did not dispel urban frustration, Joan issued an “ordinance of good rule” which urged all Catalans to avoid the dangers of opulent spending. In an act of mind-boggling hypocrisy, the king then unleashed his officials on urban coffers to fund the upcoming royal projects. By March, 1396, the king could no longer put off embassies from the town councils of his embittered capitals, each bearing a list of grievances. The townsmen insisted that Joan take notice of “the naked truth” that the “wrongs and injustices”
perpetrated by the members of the royal government were slowly destroying Joan’s ability to rule. The extravagance of his servants was rapidly dragging him into “poverty and great need.”

Of the long list of complaints brought against his curials, the most damning were those delivered to the beleaguered sovereign by a Valencian delegation headed by the legeist Ramon Soler. These general and specific grievances outlived the rigged tribunal set up to have them aired and, in fact, persisted even after the king’s death in a hunting accident on May 19, 1396. Within two weeks of this national disaster, Juan’s brother, Martí, had pressed his claim for the Crown of Aragon, using his wife, Maria de Luna, as a proxy until he could return from Sicily. To overwhelm any resistance to this rapid turn of events, Martí instructed his wife to resurrect the largely-moribund investigation of Joan’s government. As a result, most of Joan’s curials were arrested and many, like Metge, were incarcerated in Barcelona’s fortress-prison, the Castellnou. To gather evidence, the panel appointed by the new queen relied on the time-tested method of “sworn inquest” (inquisitio), and yet even after a year the investigations were not completed. Only with Martí’s insistent pressure did the tribunal, in December, 1398, render “definitive verdicts” in the case. These
remained sealed, however, and the king declared the accused innocent of all charges.

Despite this abrupt ending, the accusations of the tribunal, essentially the same grievances delivered by the Valencian delegation, are significant testimony to the rift opening between the cities and the royal court. The complaints were both generally directed against Joan’s government and individually against its members. The general charges claimed that the men of the court had bankrupted the king, but were also ultimately guilty of his death. Fully aware of his “delicate constitution,” they allowed their master to indulge his passion for hunting “at improper and inconvenient times,” both summer and winter. As a result, he was exposed to “rain, wind, and other bad weather” and thus died from conditions that could have been avoided.

The litany of other accusations was by now a familiar one. The courtiers were traitors who had conspired with “foreign captains and men-at-arms” to invade Catalonia. They had “devoured nearly all of the [royal] substance...by mortgaging, confiscating, selling, granting away, and otherwise dissipating” the sizeable royal patrimony. They had suborned justice, sold favors, embezzled public money, and floated high-interest loans (mogubells) to maintain the entire unwieldy court structure. To buffer Joan from unfavorable public opinion, they had convinced the king not to
summon another parliament after 1392 and routed his itinerary away from the larger cities of his realms.

In addition to the general charges, Joan’s men were also individually accused of official misconduct and personal immorality. A few were incriminated from impolitic statements overheard in public settings, but most allegedly misused their official positions. The most shocking of these charges were “conspiracies within a conspiracy” by which senior officials used their juniors to gain and then conceal kickbacks, bribes, colluded sales, and a number of other “get-rich schemes.” The picture which repeatedly emerges is one of “new men” overwhelmed by the possibilities of power. They enriched themselves by utilizing their official posts to divert tax money or military salaries, to bankroll privateering expeditions, and to illegally release political prisoners – all at an outrageous profit. They also seemed unrestrained by any standards of morality. One was charged with “killing his wife so he could take another”; others, with intimidating a slave-holder with prison time to gain possession of a young slave girl, with stabbing to death a reluctant sex partner, and, finally, with abducting a young girl from the front window of her father’s house to brutally rape her.
Donald J. Kagay

Beyond the evident indignation of the prosecutors, the charges of 1396 reflect a general Catalan belief that Joan’s court was ruled by evil. According to a persistent rumor, Joan was shocked at this lasciviousness, but was loath to discharge any of his fiscal procurers. The king’s subjects, however, were far less willing to turn a blind eye to such official arrogance. In one example investigated by the tribunal which could have been taken from the pages of Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna*, residents of a royal castle that had been sold to pay off the king’s mounting bills confronted the new owner, a royal official, and screamed that such alienation of royal property was illegal. The timid curial, running for his very life, apparently came to agree with them.

Even with Martí’s abrogation of the charges leveled against Joan’s courtiers, the suit of 1396-1398 proved a milestone in the long line of disputes between the Crown and the upper rungs of eastern Spanish society that spanned the fourteenth century. Far from simply arguing about transcended rights and un-tendered duties, the suit reflected a political dividing line between “court” and “country”; “government” and “town”: an intellectual dichotomy which would define so many of realms of early modern Europe. The accusations against Joan’s officials were largely those that the middle class leveled against all royal courts down to the emergence of
European absolutism. They reflect the collision of aristocratic and royal benchmarks of largesse that often became so extravagant that they led to the bankruptcy of the giver. Like many other royal establishments in Europe for the next two centuries, the actions of Joan’s court in attaining its dual ends of “fame and honor,” no matter what the cost, were considered madness by up-and-coming urban patricians who viewed the accumulation and maintenance of wealth – preferably that earned from their own efforts – as the ultimate sign of success. The two elites destined to dominate Europe for centuries were in the process of almost becoming separate countries in the same land. With Joan, this separation was intensified with his insistence on being the greatest patron of culture in his realms. Surrounded by a brilliant coterie of artists, writers, and musicians each engaged in “the serious, melancholy game” of gaining the inside track to royal favor, monarchs were becoming obsessed with demonstrating the high level of civilization of their courts. This priority of courtly reputation was clearly not that of the merchant and artisan communities whose taxes supported the royal establishment and the talented and educated men who served it.

The suit of 1396-1398, would prove the first of many instances of
disconnection between curial and local interests to resurface under the Catholic Kings and the Hapsburgs. As the seventeenth century dawned, this set of long political disagreements increasingly focused on the “decline of Spain.” Economic and political experts offered a great number of solutions for Spanish governmental malaise. One expert, comparing his country’s worsening situation to a physical illness, proclaimed that “the republic...goes into decline...by bad government”; the governing sickness was caused by the “excesses” of the court which transformed the king and his attendants into nothing “but a ceremony.” Thus even when court cultures passed into modern times, they seemed much easier to maintain than to reform, perhaps because courts and the countries they ruled were growing ever further apart.