

of the nobility, and the well-tended farmland around the city, with its elegant villas. Catholic visitors noted the profusion of religious foundations and churches; Protestants tended to comment negatively on the bigoted religiosity they discerned in the city, and especially at the court. Every visitor was struck – though not always positively – by Turin’s regular street-plan and the uniform façades of its buildings.

Many travelers observed that two different social milieus coexisted at Turin, which they called the court and “the town”. They judged the latter, the domain of the educated and well-to-do middle classes, much more “amusing”, in the words of the *Président de Brosses*, who visited Turin in the 1730s. In “the town” there were several salons they could frequent, presided over by lively hostesses, where literary figures and townspeople rubbed shoulders, gambled, and engaged in conversation. By contrast, most visitors found the court dull and stuffy. The sovereign and the royal family were bound by rigid protocol, following an unvarying routine of religious observances, meals, and receptions. Protocol prevailed even on supposedly informal occasions like the great hunting parties at Venaria Reale or Stupinigi. Moreover King Charles Emanuel III imprinted his own unbending piety on the court, proscribing discussion of subjects he deemed irreligious or immoral. The courtiers had to be careful about what they said, and were discouraged from talking to foreigners: they believed that spies were everywhere, and that indiscretions would quickly find their way to the sovereign’s ears, bringing down retribution. This oppressive atmosphere seems to have extended also to “the town”, for there were reputed to be informers even in the private salons. The famous libertine Giacomo Casanova, visiting Turin around 1760, complained that it was the most restrictive of all Italian cities. The government did not look well on philosophical speculation and the free exchange of ideas, even outside the confines of the court. Many intellectuals and writers fled from this chilling atmosphere, so contrary to the spirit of the Enlightenment. An emblematic case is the great Piedmontese dramatist Vittorio Alfieri, who in his *Autobiography* recalled his loathing for the repressive tone of Turin’s cultural life, which forced him into self-imposed exile.

The king, his court and his bureaucrats dominated Turin not only culturally, but politically too. Victor Amadeus II had shorn the city council of much of its autonomy, and it no longer tried to challenge royal authority. Victor Amadeus had in effect converted it into an outgrowth of the state, taking its orders directly from the sovereign. So we see Victor Amadeus’s successor, Charles Emanuel III, regularly intervening in its affairs: in 1745 to supervise the provisioning of the city