

Introduction

The Other Voice

When Marie Gigault de Bellefonds, marquise de Villars, joined her ambassador husband in Madrid in October 1679, she was long established in aristocratic circles. She had entered Parisian society almost three decades earlier and was a regular presence at the most popular *salons* of the time. She frequented the gatherings hosted by the marquise d'Uxelles, and kept company with acclaimed writer the comtesse de La Fayette, as well as the marquise de Sévigné, best known to posterity as the *grande dame* of French epistolary writing.¹ Unlike many women in her social milieu, however, Bellefonds-Villars traveled internationally as an *ambassadrice*, and played a significant role in supporting French interests abroad. In 1676 she traveled to the Savoy court in Turin, to which Louis XIV had sent her husband, Pierre de Villars, as French ambassador. She later moved to Madrid to be with him for his third ambassadorship to Spain. Her letters from Madrid were highly anticipated and eagerly received by her French acquaintances. During her two-year stay there, she wrote to several correspondents, including her good friend, Marie-Angélique du Gué de Bagnols, dame de Coulanges (ca. 1641–1723). A selection of her extant letters to Coulanges was first published posthumously, in 1749, and in nine subsequent editions. With the publication of this translation, the letters appear in print for the first time since 1923.

Just as Bellefonds-Villars was esteemed by her peers during her lifetime, so her published letters enjoyed a positive reception. They receive uniform praise for their liveliness, insights, and tantalizing information. Her first editor, Denis-Marius Perrin, commends the missives:

Not only are they very enjoyable to read, but also very intriguing, because of the anecdotes one finds in them on the subject of the union of Charles II with Marie-Louise d'Orléans, daughter of Philippe d'Orléans, Louis XIV's brother, and because of the portrait that

1. Marie de Bailleul, marquise d'Uxelles (ca. 1626–1712), mentioned at the end of Bellefonds-Villars' Letter 22; Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, comtesse de La Fayette (1634–1693), mentioned in Letter 9; and Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné (1626–1696), mentioned in Letters 9 and 28. Although it was common in seventeenth-century France to refer to a married noblewoman as *Madame de*, followed by her husband's surname, I use married titles such as marquise, comtesse, and duchesse to refer to aristocratic women, in keeping with scholarly practice. For the sake of clarity and efficiency, however, I use "Bellefonds-Villars" to differentiate the marquise de Villars from her husband, Pierre de Villars, to whom I refer as "Villars." In her surviving manuscript letters written after her marriage, she signs her letters "De Bellefont" or "De Bellefont Villars," indicating that she identified herself by her maiden name as well as her married name.

2 Introduction

Madame de Villars paints of the customs of the country and the mores of the court of Spain.²

In a nineteenth-century literary journal article on French women who traveled to Spain, Ferdinand Colincamp echoes Perrin's comments:

When we listen to [Madame de Villars], we see ourselves in a salon at Versailles, or else with Madame de Sévigné or de la Fayette: it's a tempered exchange, with veiled terms. The details are singular and carefully chosen [. . .]. A light irony flickers about like bees around it all.³

Certainly the regular reprinting of Bellefonds-Villars' letters, as well as references to her missives in works about late seventeenth-century Spanish-French relations, attest to the appreciation of this letter writer through the early twentieth century, both for the content of the missives and for their expressive style.

A Diplomatic Life

Marie Gigault de Bellefonds was born into a noble family in Normandy, near Valognes, in 1624.⁴ Shortly after arriving in Paris, in about 1650, she met Pierre de Villars (1623–1698), who served the French cavalry officer Charles-Amédée de Savoie, duc de Nemours (1624–1652), and was known for his excellent military skills, charm, and good looks. A witness to the early courtship of Bellefonds and Villars caught sight of Villars as he dashed away and nicknamed him Orondate, after a handsome character in Madeleine de Scudéry's popular novel *Artamène, or the Great Cyrus* (1649–1653).⁵ The Villars, married in January 1651, made a

2. Marie Gigault de Bellefonds-Villars, *Lettres de Madame la Marquise de Villars, ambassadrice en Espagne, dans le tems du mariage de Charles II, roi d'Espagne, avec Marie-Louise d'Orléans, fille de Monsieur* (Amsterdam and Paris: Michel Lambert, 1759), Introduction, iv. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

3. Ferdinand Colincamp, "Deux françaises en Espagne à la fin du XVIIe siècle," *Le Correspondant*, vol. 19 (Paris: Bureaux du *Correspondant*, 1877), 250.

4. For biographical information I have consulted the meticulous work of Alfred Morel-Fatio and Charles Jean Melchior de Vogüé (the marquis de Vogüé), who edited and introduced, respectively, Pierre de Villars' *Mémoires de la Cour d'Espagne de 1679 à 1681* (Paris: Plon, 1893; hereafter cited as "Villars, *Mémoires*"), and Alfred de Courtois, editor of Bellefonds-Villars' *Lettres à Madame de Coulanges: 1679–1681* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1868).

5. This anecdote is recounted in several sources, including the memoirs of the soldier and diplomat Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755). See the *Mémoires complets et authentiques du duc de Saint-Simon sur le siècle de Louis XIV et la Régence*, vol. 3: 1700–1703 (Paris: H.-L. Delloye, 1840), 157–59.

beautiful but financially strapped couple, as Villars had relatively little family wealth. Complicating matters was his participation as second to the duc de Nemours in that nobleman's duel with his brother-in-law, the duc de Beaufort. Nemours was killed by Beaufort, but Villars killed Beaufort's second, the comte d'Héricourt, and was forced to flee to Vienna.⁶

After the death of Nemours, Villars ingratiated himself with Armand de Bourbon, prince de Conti (1629–1666), whom he served after Conti's marriage in 1654 to Anne-Marie Martinozzi (1637–1672), a niece of Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1602–1661), Louis XIV's chief minister. Villars fought in Louis XIV's military campaign in Flanders in 1667, but although respected and admired, he was hindered in his career because of conflicts between his nephew, Bernardin Gigault de Bellefonds, maréchal de France (1630–1694), and François Michel le Tellier, marquis de Louvois (1641–1691), Louis XIV's secretary of state for war.⁷ Pierre de Villars eventually asked the king for a diplomatic post and was appointed extraordinary ambassador to Spain to announce officially the birth of Louis XIV's second son to the regent of Spain, Mariana of Austria (1634–1696). The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle had only recently been signed when Villars arrived in Spain in the fall of 1668.⁸ Meanwhile, Bellefonds-Villars remained in Paris with her children.⁹ She kept up friendships with well-connected women such as the marquise de Sévigné, whose own letters express affection for Bellefonds-Villars.¹⁰ Villars left his post in

6. See Villars, *Mémoires*, x. Héricourt is identified by his title in an earlier edition of Villars' *Mémoires*; see *Mémoires de la Cour d'Espagne, sous la [sic] regne de Charles II, 1678–1682*, ed. Sir William Stirling-Maxwell (London: Whittingham and Wilkins, 1861), vi.

7. Alfred de Courtois, introduction to *Lettres à Madame de Coulanges*, 16.

8. The 1668 Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, or Aachen, temporarily settled French and Spanish territorial disputes in the Spanish Netherlands and the Franche-Comté.

9. The Villars had nine children, seven of whom survived to adulthood (Courtois lists eight, including a son, Pierre-Hyacinthe, who died aged five, but excluding a daughter, Laurence Eléonore, who may also have died as a child). Two of them, Félix and Charlotte, were with their parents during the 1679–1681 embassy to Madrid. Although Courtois surmises that Thérèse de Villars was the other child, it was the fifteen-year-old Charlotte who accompanied them. See Courtois, introduction to *Lettres à Madame de Coulanges*, 77–78, and Villars, *Mémoires*, xlv. Laurence Eléonore de Villars (b. 1666) is listed in Père Anselme de Sainte-Marie's *Histoire généalogique et chronologique de la maison royale de France*, 3rd ed., 9 vols. (Paris: Compagnie de Libraires, 1726–1733), 5:106.

10. The marquise de Sévigné's letters are a significant source of information about Bellefonds-Villars. Both women had sons in the army. Of Louis XIV's 1667 invasion of Flanders, Sévigné writes on August 1 of that year: "Meanwhile the king amuses himself in taking Flanders, and Castel Rodrigue [the governor of Flanders] in retreating from all the towns that His Majesty wants to have. Almost everyone is worried for a son, or a brother, or a husband because, despite all our prosperity, there are always those who are wounded or killed." See Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné, de sa famille, et de ses amis*, ed. Louis-Jean-Nicolas Monmerqué, 14 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1862–1868), 1:495.

Spain in October 1669, but returned to Madrid in 1671, this time as ordinary ambassador and hoping to prevent Spain from fighting French and English interests in the Spanish Netherlands. War there began in 1672 and, after the French victory at Maastricht in 1673, Villars' life at the Spanish court became untenable. He was also out of funds, and took his leave at the end of that year.¹¹

In 1676, the Villars' friend, Simon Arnauld, marquis de Pomponne (1618–1699), secretary of state for foreign affairs, had Villars named ambassador to the court of Savoy. The ambassadorial post to Savoy was a less hazardous appointment, since the court was pro-French. Bellefonds-Villars arrived in Turin in late October, several months after her husband.¹² As the regent, Marie Jeanne Baptiste de Savoie-Nemours (1644–1724), known as “Madame Royale,” began to see more of the French *ambassadrice*, Bellefonds-Villars strove to facilitate an agreement for the regent's son, prince Victor Amadeus, aged eleven at the time, to marry a niece of Louis XIV.¹³

In September 1677, the Villars caused a stir by intervening in a love scandal. The renowned musician Alessandro Stradella (1639–1682), hired by the Venetian nobleman Alvise Contarini to provide lessons to his mistress, began his own relationship with her. The couple fled Venice and eventually went to Turin. Two men, presumably hired by Contarini, attacked Stradella there and then escaped police by entering the Villars' residence. Villars agreed to give the men immunity and personally accompanied them, hidden in his carriage, to safety across the French border. The incident did nothing to incur further favor with Madame Royale, who

11. A letter from August 1668 from Bellefonds-Villars to Hugues de Lionne (1611–1671), the French secretary of state of foreign affairs, pleads for more funds for her husband at the Court of Spain. See Villars, *Mémoires*, xx. For a discussion of the financial burdens faced by ambassadors, see William James Roosen, *The Age of Louis XIV: The Rise of Modern Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1976), 71–72.

12. Bellefonds-Villars' travels were delayed while her husband struggled to settle the question of which seat she would occupy as French ambassadress at the court of Savoy. Louis XIV wanted the ambassadress to benefit from a chair with a back, while the regent's protocol was for ambassadors' wives to sit on a stool. Seating and etiquette were considered of primary importance to relationships within courts, as rank—and recognition of rank—were central to both social and political interactions. See Villars, *Mémoires*, xxxi–xxxiii. For an analysis of etiquette at the court of Louis XIV see Giora Sternberg, *Status Interaction During the Reign of Louis XIV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

13. Marie Jeanne Baptiste de Savoie-Nemours, widow of Charles Emmanuel II and regent of Victor Amadeus Francis II of Savoy (1666–1732), was the daughter of the duc de Nemours, whom the marquis de Villars had served until the duke's death. Bellefonds-Villars advanced French interests by advocating that Victor Amadeus marry Anne-Marie d'Orléans (1669–1728). Anne-Marie was the sister of Marie-Louise d'Orléans, queen consort of Spain and a central figure in Bellefonds-Villars' letters from Madrid. The marriage of Anne-Marie and Victor Amadeus eventually took place, in 1684.

was already skeptical of Bellefonds-Villars, and she was asked to leave soon after.¹⁴ Her husband stayed on through 1678 and then returned to Paris.

Villars did not remain long in France. After the conclusion of the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1679, which ended the Franco-Dutch War and in which Spain made significant concessions to France, there was a renewed effort on the part of France to ease relations between the two countries. The Spanish were interested in a marriage between Charles II (1661–1700), the heir to the throne, and Marie-Louise d'Orléans (1662–1689), daughter of Philippe d'Orléans, Louis XIV's brother, and Henrietta of England. Villars was considered a seasoned candidate for overseeing this new alliance, and he left for Spain as ordinary ambassador in May 1679. The marriage contract was signed in August 1679, and Bellefonds-Villars joined her husband in Madrid two months later.

When the Villars settled in Spain, the court had been in financial and political turmoil for a number of years. Following the death of Philip IV in 1665, Mariana of Austria had become regent of her son, Charles II, then only four years old. Mariana appointed her confessor, Austrian Jesuit Johann Eberhard Nithard (1607–1681), as de facto prime minister. When enough opposition to Nithard was mounted, Mariana appointed another favorite (*valido*)—Fernando de Valenzuela, marquis of Villa Sierra (1636–1692)—as prime minister.¹⁵

Internal intrigues aside, there were other serious problems facing the Spanish court. Charles II, the product of generations of consanguinity in the Spanish Habsburg dynasty, was physically and mentally disabled.¹⁶ Known later as *el hechizado*, “the bewitched,” he was considered too fragile for any extensive education, and, although the information was never made public, he was infertile. Charles was particularly vulnerable to the manipulations of different parties vying for power, especially ministers and the Spanish nobility.¹⁷ Don Juan José of Austria (John of Austria, 1629–1679), the illegitimate son of Philip IV, had many supporters, and his eyes on the Spanish throne. After Charles came of age in 1675, Don Juan convinced the young king to remove prime minister Valenzuela and send Mariana from the court to Toledo. Don Juan became prime minister and garnered Spain's participation in the Peace of Nijmegen in 1678. He made no attempt to educate the already intellectually neglected king, and annulled a

14. Villars, *Mémoires*, xl–xliii. The marquis de Vogüé writes that the relationship between Bellefonds-Villars and Madame Royale was always fraught and that the regent was happy to see Bellefonds-Villars go.

15. Regarding Mariana of Austria's political influence, see Silvia Z. Mitchell, *Queen, Mother, and Stateswoman: Mariana of Austria and the Government of Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

16. His father, Philip IV, was his mother's uncle.

17. For an overview of the different factions of the court of Spain, see Marie-Françoise Maquart, *L'Espagne de Charles II et la France, 1665–1700* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2000).

marriage contract arranged by the regent between Charles and Maria Antonia, daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I.¹⁸ By the time Villars arrived in Madrid, it was clear that Don Juan had plenty of enemies, some of whom had offered to assassinate him on behalf of Mariana.¹⁹ Because Don Juan demanded an etiquette that the French considered above his rank, Villars never met with him. Charles eventually agreed to have Don Juan removed from court. Don Juan died unexpectedly, perhaps from poisoning, on September 17, 1679, and Charles retrieved his mother from Toledo a few days later. She continued to exercise power in favor of the house of Austria until her death in 1696.

According to both Villars and Bellefonds-Villars, Charles, who had seen the portrait of Marie-Louise d'Orléans, was smitten by his bride-to-be and eager to meet her. Marie-Louise's convoy arrived at the Spanish border on November 1, 1679. By this time Charles was in Burgos, where the wedding ceremony was to take place. Villars was granted permission to meet Marie-Louise, who was already unhappy with the new rules of Spanish etiquette and the political maneuvering around her.²⁰

Because the archbishop of Burgos was very ill, the wedding venue was moved to Quintanapalla, a small village near Burgos where the new queen was staying. Villars, however, almost missed the ceremony; he had been misled by Don Jerónimo de Eguía, the secretary of state, who claimed the wedding was still taking place in Burgos. In the end, Villars and the extraordinary French ambassador, the prince d'Harcourt, reached Quintanapalla in time for the ceremony. Since neither the king nor the queen spoke each other's language, Villars served as translator at their first meeting. In the words from Villars' memoirs of his ambassadorship, he "had them say to each other what they would have thought most courteous."²¹ The royal convoy arrived near Madrid in early December, and Marie-Louise d'Orléans made her ceremonial entry into Madrid the following month.²²

Both Villars' memoirs and Bellefonds-Villars' letters attest to the challenges of their two-year stay in Madrid. In addition to seemingly irreparable relations between the two countries and an abundance of political intrigues around a weak king, the Villars had to contend with a succession of conflicts, including attacks on

18. Courtois, introduction to *Lettres à Madame de Coulanges*, 41–42.

19. Courtois, 45n1.

20. Villars, *Mémoires*, 95–96.

21. Villars, *Mémoires*, 99.

22. The ceremony is recounted in *Relación compendiosa del recibimiento, y entrada triunfante de la Reyna Nuestra Señora D. María Luísa de Borbón. En la muy noble, leal Coronada Villa de Madrid. A 13 de Enero 1680* (Madrid: Bernardo Villa-Diego, Madrid, 1680), and translated into French as *Nouvelle relation de la magnifique et royale entrée qui a été faite à Madrid par Marie-Louise de Bourbon, reine des Espagnes* (Paris: A. Chouqueux, 1680). The periodicals *Gazeta de Madrid* and *Gazette de France* published regular accounts of royal ceremonies and travels.

their servants and the termination of traditional ambassadorial privileges. Court finances, moreover, were in disarray, and poverty in Madrid was widespread. And although Charles adored his French wife, he was resolutely anti-French. As the ambassadorship went on, members of the Spanish court became increasingly hostile toward the French ambassador. In France, rumors spread that Bellefonds-Villars was using her friendship with the queen to advance her own ambitions.

In the end, Louis XIV recalled ambassador Villars upon the request of the Spanish prime minister, Juan Francisco de la Cerda, duke of Medinaceli (1637–1691), who was deeply suspicious of the queen's French entourage and perceived the king as increasingly vulnerable to the queen's requests. Rumors circulated that the decision was a result of Bellefonds-Villars' plottings at the court. She left Spain in May 1681, and Villars took official leave of the court of Spain in August of the same year. Despite the disappointments of this ambassadorial assignment, however, the Villars remained in Louis XIV's good graces. Villars began serving as extraordinary ambassador to Denmark in 1683, and received several honorific titles during his years of service to the French Crown before his death in 1698. Bellefonds-Villars continued her close friendships with the marquise de Sévigné and dame de Coulanges, and died in Paris in 1706.

Women and the Epistolary Arts

Bellefonds-Villars' letters conform precisely to the aristocratic climate of epistolary writing in this era. Social letter writing in seventeenth-century France adhered to the parameters for polite conversation that were codified in the *salons* and courtly settings:²³

The art of epistolary writing and the art of conversation combine the same aesthetic values and establish the same ethics of sociability, in which spontaneity, naturalness, variety, and cheerfulness are expected to transmit the subtly surveilled flow of words within the controlled scenography of conversation.²⁴

Notions of spoken and written expression reflected similar ideas about what constituted pleasing and commendable communication. Like the familiar letter genre, which humanist culture brought to prominence in early modern Europe, the art of conversation became the subject of treatises and prescriptive texts. The

23. "With the permanent aim of pleasing, conversation developed a precise strategy involving *politesse* [politeness], *esprit* [wit], *galanterie*, *complaisance* (obligingness), *enjouement* (cheerfulness), and *flatterie*." See Benedetta Craveri, *The Age of Conversation*, trans. Teresa Waugh (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 345.

24. Brigitte Diaz, *L'épistolaire, ou la pensée nomade: Formes et fonctions de la correspondance dans quelques parcours d'écrivains au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002), 25.