

REVIEWS

Letters from Spain: A Seventeenth-Century French Noblewoman at the Spanish Royal Court. Marie Gigault de Bellefonds, Marquise de Villars.

Ed. and trans. Nathalie Hester. *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 80.* Toronto: Iter Press, 2021. xii + 100 pp. \$41.95.

As part of our expanding knowledge about women's lives in early modern political and diplomatic cultures, and the culture of princely courts, the role of the ambassador's wife is central to our understanding of the more nuanced position women held in this society. This volume of translated letters adds a rich layer to this understanding. Marie Gigault de Bellefonds, Marquise de Villars, accompanied her husband to the Spanish court in the autumn of 1679 to help prepare the ground for the arrival of a new queen of Spain, Marie-Louise d'Orléans, niece of Louis XIV. Her letters back to her friends in Paris are informative of events in Madrid, and of the extremely tense situation there, where the court was divided between pro- and anti-French factions, but also provide useful insights into the world of the epistolary arts. Not only do they demonstrate how the art of letter-writing had evolved in this period—notably in this circle closely connected to the most famous letter writer of the day, Madame de Sévigné—but also how women played a role in diplomacy, conveying important information in unofficial channels that their husbands, the ambassadors, could not.

This volume, edited and translated by Nathalie Hester as part of the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, is a welcome addition to making primary source material written by elite women in the seventeenth century more accessible to students of the period who do not read French. The thirty-seven translated letters (plus three more in the appendix written prior to her journey to Spain) are clearly translated and thoroughly annotated with footnotes that provide historical context, details of persons mentioned, and definitions of certain words pertinent to understanding the court of Spain. The introduction places the author in her historical context, and explains the editorial choice of referring to her as Bellefonds-Villars, which is how the marquise referred to herself in her letters. This is an interesting topic that potentially could be further researched: when did elite women begin to assume a husband's surname in early modern France?

The introduction also provides a thorough grounding in the recent literature focused on ceremonial, epistolary writing and the court of Spain, though it might be noted that many specialists of the Spanish court of the later seventeenth century (Storrs, Mitchell, Martínez López) are more cautious in accepting as a given that Carlos II (oddly described here as “heir to the throne” [5] in 1679, though he had been reigning since 1665) was as mentally challenged as traditional histories have presented.

Historical interpretations aside, the real strength of this slender volume is in helping students and scholars understand the delicate nuances of the epistolary arts, how women

in particular controlled their self-presentation through “codified conversation” (7). Bellefonds-Villars knew she had to be entertaining yet tasteful in her style, and she was of course wary of including too much detail about the queen and about the Spanish court, as she knew her letters would be intercepted and read. At the same time, she knew one of her intended readers was Madame de Maintenon, and via her, Louis XIV, so she was performing an important function in the ever delicate game of diplomatic exchanges, in a political space that was only recently locked in a vicious war against France.

Her letters, Hester explains, are therefore masterfully filled with indirect expressions, allusions, and double negatives—she expected her French correspondents to read between the lines. They are also full of insights into the mind of a French woman living in Spain, and therefore a good example of travel literature of the time: she is intrigued by women’s hairstyles and social rituals and repulsed by the religious fanaticism as displayed in the *auto-da-fé* or the wild and barbarous bullfights she witnessed. In the end, though the Marquise de Villars attempted to present herself in her correspondence as neutral and merely a dutiful ambassador’s wife without political ambitions of her own, Spanish authorities accused her of being too close to Queen Marie-Louise and of attempting to influence a pro-French faction at the Spanish court, and she was obliged to leave Madrid, even before her husband’s embassy had formally ended.

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Unimpeded Sailing: A Critical Edition of Johann Gröning’s “Navigatio libera” (Extended 1698 Edition). Peter Maxwell-Stuart, Steve Murdoch, and Leos Müller, eds.

Brill’s Studies in Maritime History 6. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 162 pp. €95.

When reflecting upon the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, international relations scholars are likely to recall just a couple of developments: perhaps 1648, the Treaties of Westphalia and the purported dawn of a sovereign state-system in Europe, or perhaps 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht and the rise of balance of power discourse. But arguably, the looming diplomatic preoccupation and font of a voluminous literature in international thought in these years was the question of neutrality, neutral rights, and neutral trade. Lost writings are now surfacing again and receiving careful scholarly attention, and *Navigatio Libera* by Johann Gröning (first edition 1693, second edition 1698) deserves a central place in a body of work that cannot be neglected if we want to understand the era properly. This fine production of the second edition, with generous expository material and