

¿MARGINALIDAD PRINCIPESCA?:

MUJERES Y ESPACIOS POLÍTICOS
EN LA EUROPA MODERNA

Ezequiel Borgognoni y Vincenzo Lagioia
(eds.)





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MANAGING MAYHEM AT COURT AND IN COMBAT: MADAME DE MAINTENON'S ROLE IN THE MILITARY CRISIS OF 1708

Mark Bryant
University of Chichester

After a series of spectacular defeats 1704-06, leading to Louis XIV suffering a mental breakdown as vividly recorded by Mme de Maintenon in 1705,¹ the Sun King had good reason to be slightly more optimistic about campaigning in 1708 following the successful defence of Toulon against the Allies, Villars' profitable expeditions into Germany, and Philip V's success at Almanza leading to the retaking of Valencia in 1707.² The disastrous expedition to Scotland in March 1708 to reinstall the 'Pretender' James Edward Stuart, the son of deposed King James II, on the Scottish throne, or at least divert the Allies, was unfortunately a portent of things to come.³ After the resounding defeat at Oudenarde on 11 July 1708,⁴ the town of Lille was also lost on 22 October,⁵ then Vauban's apparently impregnable citadel fell on 8 December with Ghent and Bruges recaptured by the Allies soon after. The loss of Lille shell-shocked the king and subsequent enemy incursions into France made the prospect of invasion likely. Maintenon confided to her old friend and chief lady-in-waiting to the young King and Queen of Spain, the Princess des Ursins, in Madrid on 28 October that Louis XIV was «sensitive to this loss.... Judge Madame, how embarrassing this is for the king [who] still possesses the same courage, equanimity and health as before, but I fear he is inwardly much affected»⁶

¹ See my *Queen of Versailles: Madame de Maintenon, First Lady of Louis XIV's France* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2020), 225, 271-76.

² For the best recent account of the War of the Spanish Succession see Clément Oury, *La guerre de succession d'Espagne: La fin tragique du grand siècle* (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2020).

³ Mostly scuppered by the armada's terminally unenthusiastic commanders, Marshal Gacé and the Chevalier de Forbin-Janson, the ill-health of the Pretender that delayed disembarkation and general incompetence in the orchestration and execution of the invasion: see Daniel Szechi, *Britain's Lost Revolution?: Jacobite Scotland and French Grand Strategy, 1701-8* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); and also see the older, but colourful account by John S. Gibson, *Playing the Scottish Card: The Franco-Jacobite Invasion of 1708* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988).

⁴ When the French army lost 14-15,000 men killed or wounded: John Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667-1714* (London: Longman, 1999), 320.

⁵ In the course of the siege that had begun on 13 August with the Allies suffering 12,000 casualties and the French army 4-5000: Linda and Marsha Frey, *The Treaties of the War of the Spanish Succession: An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 249.

⁶ *The Secret Correspondence of Madame de Maintenon with the Princess des Ursins from the Original Manuscripts in the Possession of the Duke de Choiseul. Translated from the French*, 3 vols. (London: Geo. B. Whittaker, 1827), vol. I, 201. Herein after: *M.U.C.*

However, Marlborough's miraculous march aside (at one stage covering approximately fifty miles in sixty hours to unite with Eugene of Savoy's army), much of the responsibility for these failings must rest on Louis XIV's shoulders. His maladroit diplomacy and the inability to choose the right commander in the Spanish Netherlands for 1708, or decide on an appropriate course of action following the defeat at Oudenarde, saw the French army humiliated further with ducs de Vendôme and de Bourgogne bickering amongst themselves at the front in the face of formidable Allied forces. This compelled the king to dispatch the marshal-duc de Berwick, James FitzJames (the illegitimate son of the Duke of York and Arabella Churchill) from the Rhine in July to fortify the French army before Oudenarde. Berwick was also told to try, in vain, and reunite Bourgogne and Vendôme, which the exhausted and unpopular war and former finance minister Michel Chamillart attempted to achieve in person on two occasions. He was first sent to Flanders in September, but only achieved a temporary reconciliation between Bourgogne and Vendôme. Chamillart was consequently dispatched again a few weeks later along with the king's leading military adviser Jules-Louis de Bolé, marquis de Chamlay, to unify the frontline generals, appraise the military situation and decide on the optimal course of action after weeks of prevarication, demonstrating behaviour that had become all too familiar in the 1690s,⁷ and which has been described by Guy Rowlands as «strategic dithering»⁸ As Emmanuel Pénicaut and more recently Jean-Philippe Cénat have asserted this was a version of the famous «strategy de cabinet» writ large.⁹ In consequence, Maintenon, courtiers, and popular opinion agreed that the diversity of views amongst the French generals in Flanders and the turgid decision making process at Versailles was fatally undermining the war effort and imperilling France with even Louis XIV's unofficially adopted son, James Edward Stuart, cuttingly complaining of a «drift in government»¹⁰

This paper will therefore examine the chaotic aftermath of Oudenarde to underscore the extent to which Mme de Maintenon was fulfilling an increasingly expansive role in the conduct of warfare superficially from the sidelines according to her critics, but in fact playing a pivotal part in the direction of campaigns. An exploration of the spectacular imbroglio of 1708 highlights the convoluted wartime decision-making process, communication difficulties, deficiencies in leadership and the command structure of the army, plus factional problems at the front and at Versailles, all of which forced Maintenon energetically to intervene. She was able to exploit her uniquely influential position

⁷ Thierry Sarmant and Pierre Waksman, "The King and His Generals: The Military Correspondence of Louis XIV in 1696," *French History* 22, 2 (June 2008): 156-74.

⁸ *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.

⁹ Emmanuel Pénicaut, *Faveur et pouvoir au tournant de grand siècle: Michel Chamillart, Ministre et secrétaire d'État de la guerre de Louis XIV* (Paris: École nationale des chartes, 2004), 198-99; Jean-Philippe Cénat, *Le Roi Stratège: Louis XIV et la direction de la guerre, 1661-1715* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 241-43.

¹⁰ Edward Corp, Ed. *A Court in Exile: The Stuarts in France, 1689-1718* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 66.

auprès du roi and her unrivalled network of clients and contacts, relatives, protégés (like Chamillart) and powerful old friends (including marshals Boufflers, Noailles, Villars and Villeroy) to try and improve the deteriorating state of France's military fortunes, communicating directly with, and acting as an intermediary between, the king, princes, ministers and marshals to try and avoid what courtiers feared could result in a full-scale invasion, the capture of Paris and total defeat by the Allied forces. The sense of panic and confusion is encapsulated in a letter from Liselotte to her Aunt Sophie sent from Fontainebleau on 1 August 1708:

I knew that a battle had been lost, but did not know where. Now I do know, but none of the details because one may not discuss it here, and the men who are in the fighting aren't allowed to discuss it here.... People talk as much about this battle as they do where you are, but only in whispers and not out loud¹¹

Even the much better informed Maintenon did not initially know for several weeks whether the French had won, drawn or lost the battle of Oudenarde, and only finally admitted to the Princess des Ursins on 19 August that, «we must not deceive ourselves, we lost the action of 11 July»¹²

As well as highlighting the pitfalls of the «cabinet strategy» this paper also reveals the extent to which the «la voix publique» [«the public voice»], or «public opinion» had become a recognisable and influential force by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Many leading figures, including Maintenon as we shall see, found this development baffling and disturbing, so that by 1739 the teacher of rhetoric at Louis-Le-Grand in Paris, the Jesuit Xavier de la Sante, commented that the empire of opinion was sovereign, and he warned, an affliction, even over the king and that it reigned «at court, in the town, the people, the nobility, the camp and in the bar»¹³

Charged with the main body of the French army that assembled in Flanders on 25 May 1708, Vendôme and Bourgogne were in conflict from the outset of the campaign because neither was strictly in charge. In a letter to Vendôme on 20 May from Marly, Louis XIV intimated his hope that Bourgogne would be able to profit both from the older duc's advice and the forthcoming experience of warfare and that the two would work well together. But the king also insightfully reminded Vendôme that resources were running short and that in the long term it would not be possible to sustain expenses in

¹¹ Maria Kroll, Trans. and Ed. *Letters from Liselotte: Elisabeth-Charlotte, Princess Palatine and Duchess of Orléans, 'Madame'* (London: Allison and Busby Ltd., 1998), 142-43.

¹² Hans Bots, Eugénie Bots-Estourgie, Catherine Hémon-Fabre, Marcel Loyau, Christine Mongenot and Jan Schillings, Eds. *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon* [and] *Lettres à Madame de Maintenon*, 11 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009-18), vol. IV, 399-402. Herein after: *B.M.L.*

¹³ See John A. W. Gunn, *Queen of the World: Opinion in the Public Life of France from the Renaissance to the Revolution* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995), 115.

proportion to revenues that had dwindling for some time.¹⁴ Maintenon alluded to the same problem when observing in a missive to the Princess des Ursins on 15 August that «it is now fifteen years since it was said that we had no more [money], and yet what immense sums have not been expended?»¹⁵ Maintenon's correspondence with the new controller-general of finance from 1708 following Chamillart's resignation, Nicolas Desmaretz, reflect on the same pressing problems and potential resolutions.¹⁶

As a Prince of France, the duc de Bourgogne was theoretically in command of the army in Flanders and this was a deliberate decision made by the king, who was keen for his eldest grandson and heir to gain invaluable military experience and potentially personal *gloire* and had therefore also placed his second grandson, the duc de Berry, in the frontline alongside his brother. But putting Bourgogne in charge of the army at this juncture was risky even if, as Cénat states, the young duke was effectively being mentored by the vastly more experienced Vendôme. Louis told his grandson to listen to the general's advice, but this did not mean he had to follow it, or abide by his decisions. Initially Vendôme wanted to take advantage of French military superiority and harass Marlborough along the Meuse eventually besieging Huy.¹⁷ But here the first of many disputes erupted between the two commanders that Bourgogne invariably attempted to resolve by writing to his grandfather. In return Louis XIV penned protracted responses detailing numerous potential scenarios that often did little to instil confidence in either commander, or clarify the course of action they should take.

In consequence, as Thierry Sarmant contends, Bourgogne was unable to «hold sway» over his more experienced commanding officers, like Biron, Hautefort, Lamotte, Matignon and Puysegur, and was paralysed by his attempt closely to follow orders from Versailles, fearful of being responsible for an event injurious to the state.¹⁸ Evidently his grandfather was also at fault because the ageing Sun King had become increasingly indecisive. And even when Louis XIV *did* dispatch definitive instructions these could often be countermanded days or even hours later, especially if they ordered an attack or assault, making it almost impossible for frontline generals to know how to proceed. For example, regarding Vendôme's proposal to besiege Huy, Bourgogne turned to the king, who counselled against such a hazardous enterprise, but his mind was subsequently changed by arguments put forward by Vendôme. Louis XIV consequently authorized an assault on Huy on June 5th and then retracted this command a week later after learning

¹⁴ François E. de Vault and Jean J. G. Pelet, Eds. *Mémoires Militaires Relatifs à la Succession d'Espagne sous Louis XIV*, 11 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1835-62), vol. VIII, 9-10. Herein after: Vault and Pelet, *Mémoires Militaires*.

¹⁵ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 176.

¹⁶ Nicolas Desmaretz to Madame de Maintenon, 26 July 1708. Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (AMAE), Mémoires et documents (MD), France, vol. 137, ff. 85-87; *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 435-36, 663-64, 918-19; vol. IX, 666-68. Also see the fine biography by Stéphane Guerre, *Nicolas Desmaretz (1648 - 1721): Le Colbert oublié du Roi-Soleil* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2019).

¹⁷ Cénat, *Le Roi Stratège*, 36.

¹⁸ *Louis XIV: Homme et Roi* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), 458.

that Eugene of Savoy had left the Moselle and was marching to link up with Marlborough, who had thwarted French advances towards Brussels.¹⁹

As long as Bourgogne deferred to Vendôme's experience and ingenuity the two could work productively in tandem, and they successfully implemented the latter's strategy to seize back Ghent and Bruges, both of which were taken by the first week of July. Now great opportunities arose if they could take Oudenarde quickly, as Vendôme proposed, before Eugene and Marlborough united their armies, but Bourgogne was less confident and the king agreed with his grandson.²⁰ This proved costly as Prince Eugene's forces were joined on the Dender at Lessines by those of Marlborough on 11 July after the Duke's astonishing march, causing disagreement about whether or not the Allied enemy should now be engaged. Bourgogne was still against giving battle, but Vendôme was in favour, mindful that Berwick's army was on its way from the Rhine as ordered by Louis XIV.

These delays were disastrous because the Allied army, after rapidly crossing the Schedlt, surprised the French army and forced it into what John Lynn has described as a «meeting engagement» at Oudenarde on 11 July where Bourgogne's inertia on the left flank, in defiance of Vendôme's exhortations to attack, meant that the latter on the right was obliged to bear the brunt of the enemy assault. Approximately 14,000 men were lost in the momentous battle with 5,000 killed and wounded and 9,000 taken prisoner, including 800 officers, that as Sarmant points out was not only costly in terms of men and morale, but also opened up a strategic gateway for the Allies and undermined the prestige of the future heir to the throne.²¹ Louis XIV's instructions to Bourgogne leave the impression that both generals were at fault,²² although a personal message from the king to his grandson received on 11 July had dictated that an engagement should be avoided and «great prudence» employed to avoid compromising the success achieved at Ghent and Bruges.²³ Predictably Louis initially gave his grandson the benefit of the doubt, even though Bourgogne's only incisive decision was to order a permanent retreat that was again contrary to Vendôme's desire to renew hostilities the following day. Public opinion was less generous,²⁴ and Bourgogne was accused of cowardice in popular verse: «They hazard neither limb nor life / Nor yet their honour in the strife / One plays at shuttlecock all day / The other commands from his *chaise-percée*»²⁵

Bourgogne consequently intensified his correspondence with Maintenon who, as the Bourbon family matriarch, was a more sympathetic royal representative. On 13 July he wrote describing his version of events at Oudenarde, which was unequivocal as to who

¹⁹ Lynn, *Wars of Louis XIV*, 318.

²⁰ Cénat, *Le Roi Stratège*, 238.

²¹ *Louis XIV*, 458.

²² John B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (New York: Norton, 1968), 551-52.

²³ Cénat, *Le Roi Stratège*, 237.

²⁴ Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Louis XIV* (Paris: Perrin, 1995), 616.

²⁵ Ernest Lavisse, *Louis XIV: Histoire d'Un Grand Règne, 1643-1715* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1989), 110-11; Lucy Norton, Trans. and Ed. *Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon*, 3 vols. (London: Prion, 1999-2000), vol. I, 383.

was primarily responsible,²⁶ declaring that «the King is utterly deceived if he maintains a high opinion of him [Vendôme]. . . . Judge, Madame, whether the interests of the state are in good hands»²⁷ In order to regain the king's esteem, and extract a vote of confidence to bolster his authority, Bourgogne emphasized that he had opposed Vendôme's decisions during and after Oudenarde, but that he had been told by the king ultimately to comply with the senior commander's wishes if they were articulated assertively. However, if the king now wanted Bourgogne to make decisions in consultation with the marshals of France and wise officers at the front then the duke stated that he would endeavour to do that as profitably as possible.²⁸ He also repeatedly condemned Vendôme's laziness, immeasurable pride and the military incapability of his supposed mentor, who countered by blaming Bourgogne's persistent irresolution.²⁹

More objectively on 21 July, Bourgogne conceded that Vendôme's errors did not excuse his own failings, whilst at the same time pointing out that the army's confidence in Vendôme was low.³⁰ This was ironic because shortly afterwards at the beginning of August when it was clear that the Allies would besiege Lille, as Eugene had proposed on 3 August, Vendôme wrote to the king stressing that a joint action in tandem with Berwick's forces was not advisable because distrustful officers «have thrown doubt into the spirit of M. le Duc de Bourgone»³¹ Meanwhile Bourgogne's more optimistic missive of the 24th implies that Maintenon had indeed been working efficaciously behind the scenes in response to his earlier request, as he intones that «I must begin by thanking you, Madam, as you have obtained from the King *la voix décisive*, which would greatly benefit the king's service»³²

Writing to Ursins on 23 July 1708, the marquise de Maintenon outlined her concern that ongoing discord in the military high command had inflamed a fierce factional struggle that, as Ernest Lavisse maintained,³³ split the army into Burgundian and Vendômiste camps as the summer progressed, thus further afflicting a deteriorating campaign. And as Jean-Christian Petitfils has more recently claimed it also crystallized the *Cabale de Meudon* who, in defending their hero Vendôme, laid the blame for France's misfortunes squarely on Chamillart's sagging shoulders.³⁴ These denigrations obliged Maintenon to write repeatedly to her long-time friend the duc de Villeroi demanding that he and the

²⁶ Abbé Millot, Ed. *Mémoires politiques et militaires pour servir à l'histoire de Louis XIV et Louis XV, composés sur les pièces originales recueillies par Adrien-Maurice, duc de Noailles, maréchal de France et ministre d'État*. vols. 71-74 in Alexandre Petitot and Louis-Jean-Nicolas Monmerqué, Eds. *Collection des Mémoires Relatifs à l'Histoire de France* (Paris: Foucault, 1828-29), vol. 74, 139-41. Herein after: Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*.

²⁷ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 141.

²⁸ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 141.

²⁹ Cénat, *Le Roi Stratège*, 238.

³⁰ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 143.

³¹ Richard Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 394.

³² Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 143-44.

³³ Lavisse, *Louis XIV*, 111.

³⁴ On the Dauphin's 'Cabale de Meudon' see Matthieu Layahe, *Le fils de Louis XIV. Monseigneur le grand Dauphin (1661-1711)* (Seyssel: Éditions Champ Vallon, 2013), 334-40.

Cabale desist from attacking Chamillart in public starting in 1706. On 23 September of that year she had written complaining to Villeroi that:

it is said that you form a cabal against M. Chamillart, that you have joined with his enemies, and that you persuade people of merit to support these interests, and many other things that I cannot believe, and I would be delighted if you would repudiate them.... I believe, Monsieur, that you are enough of an *honnête homme* to cast off your resentments against M. Chamillart at a time like this, and to think only of excusing his faults and proposing remedies for them, to resurrect hopes and engage in discourse agreeable to the King.³⁵

These entreaties do not seem to have had the desired effect because in letters dated 23 and 30 July 1708 Maintenon disclosed to Ursins that events in Flanders had «impaired the health of M. de Chamillart», who was «at death's door».³⁶ Dauphiné, Artois and Provence were also threatened and it was rumoured that the Duke of Savoy had designs on Lyon, which was «a city of such great commercial importance, that such an apprehension will greatly injure our credit».³⁷ Moreover, Maintenon complained of «contemptible and hateful fury of courtiers [who] often turn to me as less significant and less mysterious ministers to share their afflictions».³⁸ And she also began making the first of many declarations in defence of Bourgogne's conduct in combat, emphasizing that:

the duc sought much good advice, but he had been ordered to defer to the more experienced M. de Vendôme.... It is impossible that there could not be a coolness between the duc de Bourgogne and M. de Vendôme through the diversity of their opinions that many people contribute to and augment by their harmful discourse.³⁹

Maintenon consequently stepped up her war efforts and in particular those on behalf of the duc de Bourgogne. His letters show that, like her charge the duc du Maine before him, he received her protection and solicited her «good offices next to the king»,⁴⁰ which now included reciprocally relaying instructions, ideas and intelligence to which she was privy, thus fulfilling her role as the pre-eminent royal intermediary, who was present at policy-making meetings and thus familiar with highly confidential government

³⁵ Louis-Simon Auger, Ed. *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon*. 6 vols. (Paris: Maradan, 1806), vol. III, 248–49; also see vol. III, 250–51, 256–57.

³⁶ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 167, 171.

³⁷ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 170.

³⁸ *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 382.

³⁹ Auguste Geffroy, Ed. *Madame de Maintenon d'après sa correspondance authentique, choix de ses lettres et entretiens*. 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1887), vol. II, 169, 171. Herein after: *G.M.* On the same defensive theme see Maintenon to Ursins 11 November: *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 452.

⁴⁰ Alfred Baudrillart and Leon Lecestre, Eds. *Lettres du duc de Bourgogne au roi Philippe V et la reine, 1701–12*, 2 vols. (Paris: Renouard, 1912–16), vol. II, 182.

information. On 1 August Bourgogne expressed that he was pleased and had gained confidence on learning that the king was satisfied with his conduct.⁴¹ And six days later he thanked the marquise for her letter of the 4th that had divulged the content of her conversation with marshal Catinat, whose esteemed advice would prevent him from again dissatisfying the king and falling further into public disfavour.⁴² The duke also added a further critique of Vendôme's arrogance, and the lack of confidence that he claimed it inspired, before expanding on the dangers of besieging Oudenarde, explaining why a second battle was not prosecuted, and how «further misintelligence between M. de Vendôme and myself will be pernicious», but this had already been generated and was being gossiped about at court and in Paris.⁴³

Significantly, Bourgogne also betrayed that it had been critical to obtain the king's «voix decisive» because the decision-making process of the *conseil de guerre*, where «one encounters thirty different opinions», was too protracted and initiatives were consequently being lost and opportunities squandered.⁴⁴ Voltaire was later to level the same accusation that more recent studies have substantiated:

As for the generals he [Louis XIV] employed, they were often hampered by precise orders, like ambassadors who must not deviate from their instructions. In Madame de Maintenon's cabinet, he and Chamillart directed the operations of the campaign. If the general wished to undertake a major undertaking, he often had to request permission through a courier, who on his return would find either the opportunity missed, or the general defeated⁴⁵

Bourgogne had proposed and reiterated that if, at critical moments, actions could be undertaken after consulting officers and experts in the field, rather than counsellors at court, then the army's performance should improve.⁴⁶ The duke added that he was pleased that marshal Catinat was at no point worried about the security of Dauphiné because his expert knowledge would enable him to evaluate the situation better than anyone else.⁴⁷ The advice she subsequently gave to Bourgogne was extremely welcome as revealed in the duke's reply of 13th August in which he thanked the marquise for

⁴¹ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 144-45.

⁴² Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 145.

⁴³ The Duke continued: «all these reasons make many sensible people very apprehensive that, for the same reasons, some inconvenience would still occur if a second battle were to be fought; and that our affairs would be ruined if we were to lose it again. I was urged to make these things known to the King, and I thought I should tell you, Madame, so that you could make use of them with him as you see fit» (Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 148-49).

⁴⁴ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 145-46.

⁴⁵ René Pomeau, Ed. *Voltaire: Oeuvres Historiques* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1958), 812. Vault and Pelet also contend that «the orders of the king were so precise that they could not be carried out» (*Mémoires Militaires*, vol. VIII, 96).

⁴⁶ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 146-49.

⁴⁷ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 148.

her frankness and that he would follow her suggestion always to find the occasion to consult good officers.⁴⁸

However, marshal Villars had written from Dauphiné on 12 August to emphasize to Maintenon that Chamillart was underestimating the threat posed by Savoy,⁴⁹ and tensions at the French court were heightened further when the Allies began to invest Lille in earnest on the 14th with forces totalling over 110,000 men: Eugene conducted the siege with about 35,000 soldiers safeguarded by Marlborough, who led the main Allied army totalling around 75,000.⁵⁰ Diligently Maintenon wrote to ask Villars for a solution to the army's predicament, who on 23 August replied that he had previously presented one to the king during an informal conversation whilst walking in the gardens at Versailles. The solution for Villars was obvious and that was to put himself solely in charge of the Flanders army.⁵¹ This piece of advice did not prevail in this instance, but it was adopted in 1709 when Villars was placed in command of the army in Flanders on 15 March after Vendôme's temporary disgrace, and France's fortunes did slowly begin to improve militarily at least from this point on.

Throughout August marshal Boufflers kept up his valiant defence of Lille and the Allied forces did continue to enjoy a distinct advantage. But at the same time Bourgogne and Vendôme still had approximately 110,000 comparatively fresh troops at their disposal, which would prove crucial, as Berwick's forces had marched from the Rhine arriving at Douai on 18 July, although for the time being the two armies remained separate. More positively, Bourgogne communicated to Maintenon on 21 August that the concert between himself and Vendôme, which she considered vital, had finally been established by Chamillart,⁵² and added that although it was desirous to relieve Lille any combat enjoined would undoubtedly be lost, but that they would await instructions until after the king had reflected on their intelligence.⁵³ On the 22nd Louis XIV drew the same conclusions, discouraging Bourgogne from chancing a major encounter that became more probable as the siege advanced,⁵⁴ with Eugene opening trenches on the same day.⁵⁵

In another typically long and intricately detailed letter to his grandson on 26 August the French king stressed that all further decisions must now be taken in concert with the duc de Berwick, who should not unite with the main French army, as he and Chamlay had previously suggested, but assemble as many troops as possible at Valenciennes to facilitate Bourgogne's retreat to Mons. This would also provide some relief for

⁴⁸ Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 149–50.

⁴⁹ Letter from Maintenon to Villars, 12 August 1708. In Marquis de Vogüé, Ed. "Correspondance inédite de Madame de Maintenon et le maréchal de Villars, 1700–08", *Le Correspondant* (25 January 1881): 216.

⁵⁰ Lynn, *Wars of Louis XIV*, 321.

⁵¹ Letter from Villars to Maintenon, 23 August 1708. In Vogüé, "Correspondance de Maintenon et Villars", 218–9.

⁵² Yves Coirault, Ed. *Saint-Simon: Mémoires. Additions au Journal de Dangeau*, 8 vols. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1983–88), vol. III, 225–26. Herein after: Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Coirault.

⁵³ Baudrillart and Lecestre, *Lettres du duc de Bourgogne*, vol. II, 191–92.

⁵⁴ Wolf, *Louis XIV*, 553, 658, n. 44.

⁵⁵ Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Coirault, 246.

Boufflers because the loss of Lille would be «irreparable»⁵⁶ However, Louis then betrayed his bizarre belief that if Bourgogne followed his grandfather's intricate instructions then the apparently bleak situation could be turned to their advantage, incredulously explaining that «if you conduct yourself with precaution you will be able to conserve Lille and Ghent at the same time»⁵⁷ Little wonder then that Bourgogne continued to write to Maintenon in the hope that she would help the king to see sense.

Ironically weeks of prevarication ultimately proved the right course of inaction in that Marlborough had been extremely anxious in August to force the French into fighting one final decisive battle. This disquiet was caused not only by the precarious political situation in England, but also because Marlborough was keenly conscious that the siege of Lille would be an exhaustive elongated affair, as it proved to be. Marlborough had in fact confided to his wife Sarah the hope that Oudenarde would compel France to sue for peace. And he had intimated this to marshal Biron when the latter had enquired after the health of the Chevalier de Saint-George, James Stuart, who was also campaigning under Bourgogne and Vendôme in Flanders after his botched invasion of Scotland. Now expecting that no such engagement would take place Marlborough, via his nephew Berwick, secretly contacted foreign minister Torcy in late August about initiating possible peace negotiations. But Chamillart, Bourgogne and Vendôme were wary of Marlborough's motives and Torcy insisted that any peace proposals must first come from the Dutch Estates-General.⁵⁸ Louis XIV interpreted Marlborough's proposition as an admission of Allied frailty and now agreeing with Chamlay ordered Berwick's army to join Bourgogne's in order to engage the enemy, as Vendôme had originally recommended. Berwick arrived on the 29 August, but inevitable quarrelling ensued because he refused to defer to Vendôme, who he openly despised.⁵⁹

The three commanders could not agree on how to proceed and effectively paralysed French military operations. Vendôme had been eager to attack, but Berwick thought otherwise heedful of his artful uncle's intentions. Bourgogne had originally concurred with Vendôme, but the uniform opinion of the attending officers supported Berwick. Finally, after reconnoitering the enemy's position on 5 September, the three generals did agree that the enemy was now so well defended that an attack might be futile, or fatal, and conveyed this news to Versailles. Bourgogne had already privately solicited his grandfather's counsel,⁶⁰ and in response to these communications the king now gave the order to attack on several occasions,⁶¹ confident that Berwick's forces had boosted the size of the French army to a size similar to that of the Grand Alliance of approximately 110,000

⁵⁶ Philippe-Henri Grimoard and Philippe-Antoine L. Grouvelle, Eds. *Oeuvres de Louis XIV*, 6 vols. (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1806), vol. VI, 194.

⁵⁷ Louis XIV, *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, 197.

⁵⁸ John C. Rule and Ben S. Trotter, *A World of Paper: Colbert de Torcy, Louis XIV and the Rise of the Information State*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2014), 420.

⁵⁹ Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Coirault, vol. III, 248-49.

⁶⁰ Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Norton, vol. I, 386-87.

⁶¹ Vault and Pelet, *Mémoires militaires*, vol. VIII, 95.

men, many of whom were tied up besieging Lille, or defending nearby strongholds. However, no battle ensued because Bourgogne and Berwick remained united in their decision to avoid it in contrast to Vendôme, who still advocated a more aggressive strategy, but Bourgogne was convinced that this could prove calamitous. He had stressed as much in his letter to his grandfather and a subsequent, detailed missive to Maintenon on 6 September that he obviously felt was necessary to justify what observers construed to be his cowardly conservatism.⁶² This compelled an exasperated Louis XIV to repeat his instructions to attack on 7 September to no avail, so the orders were given again and conveyed to Flanders by Chamillart and the king's leading military adviser Chamlay, who arrived on the 9th, giving them the opportunity to interrogate the commanders and appraise the situation at first-hand.⁶³

The numerous councils and conferences, the expectation of a decisive offensive, and the disarray that engulfed the campaign infected the court and caused general alarm,⁶⁴ as encapsulated by Maintenon in a communication to Ursins from Saint-Cyr on 9 September 1708 in which she disclosed that she had «not had a moment's repose since Lille has been invested»:

Since we have learnt that they [Bourgogne, Berwick and Vendôme] are near Lille, we have been in the greatest suspense.... Everybody feels a general, as well as a particular, interest in what is passing. I see nothing but weeping, trembling, moaning, while all those about me are still more uneasy than myself; the king alone is firm in wishing to hazard everything for the relief of Lille, and the honour of our nation. The duc de Bourgogne is not of this opinion, because all the officers are against it, and the marshal de Berwick is at their head. M. de Vendôme alone wishes to attack and force the entrenchments: the others maintain that the king's army would be destroyed, and have but little confidence in M. de Vendôme since the unfortunate affair at Oudenarde. These different opinions place everything in a very dangerous position, which has obliged the king to send M. Chamillart, to see if he at least can rally them on the day of battle.⁶⁵

On 10 September 1708 the marquise confided similar fears to her old friend the duc de Noailles, again underscoring the extent to which she was much more than a partial observer as the commander entrusted with the defence of Lille, marshal Boufflers, was one of her closest friends:

The King wants us to risk everything to help Lille, but in doing so encounters such great difficulties because of the advantageous positions that the enemies occupy that

⁶² Millot, *Mémoires de Noailles*, vol. 74, 151-53.

⁶³ Vault and Pelet, *Mémoires militaires*, vol. VIII, 257-58.

⁶⁴ Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Coirault, vol. III, 250-51.

⁶⁵ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 184-85.

I am convinced we will not be able to overcome them.... You know my crosses, and they are imperceptible to others; but it doesn't matter: the important thing is to wear them well.... Your heart tells you that we will manage to come through the action at Lille; God willing! It will, however, be a miracle from the prayers that are being prayed everywhere; because according to appearances, we must be beaten and lose everything. Our dear marshal de Boufflers is doing everything possible. I send you my tenderest affections.⁶⁶

Maintenon also asked her confessor Godet des Marais, the bishop of Chartres, for Providential guidance. Godet deeply sympathised with the difficult predicament Maintenon was in, keenly aware of the taxing nature of her awkward unofficial position *auprès du roi* because «all public afflictions fall doubly heavily on you», but reminded her that God's designs and glory would prevail. He reassured her that she had reacted correctly and encouraged Maintenon to continue to act constructively on behalf of the king and the duc de Bourgogne. But Godet also urged that although she should take part in discussions it was not the marquise's responsibility to make decisions, which was ultimately the responsibility of ministers.⁶⁷

News reached Versailles on 14th September that Boufflers had launched a retaliatory «grande sortie» on the 12th with some success,⁶⁸ but as Bourgogne explained to Maintenon on the 18th this could not be capitalised upon because the enemy lines were by now almost impregnable and the French army was also hampered by problems with subsistence, communications and topography.⁶⁹ Similar difficulties had been outlined by Boufflers in a memoir addressed to the king on the 14th stating that Lille could not be saved by giving battle. Chamillart accordingly travelled back to Versailles arriving on the 17th and reported to Louis XIV that a full-scale attack would be potentially catastrophic as confirmed by what he had witnessed and by all the officers at the front. Only then did Louis XIV consider retracting his orders, but not until the 18th and only after Vendôme's personal letter to the king had been absorbed, urging his master not to risk a dangerous engagement and the entire French army, which had nonetheless already retreated to Tournai on the 17th.

With a portentous contest still seemingly imminent on the 16th, Maintenon informed the Princess des Ursins that «Paris is in consternation because our generals do not give battle; the capture of Lille makes them consider the enemy as already amongst us»⁷⁰ Marshal Villars had «frustrated» the designs of the Duke of Savoy, but «the two small

⁶⁶ *G.M.*, vol. II, 179-80.

⁶⁷ Letters from Godet des Marais to Maintenon, July 1708. Bibliothèque Municipale de Versailles, Manuscrit 1461, vol. P67, ff. 82-83, 87-90.

⁶⁸ Eudox Soulié, L. Dussieux, Philippe de Chennevières, Paul Mantz, Anatole de Montaiglon, and F. Feuillet de Conches, Eds. *Journal du marquis de Dangeau avec les additions inédites du duc de Saint-Simon*, 19 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot), 1854-60), vol. XII, 221. Herein after: Dangeau, *Journal*.

⁶⁹ Baudrillart and Lecestre, *Lettres du duc de Bourgogne*, vol. II, 195-96.

⁷⁰ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 186.

places that this Prince has taken are considered as affording a certain inlet into France for next year»⁷¹ Moreover, she also pointed out that the generals in Flanders including Vendôme unanimously agreed that the enemy could not now be attacked because delays had afforded them time to become unassailably entrenched. The Allied commander, the Duke of Marlborough, agreed, confiding to his wife Sara on the 10th that the French would be «mad» to attempt it.⁷² A few days earlier, Maintenon had written to Villars on the 12th, summarising the current imbroglio and its causes and again lamenting how the «diversity of sentiments spoils everything and that the plurality of generals was not good», so that «it will now take a miracle to save Lille»⁷³ But Marlborough was also exasperated, informing the exiled French Huguenot soldier, officer and diplomat Henri de Massue, Marquis de Ruvigny and 1st Earl of Galway, that after a successful but costly assault on Lille's defences on the 7th September they had «offered them [the French] battle twice, but they declined it and their design now seems chiefly to be to distress us for want of provisions being at a great distance from our magazines»⁷⁴

Meanwhile, Bourgogne continued to appeal to Maintenon to persist in conveying «her advice at this delicate time ... I am in need of good councils» On 15 September the duke accordingly thanked the marquise for sending on his grandfather's memoir on how Lille might be relieved in which «there are certainly many things that I am able to and must profit from»,⁷⁵ and that the glory of God and good of the state were the only things he was focusing upon.⁷⁶ The decision to put Bourgogne nominally in charge in Flanders in 1708 was driven purely by dynastic *gloire* rather than pragmatism because Bourgogne was almost completely inexperienced and as one historian has rightly asserted «seemed timid, scrupulous and hesitant»⁷⁷ John Lynn persuasively posits that «the shuffling of generals leaves the impression that Louis was still searching for the right combination», but then oddly footnotes that «Louis did have his three best generals up front: Villars, Berwick and Vendôme» These three commanders were evidently in the wrong place, or the wrong combination, at the wrong time as Lynn states on the same page that the Elector of Bavaria had to be sent to fight with Berwick on the Rhine, so as not to clash with Bourgogne and also marshal Villars, who did not get on with Bourgogne at all, so was transferred to Dauphiné to forestall an invasion.⁷⁸

This state of confusion inflamed critical public opinion with courtiers openly disparaging the performance of generals and the French army's apparent inertia. Even young women at Versailles were voicing censorious opinions, as Maintenon bemoaned, and

⁷¹ *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 415-17.

⁷² Holmes, *Marlborough*, 397.

⁷³ Letter from Maintenon to Villars, 12 September 1708. In Vogüé, «Correspondance de Maintenon et Villars», 219.

⁷⁴ Richard Holmes, *Marlborough*, 397.

⁷⁵ Baudrillart and Lecestre, *Lettres du duc de Bourgogne*, vol. II, 194.

⁷⁶ Baudrillart and Lecestre, *Lettres du duc de Bourgogne*, vol. II, 194.

⁷⁷ *G.M.*, vol. II, 179, n. 1.

⁷⁸ Lynn, *Wars of Louis XIV*, 317.

more scandalously the duc de Guiche composed a critique of the crown's military strategy concerning Lille and published his derogatory appraisal against the king's wishes, which led to him being personally denounced by the duc de Berry. Maintenon found this confrontation regrettable and admitted that «everyone has his own opinion», but emphasized that they should remain private. This was a rule that she rigorously observed herself, as revealed in an illuminating letter to Ursins on 23 September, in which she also detailed a number of poignant criticisms of the campaign in Flanders and those in charge of it:

The journey of M. Chamillart into Flanders has been of great service; he himself has seen the impracticability of attacking the enemy in their entrenchments. M. de Vendôme is also convinced of it and has written to the king, who has retracted his orders; which perhaps he would never have done if the secretary of state for war had not been upon the spot. Everybody pretends that if our army had taken the position which it now occupies, the siege would have been raised. We suffer thus in every quarter from the faults that are committed; it is hardly possible to give proper orders at such a distance, and they who are on the spot are divided in their views. M. de Vendôme is generally alone in his opinion; while the duc de Bourgogne sides with marshal Berwick and the general officers; all of this has a very pernicious effect....

Chamillart has reconciled the ducs de Berwick and de Vendôme between whom there was a coolness; I greatly fear the revival of their differences. Our Prince is engaged in a most difficult campaign....

Yes, Madame, this state of discord is insupportable: there also prevails an unbounded freedom of speech. M. Chamillart cannot help recalling that which he observed in the army of Flanders. Though almost leading a life of seclusion here I am astonished at the language I daily hear: there is scarcely an individual, even to the young women at court, who do not freely offer their opinion on the progress of the war, or find fault with all that is done; discussing every subject, however delicate it may be, and censuring without mercy all those who become objects of caprice or hatred. If any person ventures to think differently from them, or reprehend such a line of conduct, they are sure to be accused of haughtiness and ill-nature. Everything is in the greatest disorder and confusion; but if Lille were saved, I should not feel this state of things so acutely⁷⁹

Earlier in the month on 2 September Maintenon had intimated her hope that the arrival of «40 millions» in bullion from Mexico would be «good news for the two kingdoms [of France and Spain]»,⁸⁰ and French hopes were subsequently if temporarily revived. Eugene was grazed above the eye by a musketball during a successful, but costly attack on Lille on 21 September during which an Allied force of 15,000 captured a number of key ravelins, but suffered over 1,000 casualties. And on the night of the 28/29th

⁷⁹ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 187-90.

⁸⁰ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 183.

September the Chevalier of Luxembourg leading a force of 550 grenadiers, plus 2,000 cavalrymen each carrying a fusil and 50-60 pounds of gunpowder, audaciously set off to relieve Boufflers at Lille. Not all of the contingent managed to reach Boufflers, but it did supply him with much needed men, ammunition and 40-100,000 pounds of powder.⁸¹ It enabled the marshal to repel another Allied assault on the 14th October, but this depleted his dwindling resources to the extent that Boufflers predicted Lille would be lost in a matter of weeks. The Allies were similarly compromised in terms of supplies and when Lamotte failed to intercept an invaluable convoy of munitions from Brussels destined for Marlborough's besieging army on 28 September it effectively sealed Lille's fate. The city fell on 22 October after a massive Allied bombardment, but Boufflers retreated into Vauban's citadel with 4,500 men, who continued to frustrate Marlborough and Eugene's forces, thus realizing the former's fear, confided to his wife Sarah on 17 September, that the siege would:

continue so long, and consequently consume so much stores, that we may at last not have the wherewithal to finish, which would be very cruel. I long extremely to have this campaign well ended, for of all the campaigns I have made, this has been the most painful.⁸²

In desperation even after the conquest of the town of Lille, Marlborough again attempted to contact Torcy via Berwick on 30 October about potential peace negotiations. But Chamillart's response was so offensive that a baffled Berwick documented that it was «beyond my penetration» and copied the war minister's reply in French, so that his uncle Marlborough would know it had nothing to do with him!⁸³ These conferences may have proven consequential as Bolingbroke remarked in 1710 because they might have «removed some of the obstacles that lay now in her [France's] way, have prevented other, and procured her peace»⁸⁴ Maintenon was acutely affected by the strain that these events imposed on the king, confiding to a Saint-Cyr novice, Mme de Glapion, in September 1708 that she knew it was imperative sometimes to encourage Louis XIV into taking a decision or moderating a strategy. But she added that it was also important not to push the king too far for fear of generating «schism or revolt», especially within the royal family where tensions were palpable particularly between factions opposed to one another that coalesced around the Dauphin at Meudon and his eldest son, the duc de Bourgogne, between whom there was much antipathy.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Vault and Pelet, *Mémoires militaires*, vol. VIII, 454-59; Dangeau, *Journal*, vol. XII, 231-32.

⁸² Holmes, *Marlborough*, 397.

⁸³ Rule and Trotter, *Colbert de Torcy*, 420.

⁸⁴ Rule and Trotter, *Colbert de Torcy*, 421.

⁸⁵ *G.M.*, vol. II, 175-78.

Finally, on 28 October Maintenon confirmed to Ursins in Madrid that Lille had been lost.⁸⁶ This further dented morale at the front and Chamillart was again dispatched to Flanders a few days later as conflict had once more broken out amongst the commanders. Berwick wanted to defend fortresses in Picardy and Artois against invasion, while Vendôme wanted to defend the river Scheldt potentially to harass and attack an exhausted enemy to protect Lille's citadel, with Bourgogne, as ever, unsure whose direction to follow.⁸⁷ On 11 November Maintenon reported that Chamillart had returned having failed to reunite the squabbling generals, but that it had been resolved to «defend all that M. de Vendôme wishes to be defended, and to send a large body of cavalry into Artois, to oppose the incursions of Prince Eugene» She also disclosed that:

we are already experiencing the sad consequences of this loss which you know how to appreciate better than myself. The King is touched to the quick at seeing one of his first conquests in the power of the enemy and so fine and loyal a French city pillaged by all those nations who have entered it. He is no less affected by the disgrace of our army in having done nothing for the relief of this place....

It is very difficult for the duc de Bourgogne to do anything but what marshal Berwick advises him; he has been prejudiced from the beginning of the campaign, and perhaps even earlier, against the extravagant boldness of M. de Vendôme; the affair of Oudenarde confirmed him in this opinion; the King gives him marshal de Berwick for his advisor; it is extremely unjust to blame our prince for these unfortunate events⁸⁸

To unlock this impasse marshal Berwick was sent to Alsace on 18 November, which delighted Vendôme and Bourgogne as Maintenon corroborated, informing Ursins on the same day that «we hear that they were both equally glad of the separation and that the duc de Bourgogne was not sorry at finding some repose on that account: it is certain that this misunderstanding has been very detrimental to our affairs; it could be wished that a speedier remedy had been applied to it»⁸⁹ This was a thinly veiled criticism of the king, who still hoped to retain Ghent and Bruges. But the duc de Villeroi wrote to Maintenon on 25 November to emphasize that the defence of Ghent and Bruges would be pointless and dangerous and that the King must focus on defending his border fortresses, as Berwick had also recommended. Their warnings were substantiated by subsequent Allied raids into Artois and Picardy to procure corn, which caused further humiliations.⁹⁰

An important communication from Maintenon to Ursins dated 25 November reveals that the French government at Versailles and the high command in Flanders were still

⁸⁶ *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 448.

⁸⁷ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 199.

⁸⁸ *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 451-52.

⁸⁹ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 199.

⁹⁰ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 202.

incapacitated by a combination of shock, anxiety, incompatible opinions and a mounting tidal wave of intensely dissatisfied public discourse:

I have never seen the King so sensibly affected as he has been on this occasion, nor can he reconcile himself to see Lille in the power of his enemies.... What could our Prince do, who has not yet acquired much experience, and who finds himself involved in the situation the most difficult, but follow the advice of the man who enjoys the confidence of the King his father? How can he discriminate and judge of himself, that the councils he receives are too timid, and that he must give himself up to M de Vendôme, against whom three quarters of the army are enraged? This is the cause of the outcry against our Prince. He has not thought of justifying himself; he has not given any explanation, nor has he charged any person to take up his defence; events have been unfortunate, the minds of people are soured, his virtue has excited all the discontented against him.... The cabal which Monsieur [the Archbishop] de Cambrai [François Fénelon] is said to have at court brings still more obloquy on him. Nothing is now spoken of but *Télémaque* [*Telemachus*], in which he [Fénelon] has taught the Prince to prefer a pacific King to a conqueror: all this causes the outcry of which you hear; some say that he wished Lille to be captured, in order that we might be forced to make peace; while others assert that he wanted to restore the place because the king had taken it unjustly: others, again, say that he does not wish for any fighting from the fear of losing human lives. I should never end if I wrote all that is said on this subject.⁹¹

However, earlier in the same communication of the 25th Maintenon had also divulged that the duc de Bourgogne had sent a courier to the king asking permission to launch a last-ditch two-pronged attack both on Eugene's lines and on Marlborough's troops near Furnembach, who had been forced to move toward Brussels because they were being bombarded by the Elector of Bavaria in an attempt to split the Allied armies. Louis immediately agreed to this measure and dispatched a courier «directly for fear of delaying its execution», but little came of it.⁹² Boufflers surrendered and agreed terms on the 9 December then marched out of Lille's citadel with his remaining forces and full honours on the 13th.

Maintenon had defended Louis' decision to put his grandsons Bourgogne and Berry in the frontline to Ursins back on 12 August, asserting that:

the presence of our Princes is desired in the armies: he sends those of the most august character [and] he would be blamed if he left everything to their decision, because they

⁹¹ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 201-07.

⁹² *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 203-04

are as yet so young; they are assisted by councils, on whose advice the king relies, and it is these councils that ruin our affairs.⁹³

By the end of the season's campaigning, however, Maintenon was no longer exculpating the king. Public criticism from all quarters was also scathing as Maintenon observed on the 9th of December: «our Princes arrive tomorrow; the interview will not very agreeable. The duc de Bourgogne will require all his religion to bear up against the fury of the public»⁹⁴

Public opinion was rightly incensed and excoriatingly reproachful after a series of often avoidable and potentially fatal military setbacks. But in his edifying 2006 book, *Vauban under Siege*, Jamel Ostwald rightly avers that in the aftermath of Oudenarde the Allies were also confused and frustrated and running out of resources. By procrastinating and dithering the French crown had in fact adopted a relatively successful strategy in forcing Marlborough and Eugene's forces to commit to a ruinously costly four-month siege of one of Vauban's most formidable fortifications, during which 11-12,000 Allied soldiers perished compared with French losses of 4-5000. The Flanders army of 110,000 men may not have fought again in 1708 after Oudenarde, but it did remain intact and ready to give battle the following year under the command of marshal Villars when the stakes were even higher, following the devastating freezing winter and an escalating financial crisis that was a bankruptcy in all but name. As marshal Berwick astutely reassured Chamillart on 6 September: «it is sad to lose Lille, but it would be sadder still to lose the unique army left to us, which can stop the enemy after the loss of Lille»⁹⁵

Fortunately, Maintenon on 26 August had foreseen two factors that would save France, reflecting that «it is very true that if God aids us in this same campaign, which now gives us so much uneasiness, it will be very glorious, and that the enemy may become as tired of the war as ourselves»⁹⁶ The marquise was in a more melancholic mood by the end of the year, confessing to Ursins on 23 December that:

you are right in saying that we ought to behold the hand of Providence in all this; our king was too glorious; God wishes to humble in order to save him; France had aggrandised herself too much, perhaps unjustly.... Our nation was insolent and dissolute; it has pleased the Almighty to punish and abase it.⁹⁷

Maintenon's sense of despondency is understandable. She had been embroiled in an excruciatingly ignominious imbroglio and assiduously endeavoured to ameliorate the worsening state of the king's affairs by exploiting her powerful position and network

⁹³ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 173.

⁹⁴ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 212.

⁹⁵ Vault and Pelet, *Mémoires militaires*, vol. VIII, 91.

⁹⁶ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 180.

⁹⁷ *M.U.C.*, 213.

of influence, having correctly identified the cause of their misfortunes: misintelligence, misunderstandings, mismanagement and the manifest imperfections of statesmen. She tellingly lamented to Ursins on 23 July that «men are not perfect», and on 23 September elaborated on the same theme, confiding that «there are few perfect men and few who act solely with a view to the *bien publique*»⁹⁸ On 21 October she was more candid, imparting to the same correspondent that:

what I feel in respect to «les grands [great men]» is very different to what is generally practised: I would wish in private to tell them the severest truths about public affairs, as well as regarding their own conduct, but to uphold both in public to my last breath.⁹⁹

Over the course of a long career at court as Louis XIV's consort, that spanned over three decades, the demanding role of consultant, counsellor, conduit and confidante had become Maintenon's unique vocation and she strove to discharge these duties and obligations until the Sun King's last breath on 1 September 1715.

⁹⁸ *M.U.C.*, vol. I, 167, 188.

⁹⁹ *B.M.L.*, vol. IV, 444.

