

The *Monseigneur* and the *grands seigneurs*:

Questions of Priority in Early Modern France^{*}

You should be more *Monseigneur* for me than you ever were, since your protection with His Majesty put the finishing touch to make so many persons in this kingdom give me this title, and had it been customary, there would have been a very precise reason in an axiom of philosophy for me to give it to you all my life (*propter quod unum quodque tale, et illud magis*)...¹

These words open the letter of gratitude that Marshal Châteaurenault sent to Secretary of State Pontchartrain, when informed of his elevation to the marshalate in January 1703. They capture in a nutshell key features of the most important and controversial means of conveying deference through letters in early modern France. The use of the address term *Monseigneur* was the clearest sign of a letter-writer's recognition of his or her inferiority *vis-à-vis* the addressee. In view of the position and influence of the Secretaries of State under Louis XIV, most writers, including even high-ranking military officers, addressed them as *Monseigneur*. Among those who did not enjoy special personal status, only marshals of France, as Great Officers of the Crown, could equal the Secretaries, addressing them as *Monsieur* and themselves receiving *Monseigneur* from the hand of most other letter-writers. Châteaurenault had just advanced from one state, or status, to the other: promoted from vice-admiral to marshal, he was no longer required to award Pontchartrain the ultimate epistolary title, which he himself would now receive from 'so many persons in this kingdom'. Yet in this moment of exaltation he nonetheless wished to express his gratitude to the

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¹ Paris, Archives Nationales [hereafter AN], 257 AP 2, François-Louis Rousselet de Châteaurenault, to Jérôme Phélypeaux, count of Pontchartrain, 27 Jan. 1703.

Secretary of State for the Navy, whose influence with the king had played a part in his promotion and who hence should be considered ‘more *Monseigneur*’ than ever.

Châteaurenault’s epistolary generosity contrasts with the graver, and at times confrontational, stinginess of his peers. Other noble commanders were loath to acknowledge subordination to Secretaries and to marshals even when obliged to do so. Well aware of the stakes involved, the new marshal did not dare use the *Monseigneur* as a form of address proper, even in this first post-promotion communication. A *Monseigneur* from a marshal to a minister went against ‘custom’ (*l’usage*), and Châteaurenault could only evoke it playfully while employing lighter forms of epistolary deference elsewhere in his letter.²

This article investigates a series of conflicts and tensions that arose from the attitudes of Châteaurenault’s peers, and seeks to unlock their far-reaching military, political, cultural and social ramifications in three main areas. Remarkably, the cases in question demonstrate that the *Monseigneur* and other epistolary status-markers took priority on a number of occasions over military expediency, disrupting the operations of the French command during the wars of Louis XIV and beyond. Such prioritising of traditional values over new ideals of royal service qualifies the thesis of a reconfiguration of noble *mentalités* under the Bourbon monarchy, whether in its absolutist guise or in the revisionist interpretation of co-operation between king and elites.³ Even

² Especially in the ‘ceremonial of expression’ (for example, the use of ‘respect’ in the ending) and in non-verbal features (a significant upper margin). By resorting to the *billet* style in this case, Châteaurenault avoided the non-deferential *Monsieur* throughout, while placing a *Monseigneur* in the first line, where it would also have appeared had he used it as a form of address. For a detailed exposition of these epistolary status-markers, see G. Sternberg, ‘Epistolary Ceremonial: Corresponding Status at the Time of Louis XIV’, *Past and Present*, no. 204 (2009), pp. 33–88.

³ For the most forceful articulation of these new ideals, see J.M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997).

nuanced accounts of the transformation of the French army in this period have tended to underplay the operational effects of a ‘residual culture of independence’.⁴

Secondly, these striking effects provide strong support for the prime place of epistolary ceremonial among early modern priorities. The evidence, moreover, enables us to develop further the analysis of this form of communication.⁵ Though little explored to date, the cases in question have left quite detailed traces, both in unpublished archival material and in the literary output of some of the most celebrated authors of the *Grand Siècle*. Close analysis of these sources reveals the impact of epistolary conflicts and tensions on everyday communication and sociability and uncovers a rich spectrum of strategies deployed by protagonists, ranging from open confrontation to subtler forms of evasion or accommodation. Notably, these sources bring into relief the impact of concrete communication settings (who wrote to whom? by post or by courier? directly or indirectly?), and particularly the role—sometimes gendered—of go-betweens. Such an analysis also serves to recontextualise the literary texts as belonging to information networks that played an active role in these conflicts and tensions.

Finally, these cases throw light on questions of social stratification and identity and their transformations in early modern France. Like contemporaries, historians have struggled to define the precise contours of the higher strata of the sword nobility, especially as regards the greater *seigneurs* of old lineage who did not enjoy princely or ducal rank. Were they *grandees* or mere nobles?⁶ Some historians have argued for the concept of a ‘second nobility’ (*noblesse seconde*),

⁴ G. Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661–1701* (Cambridge, 2002), esp. pp. 7–9, 232–8; cf. his more recent ‘Les Armées de Louis XIV comme sociétés de cour’, in B. Fonck and N. Genet-Rouffiac, eds., *Combattre et gouverner: Dynamiques de l’histoire militaire de l’époque moderne (XVII^e–XVIII^e siècles)* (Rennes, 2015), pp. 281–96. On the effects of noble values in the earlier period, see D. Parrott, ‘Richelieu, the *Grands*, and the French Army’, in J. Bergin and L. Brockliss, eds., *Richelieu and His Age* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 135–73. See also J. Chagniot, ‘La Rationalisation de l’armée française après 1660’, *Bulletin de l’Association des historiens modernistes des universités*, xvi (1992), pp. 97–108.

⁵ This analytical framework is introduced in Sternberg, ‘Epistolary Ceremonial’.

⁶ On these challenges, see Rowlands, *Dynastic State*, Appendix I, ‘Defining the *grands*’.

encompassing those who drew on a prominent provincial foothold in order to act as power brokers for the Crown. But this concept has faced critique, not least concerning its applicability for the middle and later seventeenth century.⁷ If we choose instead to focus on those who held noble titles, such as marquis or count, we face the irony of courtly nomenclature in this later period, when the term ‘titled’ (*titré*) excluded all but princes, dukes, and often marshals. The tensions between titled and prominent ‘untitled’, thus conceived, have received little sustained treatment outside transition periods such as the Orléans regency.⁸ Our cases, by contrast, illuminate the ongoing struggle of untitled *grands seigneurs* for social priority, in an aristocratic landscape that continued to evolve in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹ Revealing conscious and even collective identification and action, this analysis powerfully illustrates how cultural practices can advance our understanding of social structures and dynamics.

I

At the end of 1673, Louis de Crevant, Marshal d’Humières, took command of the Dutch theatre of operations during the second winter of the Dutch War (1672–8).¹⁰ On arrival, he wrote a courtesy letter to a subordinate commander, Lieutenant-General Guy-Aldonce de Durfort, count

⁷ For a critical overview of the concept and the related historiographical debate, see J.H.M. Salmon, ‘A Second Look at the *Noblesse Seconde*: The Key to Noble Clientage and Power in Early Modern France?’, *French Historical Studies*, xxv (2002), pp. 575–93. See also É. Haddad, *Fondation et ruine d’une ‘maison’: Histoire sociale des comtes de Belin (1582–1706)* (Limoges, 2009), esp. pp. 14–17, 296–7, 377–9.

⁸ For a general statement of this tension, see R. Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford, 1988), esp. pp. 55–6; id., ‘The French Nobility, 1610–1715’, in H.M. Scott, ed., *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2nd edn., 2 vols., Basingstoke, 2007), vol. i, esp. pp. 131–2. On its manifestations during the Orléans regency, see H.A. Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), esp. pp. 133–42, 181–5; J-P. Labatut, *Les Ducs et pairs de France au XVII^e siècle: Étude sociale* (Paris, 1972), pp. 371–400; J. Lassaigne, *Les Assemblées de la noblesse de France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1965).

⁹ Here and later, I use ‘untitled *grands seigneurs*’ to refer to this group: ‘untitled’ follows the later court usage, and *grands seigneurs* denotes sword nobles from families of the highest standing (based on lineage, land-holding and post-holding).

¹⁰ For an overview of military operations during the Dutch War, see J.A. Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667–1714* (Harlow, 1999), pp. 113–56.

of Lorge. The latter's reply presented the marshal with an unpleasant surprise: the superscription read *Monsieur* rather than the expected *Monseigneur*.¹¹ Humières immediately returned the letter to its bearer, the marquis of Béthune, declaring that his dignity as marshal, coupled with the position of authority that the king had now given him over Lorge, 'deprived him of the means to read it'. Béthune, a mutual friend, offered to talk to Lorge and suggested that, if the latter would not change his manner of address, then the marshal should cease writing to the lieutenant-general. Humières continued to address his orders to Lorge, but received no reply. Subsequently, he addressed them to a lower-ranking officer, the *lieutenant de Roy*.¹²

Justifying his actions to the War Minister, Louvois, Humières explained that the matter was 'of great consequence for all those who held the same dignity'. As marshal, he received the *Monseigneur* from all 'people of quality', including those with more elevated posts than Lorge. He himself had done the same before his promotion, and he did not consider himself any less than 'mrs de Duras' (the Durfort family).¹³ Lorge, for his part, declared that to comply with the demand would set him at odds with all his family, since neither 'he, nor his brothers, nor his father, nor his grandfather ever treated any marshal of France with *Monseigneur*'. Reporting to Louvois, the intendant Robert noted that the dispute had not reached the public eye so far, as the two commanders had kept up appearances in a face-to-face encounter. However, they would not discuss the matter and so the break in military communications continued.¹⁴

In the meantime, Louvois had already written to Robert with the Crown's decision. The king disapproved of the overriding of the chain of command and the 'degradation' of Lorge

¹¹ The superscription (*suscription*) was the text that appeared on the letter cover.

¹² Vincennes, Service Historique de la Défense, Fonds de l'Armée de Terre [hereafter SHDT], A1 409, no. 60, Humières to François-Michel Le Tellier, marquis of Louvois, 20 Jan. 1674 (this detailed letter, written after Humières had been informed of the Crown's decision, is wholly dedicated to the dispute and is entirely in the marshal's hand).

¹³ Ibid. Lorge's elder brother was the duke of Duras. Both were nephews of Turenne.

¹⁴ Ibid., no. 41, Louis Robert to Louvois, 12 Jan. 1674.

implied by Humières's correspondence with lower-ranking officers. As for the substance of the dispute, the letter continued, if indeed neither Lorge nor any member of his house had ever awarded the *Monseigneur* to marshals, then this would remain a 'difficulty' between this house and 'the corps of *Messieurs* the marshals of France'. Assuming that Lorge was willing to pledge his word that this was the case, the king left Humières with two alternatives: he could receive Lorge's letters with the *Monsieur* address, or the lieutenant-general could address his letters to the intendant instead, and the latter would update the marshal in turn.¹⁵

Humières, in response, expressed disbelief and disappointment. How could the minister condemn his (Humières's) conduct, based as it was on grounds 'as strong as established usage'? He should rather disapprove of this 'new fancy which has no foundation but the liberty with which Monsieur de Duras pushes forward matters which are sometimes very perilous'.¹⁶ If 'these people' addressed a commanding marshal as *Monsieur*, then all subordinate generals would claim the same right. This could not be the minister's intention. At the same time, Humières assured Louvois that as soon as he knew the minister's sentiments he would comply, without protesting to the 'tribunal'.¹⁷ He also insisted that the king's service had not suffered as a result of the dispute. Nevertheless, of the two alternatives offered, the marshal opted for indirect communication: it was the least damaging to his own status—as it avoided the creation of actual precedents of *Monsieur* address—but also the least conducive to the smooth running of the chain of command.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., no. 31, Louvois to Robert, 7 Jan. 1674.

¹⁶ As one of the Captains of the King's Bodyguard, Duras enjoyed intimate access to the king.

¹⁷ Referring to the tribunal of the marshals of France. Despite Humières's assurance, the very mention of the possibility of appeal over and above an order given in the king's name is striking. On this tribunal and on the collective action of the marshals, see further below.

¹⁸ SHDT, A1 409, no. 60, Humières to Louvois, 20 Jan. 1674, and no. 57, Robert to Louvois, 18 Jan. 1674.

Another case of open conflict took place in the early stages of the campaign of 1675, when the primary war effort was focused on the valley of the river Meuse.¹⁹ After securing the city of Liège in the spring, the Crown's objective was the fortified town of Dinant. For this purpose, the king formed two forces, which were to invest the town from both sides of the river: one assembled in Charleville, under the command of François de Créqui, marshal of France, and another in Philippeville, under Henri-Louis d'Aloigny, marquis of Rochefort and lieutenant-general. Shortly before leaving Charleville, Créqui wrote an autograph note to the War Minister:

Since Monsieur de Rochefort thought that he should not treat me in writing as the people of the highest quality and holding the greatest posts have done up till now, I thought that I should indicate my view courteously to him and report it to you as the person to whom I defer most willingly and who knows best what should be done in this case.

He ended by emphasising that he would always resort to expedients that appeared likely to suit the minister best, as he had done in this case.²⁰

Louvois sent an inquiry to Rochefort, who explained the matter in a letter written a few days later in the vicinity of Dinant, after the two commanders had met.²¹ The issue, he explained to the minister, revolved around 'the *M^{gr}* [*Monseigneur*] that he wants me to put in my letters on the superscription'. In all other respects, he wryly added, 'subaltern humility has never been pushed farther'. The first time he had written to Créqui, the marshal had replied that he erred against usage, effectively reprimanding him but also suggesting a means to prevent the disruption of communication, for the sake of the service. Rochefort wrote back 'with all kinds of courtesies', accepting the expedient and outlining his motives, which he now explained to

¹⁹ Lynn, *Wars of Louis XIV*, pp. 137–40; Joseph Halkin, 'Dépêches des officiers au service de la France concernant les opérations militaires des armées de Louis XIV en Belgique pendant les mois de mai, juin et juillet 1675', *Académie royale de Belgique: Compte rendu des séances de la commission royale d'histoire*, 5th ser., vi (1896), pp. 346–64.

²⁰ SHDT, A1 449, no. 160bis, Créqui to Louvois, 17 May 1675.

²¹ *Ibid.*, no. 177, Rochefort, to Louvois, 22 May 1675.

Louvois. He had been addressing marshals of France as *Monsieur* since his promotion (in 1669) to the post of Captain of the King's Bodyguard. All his 'untitled' colleagues did the same.²² He also noted that he commanded an army, as Créqui did, and that they were of a similar age.²³

At the same time as this matter was diverting the attention of the high command from the primary war effort, the most famous such contestation compromised the quelling of rebellion on the home front. The financial pressures of the Dutch War set off the last major wave of revolt under the *Ancien Régime*, beginning in Bordeaux in the spring of 1675 and spreading to other areas within and beyond the province of Guyenne.²⁴ César-Phoebus d'Albret, marshal of France and governor of the province, took charge of the repression effort. In May, the king formally appointed François de Gélais de Voisins, marquis of Ambres, as lieutenant-general of Upper Guyenne. Having sworn allegiance to the king in the north, Ambres rode to the south-west. On the way, he sent the marshal a letter asking for orders, but received no response. On arrival, he learned that Albret had refused to open the letter because it was not addressed *Monseigneur*.²⁵

Writing to seek the support of the minister Colbert, Ambres argued that Albret's pretension was against custom and even against the royal will. Neither Ambres nor his father had ever accorded such treatment. With the reinforcement of the example of 'several persons'—and here he cited the recent case of Lorge and Humières—'His Majesty himself found my reasoning in this matter so good that he permitted me on leaving to write as I wished'. Ambres, according to this account, had foreseen the problem and sought to pre-empt it by securing royal sanction.

²² As noted in the introduction above (and analysed in the conclusion below), in courtly usage those who did not hold princely or ducal rank were usually considered 'untitled' even if they held noble titles such as count or marquis.

²³ Rochefort suspected that the marshal had travelled to meet Louvois about the affair; its outcome is unknown. The two commanders soon parted ways, and Rochefort was promoted to the marshalate in July.

²⁴ R. Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), p. 169; W. Beik, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France: The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge, 1997), ch. 7; Y.-M. Bercé, *Histoire des croquants: Étude des soulèvements populaires au XVII^e siècle dans le sud-ouest de la France* (2 vols., Geneva, 1974), i. 516–23.

²⁵ Bibliothèque Nationale de France [hereafter BN], Mélanges Colbert 171bis, fo. 470 ff., Ambres to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, 2 June 1675.

Repeating a by now familiar mantra, Ambres assured the minister that, as far as he was concerned, this matter would in no way compromise the king's service, which would always come 'before everything'. His final remarks, however, suggest a different set of priorities: 'My letters will report to [Albret] all that takes place. If he cannot read them, it will be his fault, not mine'.²⁶

The count of Montaigu, Ambres's opposite number in Lower Guyenne, reported for his part to the War Minister that the 'bad relations' between the two commanders 'could not but have a pernicious effect in this province'. He wished to calm the dispute, but, as Albret wanted Ambres to write to him as *Monseigneur*, and the latter simply would not do it, there was no expedient to be found. 'These are troubles that we do not need', he added, at a time when 'we are seeking to regain the upper hand and to chastise the rebels'.²⁷ In June, the Crown instructed Ambres to award the *Monseigneur* to Albret. The marquis did not comply until August, when he received an order from the king not to delay any longer in giving the marshal his due respects.²⁸ The Crown thus reversed the policy that had informed the Humières–Lorge affair and the alleged earlier sanction given to Ambres. 'There you are a bit mortified, *Messieurs les grands seigneurs*', commented the celebrated letter-writer Madame de Sévigné: 'those who decide have an interest in upholding the *dignités*. One must follow the times; this one is not for you'.²⁹

II

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ SHDT, A1 440, fos. 532–533, Jean de Magnaut, count of Montaigu, to Louvois, 25 May 1675.

²⁸ La Courneuve, Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Mémoires et Documents, France 941, fos. 119r, 175r. Unfortunately, these summaries of despatches by the Secretaries of State do not give much detail.

²⁹ Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise of Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. R. Duchêne (3 vols., Paris, 1972–78), ii, 123.

Sévigné had been following the Albret–Ambres affair closely for some time. Her interest in the rivalry between the (untitled) *grands seigneurs* and the dignitaries did not stem only from its value as a juicy news item, to be shared among her wide network of correspondents. The matter also had a personal bearing: her son-in-law, François Adhémar de Monteil, count of Grignan, came from an illustrious noble house; an ancestor of his, she once noted with pride, had been a ‘grandissime seigneur’ in the eleventh century.³⁰ Lieutenant-general in Provence, Grignan was fortunate enough to enjoy a free hand there for extended periods without a marshal in place. Yet, given his military duties in the province, he could hardly consistently avoid contact with holders of this rank. To make matters more complicated, the Albret–Ambres contestation coincided with the creation of eight new marshals at the end of July 1675 (following the sudden death of Turenne). Doubling the number of living marshals, this mass promotion created many new potential *Monseigneur* addressees. Moreover, promotions posed an immediate problem, since they called for congratulatory letters to be sent to the newly promoted. The personal exchanges of Madame de Sévigné and her network of correspondents thus complement the correspondence between ministers and generals and help to illuminate how letter-writers dealt with such epistolary challenges: the dilemmas and deliberations, and the range of strategies adopted—not just juridical or confrontational, but also various forms of avoidance or compromise.

The first reference to the matter appears in a letter to Sévigné’s daughter, the countess of Grignan, shortly after the promotion. Sévigné remarked that her son-in-law ‘has many [compliments] to make, and perhaps enemies, for they claim the *Monseigneur*, and this is an injustice that is impossible to impress on them’.³¹ A fortnight later, her tone became more cautious, and she even advised her daughter to make an exception ‘without consequence’ of

³⁰ Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, ii. 151. See also S. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York, 1986), pp. 104–11.

³¹ Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, ii. 30.

Vivonne, who was high in the king's favour, by writing to him in the less formal *billet* style and slipping in a *Monseigneur*.³² It seemed, she added, that Ambres was going to lose his case against Albret, 'and that the ruling will be general. It is the king who is shortly to pronounce on this affair'.³³ On this occasion, then, the dispute clearly reached the public eye.

A subsequent consultation with the minister Pomponne confirmed Sévigné's premonition. The king, it turned out, had already made his decision against Ambres.³⁴ Pomponne vehemently advised Grignan against offering the *Monsieur*; the only possible alternative was to refrain from writing altogether. A few days later, Sévigné confirmed that haggling over the question was no longer 'fashionable'. When she met the marquis of Lavardin in September, she discovered that he had awarded the *Monseigneur* to two of the new marshals (Duras and La Feuillade), writing familiarly 'mon très honoré seigneur'. This was small comfort, remarked Sévigné to her daughter, but one must either do so or refrain from writing.³⁵ Earlier, she had noted an intriguing, gender-based expedient employed by Lavardin and by another well-born provincial lieutenant-general, the marquis of Beuvron: 'they have their sisters, their mothers write ... and they avoid decision'.³⁶

Sévigné and her correspondents also circulated and discussed copies of a letter exchange that reportedly took place between Albret and Ambres following the king's decision. Ambres began his letter with the required *Monseigneur*, declared that he was doing so (only) to obey the order of the king, and ended by expressing his conviction that 'you know to what degree I am, *Monseigneur*, your most humble and most obedient servant', the last seven words comprising the

³² On the *billet* style, see Sternberg, 'Epistolary Ceremonial', pp. 74–8.

³³ *Ibid.*, ii. 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, ii. 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ii. 105. Lavardin (Henri-Charles de Beaumanoir) was lieutenant-general in Brittany.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ii. 58. Could wives also act in this mediatory capacity? Both Lavardin and Beuvron were widowers at the time (P. Anselme et al., *Histoire généalogique et chronologique de la maison royale de France* [3rd edn., 9 vols., Paris, 1726–33], v. 152, vii. 387), so the question remains open, along with the corresponding one of whether Sévigné was trying to spare her daughter from the task.

standard subscription formula used towards superiors or equals. The marshal cleverly replied by mimicking the structure and style of Ambres's letter, yet with a crucial variation. He underscored that the king's order was just and deserved, and ended the letter thus: 'as I express myself clearly and unequivocally, I shall assure you that I shall be in the future, depending on whether your conduct obliges me so, *Monsieur*, your most humble and most affectionate servant'.³⁷ The change of adjective in the subscription underscored the marshal's victory in forcing through his own vision of status relations; 'affectionate', as opposed to 'obedient', was generally used towards social inferiors. Sévigné found the letter very haughty (as well as uncharacteristically witty): 'The *affectionné serviteur* is hard to swallow. The *Monseigneur* is well established then'.³⁸

Interestingly, the count of Bussy-Rabutin, Sévigné's cousin and a celebrated writer in his own right, sided with the marshal on this occasion. For him, Albret's seniority in both age and military rank clinched the argument in his favour: 'The marquis of Ambres doesn't know how to behave. Being much younger than Marshal d'Albret and having never had any other [i.e., better] position than that of cavalry colonel of the Champagne regiment, it was ridiculous not to write *Monseigneur* to this marshal'.³⁹ This logic of seniority guided Bussy in his own epistolary interactions with marshals. These interactions touched on a painful spot: the count believed that he would have become a marshal himself were it not for his infamous disgrace.⁴⁰ He accordingly refused the *Monseigneur* to army peers or juniors who were created marshals after his forced

³⁷ Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, ii. 85.

³⁸ Ibid., ii. 119 (cf. ii. 27–8, 33–4). On subscription formulae, see Sternberg, 'Epistolary Ceremonial', pp. 54–60.

³⁹ Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, ii. 89. Although this remark, like the verbatim account of the Albret–Ambres exchange, is appended only to some of the extant copies of this correspondence, it matches both the ideas and the writing style of Bussy (cf., for example, *Correspondance de Roger de Rabutin, comte de Bussy*, ed. Ludovic Lalanne [6 vols., Paris, 1858–9], iii. 164). Albret was 61 years old in 1675, Ambres only 35.

⁴⁰ For a recent account, see J. Swann, *Exile, Imprisonment, or Death: The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610–1789* (Oxford, 2017), esp. ch. 3.

retirement from a long military career.⁴¹ As we might expect, such a stance did not fail to generate friction. Two incidents, discussed at length in Bussy's correspondence, throw further light on how epistolary disputes were handled outside of the royal orbit, and on the subtle micro-politics of social communication and exchange.

In May 1676 Bussy wrote to Créqui to thank him for his treatment of Bussy's son, who was serving under the marshal. The wording was warm, but gratitude did not affect epistolary policy: Bussy addressed Créqui as *Monsieur*, as was his wont with any former army subordinate.⁴² Having received no response, and having heard that the form of address was to blame, he expounded his position in a second letter to the marshal, written in quite a different tone. Against the claim that only Officers of the Crown were spared the obligation to award the *Monseigneur* to marshals, he argued that 'no rules were so general as to have no exceptions'. He also cited the example of five of Créqui's colleagues who treated him as though he were one of their 'corps'.⁴³ He raised the stakes even higher by sending the letter via personal courier rather than through the ordinary post. Bussy thus denied the marshal the benefit of communicational doubt: it could not be claimed that the missive had been lost. Créqui nevertheless turned down the courier's demand for a reply. Concerned now that the matter might reach the king, Bussy explained his position in detail to his friend, the duke of Saint-Aignan, so that the latter (who enjoyed close relations with Louis XIV) could represent him if necessary.⁴⁴

The second incident followed the next promotion to the marshalate, in the spring of 1681. This time the new marshal, Jean, count of Estrées, was an old friend of the disgraced count.

⁴¹ Prior to his disgrace in the 1660s, Bussy had served since the early 1630s and reached the rank of lieutenant-general in 1654: M. Pinard, *Chronologie historique-militaire* (8 vols., Paris, 1760–78), iv. 192–4. See also C. Blanquie, 'Entre courtoisie et révolte: La Correspondance de Condé (1648–1659)', *Histoire, économie et société*, xiv (1995), pp. 428–9.

⁴² *Correspondance ... de Bussy*, ed. Lalanne, iii. 155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, iii. 160–62. Bussy listed a few other exemption-worthy veteran commanders besides himself; ironically, when one of them became marshal five years later, he too antagonised Bussy (see below).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, iii. 163–6; see also iii. 246.

Bussy wrote Estrées a *billet* in early April to congratulate him on the honour, continuing, though, to address him as *Monsieur*.⁴⁵ He also told Sévigné how pleased he was at such a well-earned promotion, and she, on her own initiative, passed on this compliment to Estrées, whom she met at a social occasion later in April. The marshal then and there prayed her to return the compliment, and reinforced this response by saying to Bussy's son in Versailles that he had asked Sévigné to thank Bussy. Given that the *billet* remained unanswered, Bussy inferred that Estrées was trying to channel their exchange away from the written medium, in order to avoid an implicit acknowledgement of the *Monsieur*.⁴⁶

Bussy took the matter 'much to heart'. The reopening of old wounds felt especially painful when caused by someone he considered a friend. His first impulse was to write a second, sharp communication, like the one he had sent to Créqui five years earlier. He decided, however, to make another attempt for the sake of old friendship, and wrote a letter that expressed his emotions and demanded an explanation.⁴⁷ Bussy did not explicitly bring up the cause of the controversy; this he explained to Sévigné, who again passed on his views to the marshal.⁴⁸ Finally, Estrées wrote back on 29 June: 'I am very obliged to you, *Monsieur*, and without caring about formalities with you I pray you to believe that I still esteem your friendship as I should and that it is with pleasure that I ask you to continue it'. He sealed the gesture by subscribing himself as Bussy's 'most humble and most obedient servant'.⁴⁹ Estrées agreed to make a special

⁴⁵ Ibid., v. 258.

⁴⁶ That the son had also been the courier of the *billet* makes the fact that the marshal referred only to the oral channel even more significant. Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, iii. 64, 66–8; cf. an analogous case with Marshal La Feuillade two years earlier, which Bussy apparently chose not to escalate: *Correspondance ... de Bussy*, ed. Lalanne, iv. 421–2 (see also Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, ii. 218–19).

⁴⁷ Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, iii. 70–71; *Correspondance ... de Bussy*, ed. Lalanne, v. 278–9.

⁴⁸ The marshal apparently showed the marquise letters from two other lieutenant-generals who had addressed him as *Monseigneur*, while she noted the cases of other marshals who had replied to Bussy's *Monsieur*: Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, iii. 70–73.

⁴⁹ *Correspondance ... de Bussy*, ed. Lalanne, v. 283. The precise wording should be treated with caution, since all this correspondence is only known to survive in copies made by Bussy (see Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, i. 821–5).

exception for his friend in this case; by making the exception explicit, however, he signalled that he was not renouncing his epistolary prerogatives as marshal or allowing a generally applicable precedent against them.⁵⁰

If Bussy's position was somewhat unusual, other views and cases that arise in the letters of his correspondents seem more representative of general trends. These confirm his expectations, if not his tactics. Saint-Aignan sided with his friend and noted also the implications for his own position. Dukes ranked above marshals in several respects, and he was a senior lieutenant-general himself (more senior than Bussy), 'but if you had written *Monseigneur* to me, I would have thought that you were making fun of me'.⁵¹ Sévigné too supported Bussy's critique of the 'fantasy' of the marshals, but she counselled a pragmatic approach of avoidance: 'If you could have foreseen this, it would have been best to avoid writing to him, *as many people do presently*, for this way one does not hurt one's *gloire* nor that of one's friend'. Humières, she added, had reached an even better solution with her son-in-law Grignan: 'they still argue about it, but without bitterness, like good old friends, and they still write to one another while jesting about this issue'.⁵² This was serious jest, though: like Estrées, Humières addressed a challenge in the form of his correspondent's letters by contesting it explicitly in the content of his responses. And a few years later, Sévigné advised instead the gender-based expedient of writing to Humières's wife.⁵³ Others, however, chose to indulge the marshals.

Summing up the Bussy–Estrées case, Sévigné declared:

⁵⁰ Indeed, the marshal may even have sent an indirect message via Sévigné to indicate that this exception might not last; in a letter which probably accompanied the marshal's, she hinted that Bussy should not keep writing to Estrées if he wanted to preserve the friendship: Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, iii. 72–3.

⁵¹ *Correspondance ... de Bussy*, ed. Lalanne, iii. 165–6. Saint-Simon complained that although the dukes had a right to the *Monseigneur* from all but Officers of the Crown, they had lost more ground than the marshals in this respect: *Écrits inédits de Saint-Simon*, ed. Armand-Prosper Faugère (8 vols., Paris, 1880–93), iii. 142–5.

⁵² Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, iii. 68–9 (my emphasis).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, iii. 872.

Nothing gets decided in France; everything turns into chicanery and into claims. May each and every one keep them ... and may the wiser avoid making enemies or losing their friends.⁵⁴

A few years after the king's ruling in the Albret–Ambres dispute, the issue remained highly contested. Indeed, that dispute was not mentioned in relation to either of these later incidents, indicating that the ruling did not in fact have a general application. What emerges instead from the correspondence of Sévigné and Bussy is a rich picture of the unofficial ways of negotiating status disputes and the serious implications of epistolary ceremonial for personal communication, sociability and friendship. Personal interests were also at stake here: in this case, those of Bussy's son, who was trying to carve out his own military and courtly career and was dependent for this purpose on those who, unlike his father, remained in the Crown's good graces.⁵⁵ Thus even those living away from court or celebrated for an informal literary style in their own letters were deeply affected and involved. And their oft-quoted networks did not just passively propagate news of the contestations in question; rather, they acted as a mechanism for the exchange of information, advice and expedients among the affected parties. The high points of open dispute were just the tip of a larger iceberg.

III

As the seventeenth century drew towards a close, contestation over the *Monseigneur* did not remain confined to personal correspondence. During the next major European conflict—the Nine Years War—the issue continued to divide the high command at the front. In May 1694, Louis XIV sent Claude de Choiseul, marshal of France, to lead the defence of the northern coast against

⁵⁴ Ibid., iii. 73.

⁵⁵ See also *ibid.*, iii. 69: 'Il faut qu'il [Estrées] récompense cet endroit par mille bons offices qu'il doit rendre à Monsieur votre fils dans les occasions'. On the next generation, see also section IV below.

allied attack.⁵⁶ In Normandy, the lieutenant-generals were François de Harcourt, marquis of Beuvron, and Jacques Goyon, lord of Matignon. Beuvron, as we have seen, sometimes relied on female go-betweens to avoid the epistolary dilemma. On this occasion, however, such an expedient was obviously not an option, and, faced with a determined marshal, a dispute became inevitable, as Matignon reported to the War Minister:

Claiming that I ought to write to him [as] *Monseigneur*, Monsieur the marshal of Choiseul sent me a gentleman to inform me of the matter. I immediately went to find him and let him understand that I had always practiced the contrary with *Messieurs* the marshals of France, who did not take offence, even with Monsieur the marshal of Luxembourg, governor of the province, and Monsieur the marshal of Bellefonds, when he was commanding the king's army two years ago; that my fathers have always done the same, both in ordinary communication and in a contestation with *Messieurs* the marshals of Grancey and of La Ferté which had reached His Majesty. Nonetheless, Monsieur the marshal of Choiseul told me that there is no exception in this matter in the kingdom. To my reply that I thought that my birth should draw [an exception] for me, he declared that he would ask the king to rule on the matter.⁵⁷

Twenty years after the king's ruling against Ambres, these untitled *grands seigneurs* would still not bow before the *dignités*. While Marshals Luxembourg and Bellefonds (who had been sent to Normandy on a similar mission in 1692) tolerated the lack of *Monseigneur*, Choiseul would not.⁵⁸ The matter had a wide resonance: far away on the Italian front, Marshal Catinat followed it with interest and asked his brother to inform him of the outcome.⁵⁹ The marquis of Dangeau reported it in his journal, in an entry dated 27 July. Dangeau's priorities are clear: writing just a

⁵⁶ P. Le Cacheux, ed., 'La Mission du maréchal Choiseul en Normandie', in *Mélanges (Société de l'histoire de Normandie)*, xi (1927), pp. 123–202; Lynn, *Wars of Louis XIV*, pp. 244–6.

⁵⁷ SHDT, A1 1256, no. 123, Matignon to Barbezieux, 19 June 1694. On the earlier contestation with Grancey and La Ferté and its implications, see below.

⁵⁸ See also Le Cacheux, 'La Mission du maréchal Choiseul', p. 153.

⁵⁹ BN, fonds français 7888, fo. 152.

few days after the destruction of Dieppe, he dealt with the bombardment of the Norman port of Le Havre by an Anglo-Dutch fleet in a brief sentence, dwelling instead on the battle over forms of address. He noted that ‘both sides wrote about it to the king, and His Majesty decided that [Beuvron and Matignon] should write *Monseigneur* to the marshal’.⁶⁰

While continuing to disrupt internal communications among the high command, epistolary disputes also affected the delicate maintenance of France’s international relations in times of war, when commanders of armies in foreign territory had to liaise with local princes. Here the marshals faced the sharp end of the pretensions of sovereign or quasi-sovereign members of the ‘Society of Princes’. In 1702–3, for example, during the War of the Spanish Succession, Marshals Villars and Tallard, commanding armies on the German front, took offence at the haughty subscription formula which the duke of Lorraine used in ending his letters to them.⁶¹ Tallard delayed responding while he consulted with the War Minister about it, and on whether or not he himself should award the *Monseigneur* to the prince. Unsatisfied with the instructions he received, Tallard wrote again with details of past cases, revealing a history of communication problems between his predecessors and other princes. In one of these episodes, Marshal Villeroy had reportedly evaded an express order from the king to award the *Monseigneur* to the elector of Bavaria.

To support their case, the marshals co-ordinated their efforts and sent the minister extracts from recent letters sent by other German princes which had ended more courteously.⁶² This line of argument met with greater success. While the Crown still insisted that the two write

⁶⁰ *Journal du marquis de Dangeau*, ed. Eudore Soulié et al. (19 vols., Paris, 1854–60), v. 50.

⁶¹ ‘Votre très affectionné ami à vous servir’. Villars first raised the matter in December 1702, and Tallard accelerated it in March–April 1703. Some of the extended correspondence on this matter is to be found in SHDT, A1 1663, nos. 25, 29; A1 1666, nos. 47, 48, 52, 66; and A1 3779, nos. 564–9.

⁶² With either less haughty subscriptions or *billet* endings: SHDT, A1 3779, no. 567. These extracts derive from correspondence addressed to Marshal Boufflers as well as to Tallard and Villars, which suggests that he assisted his two colleagues in upholding the dignity of their collective rank.

deferentially to Lorraine, awarding him the address terms *Monseigneur* and *Your Highness* (the latter a notch down from the *Royal Highness* Lorraine expected), it agreed that the duke's subscriptions were unacceptable given the practice of other princes. The Crown accordingly wrote to Lorraine's representative in France that the marshals expected the duke 'to maintain the dignity of their posts and of the honour that they have of commanding the king's armies, or else they would be obliged to refrain from writing to him'.⁶³ If the king himself prioritised epistolary ceremonial over military expediency, 'at a time when [the Crown] was putting troops in the small towns of *Monsieur* the duke of Lorraine', no wonder that the commanders in his service did the same.⁶⁴

Later in the war, Claude-François Bidal d'Asfeld, lieutenant-general in command at Nice in 1711, found himself in a similar situation *vis-à-vis* the prince of Monaco, with whom he was supposed to liaise over the fortification of the frontier.⁶⁵ Following the advice of Marshal Berwick and the example of Grignan (commander-in-chief in Provence), Asfeld chose not to award the *Monseigneur* to Monaco. It was for the good of the king's service, he claimed, to uphold 'the persons that [His Majesty] puts in position and who hold his authority'.⁶⁶ The prince complained vociferously about this 'degradation', supplying a long list of contrary precedents.

⁶³ SHDT, A1 3779, no. 569. This letter ended by noting that marshals receive 'cousin' treatment from the king, another hint that Lorraine's haughty style had a negative implication for Louis's own status.

⁶⁴ The quotation is from SHDT, A1 3779, no. 564, Claude-Louis-Hector de Villars to Chamillart, 21 Dec. 1702. On French policy in Lorraine during this period, see P. McCluskey, *Absolute Monarchy on the Frontiers: Louis XIV's Military Occupations of Lorraine and Savoy* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 41–3. On the priority of private interest over military expediency during this major conflict, see also C. Oury, 'La Prise de decision militaire à la fin du règne de Louis XIV: L'Exemple du siège de Turin, 1706', *Histoire, économie et société*, xxix, no. 2 (2010), pp. 23–43.

⁶⁵ On this campaign, see François-Eugène de Vault and Jean-Jacques-Germain Pelet, *Mémoires militaires relatifs à la succession d'Espagne sous Louis XIV* (11 vols., Paris, 1835–62), x. 451–515.

⁶⁶ SHDT, A1 2326, no. 134, Asfeld to Daniel-François Voysin de La Noiraye, 13 June 1711. The long passage that discusses the dispute appears in a postscript in Asfeld's own hand.

Noting these precedents and the distinctions that Monaco enjoyed as a sovereign prince, the War Secretary strongly advised the lieutenant-general to acquiesce.⁶⁷

The end of the reign of Louis XIV did not put an end to this form of altercation. Quite the contrary: during the regency, when various parties pushed forward their status agenda, such disputes verged on insubordination. Henri-Louis de La Tour-d'Auvergne, count of Evreux, was Colonel-General of the Cavalry and member of the War Council. In the summer of 1718, he clashed with cavalry colonels over the closing formulae of his letters. Evreux reportedly finished with 'I am all yours and honour you perfectly', thus compounding the familiar and simple 'all yours' *billet* ending with the condescending implication that he was in a position to 'honour' the addressees.⁶⁸ This created public uproar and a heated letter exchange with four of the colonels, who came from distinguished family backgrounds.⁶⁹ Evreux put forward his military superiority as the reason for the choice of formula, but others suspected that he was using it to further the claims of his family to princely status, not least since two of the four colonels came from the ranks of rival, ducal families.⁷⁰

The most spectacular such case had occurred a few months earlier, when a colonel of dragoons was thrown in prison over a closing formula. Here too the trigger was a collective letter

⁶⁷ Ibid., nos. 132–3, Antoine Grimaldi, prince of Monaco, to Voysin, 12 June 1711, and no. 153, Voysin to Asfeld, 25 June 1711. Asfeld, of recent nobility, came from a different background to our previous protagonists.

⁶⁸ I have not been able to trace Evreux's original missives. Dangeau reports that they ended 'Je suis tout à vous et vous honore parfaitement', and claims that the *tout à vous* did the damage: *Journal du marquis de Dangeau*, ed. Soulié et al., xvii. 360. According to *Les Correspondants de la marquise de Balleroy*, ed. Édouard de Barthélemy (2 vols., Paris, 1883), i. 347, the addressees found fault with the *honore*. The subsequent letter exchange (see the next note) explicitly refers to the latter.

⁶⁹ For copies of the exchange, see, for example, BN, Clairambault 1137, fos. 180–182; BN, Châtre de Cangé, Réserve, F 161, fos. 21–22; BN, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9741, fos. 170–173. Dangeau notes it in *Journal du marquis de Dangeau*, ed. Soulié et al., xvii. 373.

⁷⁰ The houses of Aumont and Gesvres. Ducal rank, unlike that of princes, did not extend beyond the heads of the family; thus Evreux, a cadet member of the La Tour d'Auvergne, could claim a status which these two, though heirs of dukes, could not. Cf. *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, ed. Arthur de Boislisle et al. (43 vols., Paris, 1879–1930), xxxiii. 173–4, 316–17; Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 4817, pp. 36–7. By contrast, the two, along with other sons of dukes, apparently received special epistolary treatment from the head of the War Council, a duke himself (Villars; see below): BN, Châtre de Cangé, Réserve, F 226, fo. 289v. The other two addressees came from the La Motte-Houdancourt and Vintimille houses.

from the top command. Marshal Villars, now head of the War Council as well as duke and peer, ended a circular letter to colonels with the formula ‘very perfectly yours’ (*très parfaitement à vous*), as was his wont with those who did not enjoy special personal status. Several addressees took offence, and one of them, Louis-Bénigne, marquis of Bauffremont, sent Villars a provocative reply that culminated in a mimicking of the offensive formula. The marshals complained, and a *lettre de cachet* ordered the colonel into the Bastille. The affair generated lively public debate at court and in the capital. The tension between ‘untitled’ and ‘titled’ was brought into relief in this dispute, pitting as it did a middle-grade officer from an ancient and illustrious Burgundian house against a descendant of Lyonnais merchants who had become a marshal and a duke. Despite his incarceration, Bauffremont gained the upper hand in public, while Villars and the marshals suffered humiliation.⁷¹

IV

Bauffremont’s challenge was particularly threatening to the chain of command because at the time Villars combined in his person the military superiority of marshals with the administrative superiority of the head of the War Council. While this was a product of the unusual circumstances of the early regency, it calls our attention to relations between sword officers and those who normally stood at the head of the administrative hierarchy: the Secretaries of State for War. Before the second half of the eighteenth century, these and other ministers mostly came from a social background considered inferior to that of many officers and commanders.⁷² At the

⁷¹ For a detailed analysis of this rich case and its implications, see G. Sternberg, ‘Are *formules de politesse* Always Polite? The Bauffremont–Villars Incident, Discursive Struggles and Social Tensions under the Ancien Régime’, *Zeitsprünge*, xiii (2009), pp. 219–34.

⁷² I use ‘minister’ as shorthand for Secretary of State rather than as a literal rendering of the partially overlapping, but not identical, ‘ministre’.

same time, the Secretaries of State drew their authority from representing the king and from their influence over governmental decisions, funds and promotions.

In the course of the seventeenth century, this growing ministerial power increasingly translated into symbols of status, and especially into epistolary ones. Like Albret, ministers would normally award lieutenant-generals the lesser ‘affectionate’ in the subscription, whereas the latter, as Bussy bitterly remarked, ‘knowing that the Secretaries of State could make or break them, have been their most humble and most obedient servants’. For him, this represented the decline of ‘birth and arms’.⁷³ What is more, as the quotation with which this article began illustrates, it became the norm for all but marshals (and titled nobles) to address ministers as *Monseigneur*. Saint-Simon saw Louvois as the motor of this and other pretensions, and claimed that the minister, with royal sanction, had used all the power invested in him to wring this form of address from recalcitrant officers. Many ‘distinguished people’ quit the service as a result, but continued to suffer the consequences until their death. Finally, he concluded, ‘there remained no one who did not bear this yoke’.⁷⁴

Were ministers more successful than marshals, then, in securing recognition of their epistolary pretensions? One immediate test would be to check the practice of those who refused the *Monseigneur* in writing to their military superiors. It turns out that those refusers, and even the evaders, consistently addressed ministers as *Monsieur*. What is more, they refrained from the *Monseigneur* in the very letters in which they asked ministers for protection against the marshals,

⁷³ *Correspondance ... de Bussy*, ed. Lalanne, ii. 347–8. In some cases, Secretaries of State awarded the ‘affectionate’ even to marshals, as Joyeuse, who replaced Choiseul in Normandy, complained in 1696: *Mémoires de Nicolas-Joseph Foucault*, ed. Frédéric Baudry (Paris, 1862), p. 320.

⁷⁴ *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, ed. Boislisle et al., vi. 130, xiv. 229. See also the anecdote about an officer from a distinguished family who wrote the *Monseigneur* on top of a request for an army position from Louvois, but added ‘Au nom de Dieu, ne montrez pas ma Letre à mon Oncle: car il me deshériteroit’: Amelot de la Houssaie, *Mémoires historiques, politiques, critiques et littéraires* (2 vols., Amsterdam, 1731), ii. 95–6. On Louvois’s style, see T. Sarmant and M. Stoll, ‘Le Style de Louvois: Formulaire administratif et expression personnelle dans la correspondance du secrétaire d’État de la Guerre de Louis XIV’, *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de France* (1997), pp. 57–77.

and they continued to deny the former even in cases where the king ordered them to submit to the latter.⁷⁵ Into the eighteenth century, *Monsieurs* still opened requests for ministerial assistance.⁷⁶ Significantly, there are no clear-cut cases of ministers who relied on open royal sanction, as did Albret or Choiseul.⁷⁷ Saint-Simon's categorical claim thus requires more scrutiny.

For one thing, it appears that the obligation for sword officers to address ministers as *Monseigneur* dates from well before the time of Louvois, or indeed of Louis XIV. As early as 1636, the marquise of Feuquières added this form to her son's letter as she forwarded it to Sublet de Noyers, noting that 'one must put *Monseigneur* to the Secretaries of State and ministers of France'.⁷⁸ The case of ministers is particularly conducive to comparative examination over time, given their copious and relatively well preserved correspondence. From around the mid-seventeenth century onwards, War Ministers increasingly archived the letters they received, which by the early eighteenth century numbered well into the thousands per year. In theory, the question might be amenable to precise quantitative analysis; given the considerable challenges of labour and methodology involved, I limit myself here to some observations about patterns and changes, especially in relation to the persons and periods discussed in the preceding sections.

A survey of letters from the first years of the Dutch War suggests that at this stage the War Minister could already expect the *Monseigneur* from most of his correspondents. Still, Lorge and Rochefort formed part of a minority of military lieutenant-generals from privileged

⁷⁵ In addition to letters to ministers cited above, see SHDT, A1 347, no. 382 (Rochefort, 1673); A1 466, no. 171 (Lorge, 1675); A1 903, no. 9 (Grignan, 1689); A1 1256, no. 166 (Lavardin, 1694); A1 1257, no. 118 (Beuvron, 1694); A1 1258, no. 21 (Matignon, 1694, a week after Dangeau's report of the king's decision).

⁷⁶ SHDT, A1 2139, no. 153 (Matignon, 1709); Frédéric Masson, *Le Marquis de Grignan, petit-fils de Madame de Sévigné* (2nd edn., Paris, 1903), p. 293 (Grignan, 1704). As noted earlier in the case of Bussy's son, refusers/evaders prioritised status over their other interests in their interactions—or lack thereof—with marshals too, since the latter also enjoyed non-negligible influence over military fates. See also Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, ii. 36.

⁷⁷ For one possible case, mentioned in long retrospect, see AN, O1 281, no. 25.

⁷⁸ *Lettres inédites des Feuquières*, ed. Auguste-Alphonse Étienne-Gallois (5 vols., Paris, 1845–6), i. 161.

backgrounds who hung on to the *Monsieur*.⁷⁹ By the later wars of the reign, however, this manner of address seems to have been almost entirely limited to lieutenant-generals, such as Matignon and Grignan, whose rank derived from a provincial position rather than from regular army service. Even they compensated in part for the equality of address via other aspects of epistolary ceremonial, in the full knowledge that these would not be reciprocated by the ministers: not just the ‘obedient’ in the subscription, but also expressions of lexical ‘respect’ and spatial deference.⁸⁰

A shift thus appears to have taken place between one generation and the next. That we are indeed dealing with a generational change becomes clear when we refocus our gaze from a broad survey to specific cases. For the sons of our previous protagonists entered the army in the later period, and some became sufficiently prominent to correspond directly with the War Minister of the time. The eldest sons of Ambres and Grignan, for example, served as colonel and brigadier in the War of the Spanish Succession. Both awarded the *Monseigneur* to the minister.⁸¹ Beuvron’s eldest, the marquis of Harcourt, kept up the deferential style as lieutenant-general, a fact which probably did not hamper his progress towards his final exemption from the term—his elevation to ducal rank in 1700.⁸²

Perhaps the most striking illustration of this transition is the case of Matignon’s younger brother, Charles-Auguste Goyon, count of Gacé. In 1688, around the outbreak of the Nine Years War, the count received the provincial governorship of Aunis, which included the key port of La Rochelle. True to the family tradition, Gacé addressed the War Minister as *Monsieur*; why award

⁷⁹ For example, the various letters of the marquis of Montpesat in SHDT, A1 311, and of the count of Estrades in A1 347.

⁸⁰ See, for example, the letters cited in n. 75 above. On lexical and spatial aspects, see Sternberg, ‘Epistolary Ceremonial’, esp. pp. 60–74.

⁸¹ For Lautrec (Ambres’s eldest surviving son at this point), see SHDT, A1 1862, no. 409; A1 2139, no. 17. For Grignan, see Masson, *Le Marquis de Grignan*, pp. 282–4; SHDT, A1 1555, no. 113.

⁸² See, for example, SHDT, A1 1255, no. 16; A1 1256, no. 39; A1 1258, no. 86. On the ambiguity of Harcourt’s attitude to questions of status and rank, a combination of haughtiness and instrumental obsequiousness, see *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, ed. Boislisle et al., xxi. 160–61.

the more deferential form to ministers when his own great-grandfather had been on the receiving end of the *Monseigneur* from the pens of their predecessors?⁸³ Soon, however, the governor was to discover the shaky basis of his own position.

In early 1689 the marquis of La Trousse, a military lieutenant-general, arrived in La Rochelle with royal letters overriding Gacé's command. 'I found him very cold and very serious', reported the marquis to the minister; 'whatever I came up with ... would not warm him up'. 'He cannot come to terms with seeing someone here holding the command over him', concluded La Trousse—and added the customary *Monseigneur* before ending.⁸⁴ Gacé seems to have learned a lesson from this. By 1691 the deferential form regularly graced his letters to the minister, and it continued to do so following his promotion to lieutenant-general in 1693.⁸⁵ Interestingly, though, these letters are in scribal hand, in contrast with autograph *Monsieurs* of the late 1680s. Did this distinction serve to salvage a sense of self-dignity from the humiliating *volte-face*? Either way, his own hand reappears, with the *Monsieur*, after his promotion to the marshalate in 1708.⁸⁶

Gacé knew what he had to do, as did other career officers among the younger generation of sword aristocrats. Ministers usually lacked the social credit that allowed marshals to seek open royal sanction; they could, however, draw on their political capital to extract the cultural specie of the *Monseigneur*, which—in turn and in time—might help to narrow the structural social gap between them and their aristocratic addressers. Perhaps the younger officers felt that they could afford to be less punctilious in their interactions with such outsiders than they were with their

⁸³ For examples of *Monsieur* address by Gacé in late 1688, see SHDT, A1 837, *passim*. For a ministerial *Monseigneur* to his ancestor, see *Documents concernant les relations entre le duc d'Anjou et les Pays-Bas*, ed. Pieter Lodewijk Muller and Alphonse Diegerick (5 vols., Utrecht, 1889–99), v. 611.

⁸⁴ SHDT, A1 903, no. 227, Philippe-Auguste Le Hardy, marquis of La Trousse, to Louvois, 19 Mar. 1689; cf. Gacé's earlier letters (addressed *Monsieur*), nos. 58 and 196, and *Mémoires du marquis de Sourches sur le règne de Louis XIV*, ed. Gabriel-Jules de Cosnac et al. (13 vols., Paris, 1882–93), iii. 55.

⁸⁵ SHDT, A1 1052, *passim*; A1 1255, no. 152. Gacé's need to procure new forms of ministerial patronage grew after the death of Colbert de Seignelay (married to the count's niece) in 1690.

⁸⁶ SHDT, A1 2139, no. 216.

social peers. Moreover, they knew that political capital was less durable than its social equivalent, and that the ministers might not retain their positions. As the chevalier de Quincy observed with regard to the fate of the marquis of Cany: from ‘a Secretary of State for War, to whom all the generals had been obliged, when they had written to him, to give the *Monseigneur*, [Cany had] become ... a simple colonel, this is cruel and quite hard’.⁸⁷

V

The status contestations over the *Monseigneur* and other aspects of epistolary ceremonial posed a recurring challenge to the functioning of royal forces in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That the Crown was willing to tolerate—let alone come up with—the idea that two commanders in charge of a wartime theatre of operations should communicate indirectly on account of disagreements over a form of address is evidence enough of early modern priorities.

From 1675, though, the Crown appears to have pursued a policy of backing the Great Officers that stood at the top of the chain of command. Louis XIV could no longer resort to his favourite half-measure of deciding not to decide. Coming at the heels of the Humières–Lorge and Créqui–Rocheport disputes, the Albret–Ambres case highlighted the ‘pernicious effect’ of status claims on military operations in the midst of external war and internal rebellion. What is more, it became a *cause célèbre*, eagerly followed and disseminated by the famous writers of the period. The Crown’s apprehension about the ‘public eye’ was already discernible in the intendant Robert’s report on the Humières–Lorge case. In a strongly corporatist and precedent-based society, recognition of an individual claim could have broad ramifications. Indeed, despite

⁸⁷ Cany had been *survivancier* of his father Chamillart as Secretary of State, but was disgraced with him in 1709: *Mémoires du chevalier de Quincy*, ed. Léon Lecestre (3 vols., Paris, 1898–1901), iii. 238–9.

Robert's efforts, news of the striking outcome of this earlier dispute did circulate widely enough for Ambres to be able to cite it in support of his own claim a year later.

In the light of these considerations, the king decided to renege on his earlier position and instructions to Ambres and to prioritise the official dignity and commanding authority of marshals over the family precedents of *grands seigneurs*. Like the famous *ordre du tableau*, issued at the same time, this decision sought to establish the chain of command on a clear, centrally governed hierarchical basis.⁸⁸ However, Ambres's delays and the subsequent recurring breaches and resistance by sword nobles demonstrate the limits of such 'rationalising' policies in the early modern period, even at the top of the institutions most crucial to the state, in the face of social constraints and traditional values. After all, the officers who led the king's armies in pursuit of his glory could not really be expected to forsake glory of their own. The two were intertwined, moreover, in the dealings of the Crown and the high command with foreign powers.

No royal order was considered definitive in matters of status, and so these continued to have an adverse effect on military communications in subsequent wars. In 1694, Matignon rehearsed the same arguments about birth and usage brought forward by Lorge, Rochefort and Ambres twenty years earlier. As late as the 1760s, 'many persons' still did not follow the 'ceremonial decided several times' with regard to the marshals of France. One of them again ended up in prison.⁸⁹ One suspects that many more resorted to the safer alternative revealed in Sévigné's letters, of avoiding communication whenever possible. The cumulative effect on

⁸⁸ See Rowlands, *Dynastic State*, pp. 297–300; H. Drévilion, *L'Impôt du sang: Le Métier des armes sous Louis XIV* (Paris, 2005), pp. 39–46. Consider also in this context the earlier decision of 1672 that subordinated the marshals themselves—*pace* two of our protagonists (Créqui and Humières)—to Turenne and the hierarchical principle.

⁸⁹ M. de Beaufort, *Recueil concernant le tribunal de nosseigneurs les maréchaux de France* (2 vols., Paris, 1784), i. 24–32; cf. AN, O1 281, no. 25.

military operations of such hard-to-detect passive resistance may well have been more deleterious to ‘the king’s service’ than the more celebrated cases of open insubordination.⁹⁰

Micro-politics, then, could trump macro-politics, and this underscores the need to recover and comprehend its subtle mechanisms. The case of correspondence requires a grasp of two dimensions in particular: the writing code and communication settings. The code involved a variety of aspects, including forms of address, closing formulae, other linguistic status-markers, and non-verbal features. The *Monseigneur* was the most polarising of all of these: its presence in a letter unequivocally signified the superiority of the addressee, while its absence gave rise to bitter and protracted disputes. Other features could reinforce the message—or qualify it. In the same letter, the deferential use of subscriptions, expression, or space on the paper could mitigate the absence of the *Monseigneur*. Conversely, even those who granted the term might expect courteous treatment in other aspects. The closing formulae of the Villars correspondence demonstrate this last point from both perspectives: as the inferior addressee of Lorraine in 1702–3 and as the superior addresser of Bauffremont in 1718. Just as the absence of the *Monseigneur* did not necessarily send a message of total equality, so its presence did not signify recognition of abject inferiority.⁹¹

Communication settings involved both correspondents and other parties. Since the former were, by definition, not co-present, letters provide an unusual and particularly interesting arena for status interaction. Each side enjoyed a degree of control over the moment of writing or reading, or indeed over the channel of communication. Marshals could not receive the *Monseigneur* if lieutenant-generals did not write to them. In that sense, the latter enjoyed a

⁹⁰ If Saint-Simon was right, the Crown also lost commanders who left the army as a result (and possibly also, in later generations, potential commanders who chose not to join in the first place); see n. 75 above.

⁹¹ This lends further support to the more general observation that status interaction is not reducible to the simple question of precedence: G. Sternberg, *Status Interaction during the Reign of Louis XIV* (Oxford, 2014).

certain advantage by default: as long as nothing happened, they could claim that neither they nor their ancestors had ever awarded the deferential address term. If they wrote *Monsieur* instead, the outcome would now depend on the reaction of the addressee. If he continued corresponding as usual, the precedent would be set. If he did nothing, the matter would remain unsettled. For either side, total victory depended on keeping the channel of communication open from both ends.

Here the precise mode of communication also made a difference. Since the ordinary post was never perfectly reliable, there was room for doubt over whether or not letters had reached their destination. With goodwill on both sides, tacit avoidance could prevent open conflict. However, if senders wished to make their point, as Bussy did with Créqui, they could send the letter by courier and even demand a response on the spot. If addressees did not then make some semblance of resistance, for example by sending back the letter or by refusing to reply, the sender would have evidence of uncontested reception.⁹² Tacit avoidance was likewise difficult if the correspondence could not cease without serious consequences. This applies especially to the king's service, but also to cases where the norms of sociability called for a two-sided exchange. In particular, the problem occurred at the very moment of elevation to the position that generated the claim for deferential (or condescending) address in the first place.

When correspondents could not or would not resort to tacit avoidance, some solution had to be found. With some goodwill, they could agree on an expedient, usually relying on some other form of avoidance. One was to communicate indirectly via third parties who corresponded freely with both sides, such as the intendant Robert or, most intriguingly, the women who acted as go-betweens. While this last expedient spared the male heads of the family, female writers still had to come up with some form of address. Was a *Monseigneur* from a woman's pen considered less consequential for a house's prestige? Or did the norm of gender courtesy make it easier for

⁹² See also Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5170, pp. 146–7.

addressees to put up with a mere *Monsieur*?⁹³ It would not appear so for princes of royal blood, who rejected at least two such attempts by lower-ranking princesses writing on behalf of male relatives.⁹⁴ Women might prove even more convenient in the capacity of addressee, as suggested by Sévigné, for there was no female equivalent of the male *Monseigneur/Monsieur* duality of deference. Either way, this expedient reveals another, highly specific reason for women's key role in epistolary communications and in managing social networks more generally.⁹⁵

Another common expedient brought avoidance to the writing code, through the *billet* style that did not require formulaic address or subscription. However, this expedient did not always work well in practice, as we have seen, for example, in the cases of Evreux and Bauffremont. Similarly, 'many people' complained that Marshal Catinat 'made use of the liberty of the *billet*, having little familiarity with them'.⁹⁶ What is more, the practical constraints of the communication channel required some form of address in the superscription on the outside of the letter for it to reach its destination. While this constraint inevitably applied to the ordinary post, it also affected special dispatches, as the case of Humières–Lorge shows.

Finally, addressees could make exceptions that proved the rule, as Humières did with Grignan or Estrées with Bussy. If all expedients failed, correspondents entered a state of open dispute. Unsatisfied addressees, such as the regency colonels, might escalate the situation by retaliating in kind, mimicking the style of addressers and denying them their own expected treatment. At this stage, the Crown often intervened, in an attempt to stop the escalation or at the request of one or both of the parties. It was usually only then that latent disputes burst into the public domain and, consequently, left a trace in the more regularly available sources.

⁹³ In some cases, female relatives might have enjoyed a different status because of marriage into another house; thus, as duchess of Arpajon, Beuvron's sister would not have been expected to award the *Monseigneur* to marshals.

⁹⁴ Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5170, pp. 146–7.

⁹⁵ See, for example, J.B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 2009), pp. 175–6, and J. Daybell and A. Gordon, eds., *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture, 1450–1690* (London, 2016).

⁹⁶ BN, fonds français 7888, fo. 57r.

Latent or public, the disputes also illuminate social fissures and identities. Whereas the more typical dividing lines contrast nobles with commoners, sword with robe, or aristocrats with *hobereaux*, the cases considered here reveal a subtler tension that does not neatly map onto these categories. Grignan, Lavardin, Beuvron and Matignon were clearly members of the old sword nobility who could not be regarded as simple country squires. Socially and culturally, they are in many respects difficult to distinguish from their rivals. Lorge and Rochefort became marshals themselves shortly after their altercation with holders of that rank. With the exception of Rochefort, who died early, all rubbed shoulders with Humières, Estrées and Choiseul at the 1688 promotion to the highly prestigious Order of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁷

What, then, was the nature of the lines that divided the sides in question? Sévigné provides a pointer towards the answer in her useful, though not unproblematic, distinction between *grands seigneurs* and *dignités*. The difference lay in the source of prestige: lineage based on feudal standing in the countryside versus association with the Crown through permanent rank at court. The most spectacular case, Bauffremont against Villars, pitted a middle-grade officer of ancient provincial lineage against a marshal and duke of (relatively) recent nobility. But what makes the general division particularly interesting is that it also drove the dispute in other cases, where it was a question of subtle priority rather than of stark contrast. In fact, the two sources of prestige frequently overlapped in the same person: most dignitaries came from old families, while many of their rivals were associated with the court and even held long-term positions there.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Choiseul, not yet a marshal at the time, ranked between Grignan and Matignon, while his other subordinate in 1694, Beuvron, preceded him by several places, as did Lavardin (in fact, they did not physically rub shoulders upon nomination in 1688–9, because many were absent raising troops in the provinces and technically became knights at a later ceremony only, but the king ordered that they keep their original rankings nonetheless; see *Journal du marquis de Dangeau*, ed. Soulié et al., ii. 222–3, 225, 229, 285–6, 319–20).

⁹⁸ Matignon, for example, was a *menin* of the dauphin: a prestigious position, though not a *dignité*. In the final count, then, Sévigné's distinction is misleading to the extent that it implies that *grands seigneurs* and *dignités* were mutually exclusive. In most cases, the latter formed a sub-group within the former. On the contested notion of

Most of the untitled *grands seigneurs* under discussion here represented the Crown as lieutenant-generals in the provinces: the positions of political and military command that put them in contact with marshals in the first place and entitled them, in other communicational contexts, to receive the *Monseigneur* themselves.⁹⁹ Though theoretically revocable rather than permanent or hereditary offices, these positions were often in practice held for life and passed on to family members.¹⁰⁰ What is more, they tended to remain more in the hands of the most prominent local landholders even when the more elevated position of governor increasingly became, in the later years, a near-sinecure for dignitaries without a significant seigneurial presence in the region.

The contestations thus also illuminate the structural tensions of provincial government, which involved further contention, in the stakes of status interaction as of institutional authority. The dispute between Albret and Ambres, for example, did not stop at epistolary matters. The marquis also complained to Colbert that, when he had gone to see the marshal, the latter ‘overtook the door before me’, refusing to award the better spatial position as a courtesy to his guest and thus claiming great superiority.¹⁰¹ In Provence, Grignan faced similar issues *vis-à-vis* the papal vice-legate of Avignon.¹⁰² The manifold codes of status interaction thus affected face-to-face encounters too, making any form of direct communication difficult, if not impossible.

dignité, see also F. Cosandey, *Le Rang: Préséances et hiérarchies dans la France d'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2016), pp. 352–5.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Duchêne, i. 701–2.

¹⁰⁰ In Normandy, the Matignons and the Beuvrons retained their position from the sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries (respectively) until the end of the *Ancien Régime*. Ambres was too young at the death of his father, lieutenant-general in Upper Languedoc since 1633, to succeed to his position; but he subsequently obtained the adjacent position in Upper Guyenne, which passed on to his progeny until the extinction of the male line in the second half of the eighteenth century. See Anselme et al., *Histoire généalogique et chronologique*, v. 152–4, 384–91, ix. 174–7; L. Horowski, *Die Belagerung des Thrones: Machtstrukturen und Karrieremechanismen am Hof von Frankreich, 1661–1789* (Ostfildern, 2012), Appendix: ‘Prosopographie’, pp. 486–8, 495–6.

¹⁰¹ BN, Mélanges Colbert 171bis, fo. 470 ff., Ambres to Colbert, 2 June 1675. cf. BN, Clairambault 805, fos. 79–83.

¹⁰² Here tied up with the question of sovereign status: Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Mémoires et Documents, France 1093, fo. 88. On the effects of status interaction on diplomatic communications, see also Sternberg, *Status Interaction*, pp. 28, 34–5, 170–71.

As far as authority was concerned, the very appointment of marshals as commanders-in-chief at times of war or rebellion sometimes took the oversight of military affairs from the hands of governors or lieutenant-generals, the traditional commanders of forces in the provinces.¹⁰³ Another recurring point of contention involved the adjudication of honour disputes among the nobility. The marshals claimed that their tribunal could exercise appellate rights over provincial rulings, while governors and lieutenant-generals refused to recognise it as a superior jurisdiction. This had been the subject of the earlier contestation with the marshals of Grancey and La Ferté mentioned by Matignon. In awarding these marshals *Monsieur* only, Matignon's father had underscored the general jurisdictional point as well as his personal status.¹⁰⁴

As power brokers in the provinces, our *grands seigneurs* are perhaps reminiscent of the 'second nobility' which some historians have identified for earlier periods. Whether or not this controversial concept neatly applies to our protagonists, they clearly defined themselves against a first aristocracy of dignitaries that was growing and crystallising around the court and the state.¹⁰⁵ The two key dignities, that of marshal and that of duke, underwent substantial and remarkably parallel transformations in the course of the early modern period, with fundamental ramifications for the social stratification of the French aristocracy in general, and the place of those *grands seigneurs* who remained without these dignities in particular.

During the first half of the sixteenth century, the dignity of marshal seldom applied to more than three or four individuals at any given time. The ducal dignity was largely closed to French *gentilhommes* and restricted to princes of the royal family or of foreign stock. But in the

¹⁰³ See also *Mémoires du marquis de Sourches*, ed. Cosnac et al., iv. 191 n. 4.

¹⁰⁴ The treatise that published the letter by Matignon senior was tellingly titled *Preuves de l'égalité du pouvoir de messieurs les mareschaux de France et de messieurs les gouverneurs de province dans l'accommodement des querelles* (Paris, 1679). On the tribunal of the marshals, see P. Briost, H. Drévilion, and P. Serna, *Croiser le fer: Violence et culture de l'épée dans la France moderne (XVI^e–XVIII^e siècle)* (Seyssel, 2002), esp. pp. 288–96, 349–62; F. El Hage, *Histoire des maréchaux de France à l'époque moderne* (Paris, 2012), ch. 12.

¹⁰⁵ On the second nobility, see above, at n. 7.

course of the troubled second half of this century and first half of the seventeenth, the ranks of dignitaries thoroughly changed, qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The number of marshals rose to six under the late Valois and reached double figures when Henri IV compensated both allies and former enemies as part of his efforts to pacify a kingdom torn apart by the Wars of Religion. The same decades saw the ducal dignity opening its ranks to non-princely members, who gained similar figures around the turn of the century. These developments continued under the subsequent pressures of external and internal warfare, especially the Thirty Years War and the Fronde. The number of marshals remained at a higher level, ruling out the prospect of a return to a capped low quota. The ranks of dukes-*gentilhommes* swelled even more dramatically, more than doubling under Louis XIII and Richelieu compared to numbers in 1589, and tripling by the end of Mazarin's ministry.¹⁰⁶

The enlarged numbers and broader social composition of dignitaries gave rise to perceptions of inflation or debasement, epitomised by the expression 'monnaie de Turenne', coined on the occasion of the mass promotion of marshals in 1675. Arguably, this process increased the likelihood of status contestations. On the one hand, the perceived devaluation of status undermined the inclination for deference towards the dignitaries. On the other hand, it heightened their sensitivity and reduced their readiness to tolerate any exceptions—as Choiseul argued in 1694—even when based on clear precedents. If the dukes rarely featured directly in the disputes discussed here, their indirect role was no less essential. Unlike the untitled, dukes were fully exempt from awarding the *Monseigneur* to marshals and to ministers. The growth of their numbers thus served to aggravate the sense of marginalisation of those who were left out.

¹⁰⁶ El Hage, *Histoire des maréchaux*, ch. 4; Labatut, *Les Ducs et pairs*, pp. 57–82.

What is more, the dignitaries increasingly developed collective identities, embodied in common assemblies and in bureaucratic structures.¹⁰⁷ Such common fronts further reduced the scope for exceptions, putting pressure on addressers and addressees alike. We have seen the concerted action of marshals in the case of Lorraine. In writing to Pontchartrain that year, Châteaurenault had to tread carefully to avoid reproach from his vigilant colleagues. ‘*Messieurs* the marshals of France’ had already expressed concern in 1693, when two newly elevated members had deviated from the norm and awarded the *Monseigneur* and ‘Your Highness’ to the Vendôme brothers.¹⁰⁸ In 1718, the marshals assembled to co-ordinate policy in face of the Bauffremont threat. The dukes too acted collectively on many occasions, most famously during the early years of the regency when they sometimes convened several times per week.¹⁰⁹

The landscape of the sword aristocracy was thus fundamentally transformed. Dignity bred dignity, as the marshalate became a stepping stone to the peerage (and *vice versa*) and as the so-called ‘titled’ nobility engrossed the major court offices.¹¹⁰ Indeed, this odd semantic shift, whereby ‘titled’ became so bound up with these dignities as to exclude counts and other noble titles, is telling of the underlying transformation.¹¹¹ Consequently, those *grands seigneurs* who failed to secure dignities for themselves had to face new groups which claimed superior status and monopolised opportunities for advancement. In many cases, members of these groups had been their peers or even inferiors—whether in the army or in society at large—only a few years

¹⁰⁷ As we have seen, Louvois and Bussy even used the term ‘corps’ to describe the collectivity of marshals.

¹⁰⁸ Grandsons of a bastard of Henri IV: BN, fonds français 7888, fo. 56v.

¹⁰⁹ Labatut, *Les Ducs et pairs*. See also Beaufort, *Recueil concernant le tribunal de nosseigneurs les maréchaux de France*, i. 24–32.

¹¹⁰ See L. Horowski, “‘Such a Great Advantage for My Son’: Office-holding and Career Mechanisms at the Court of France, 1661–1789”, *Court Historian*, viii (2003), pp. 125–77. See also Labatut, *Les Ducs et pairs*, pp. 187–8, 323–4, 327–8, 399–400; J. Swann, ‘The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century’, in Scott, ed., *European Nobilities*, vol. i, esp. pp. 182–3.

¹¹¹ In its first edition (1694), the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* still defined *titré* as ‘Qui a un titre d’honneur, comme de Duc, de Marquis, de Comte’; by 1718, this had changed to ‘comme de Duc, de Mareschal de France, de Pair’.

or generations earlier. Like Bussy, Rochefort was reluctant to award the *Monseigneur* to a marshal of his generation.¹¹² In 1694, Beuvron was loath to do the same with regard to a person who ranked after him as a Knight of the Holy Spirit. Ancient lineages of *gentilhommes* resented recent princes by patent such as the La Tour d’Auvergne or the meteoric—by *Ancien Régime* standards—rise of the Villars family. By refusing to bow in writing, they all manifested resistance against the changing balance in the criteria for social priority, from pedigree to dignity.¹¹³

To an extent, the policies of Louis XIV from 1661 onwards did stabilise the French aristocracy. The king reprioritised pedigree as a criterion for dignity and put a check on the upward trend in the number of dignitaries. But, importantly, he did not reverse the trend. In this sense, the hierarchical aristocratic system that crystallised in the later seventeenth century was far from ‘traditional’.¹¹⁴ While balancing the horizontal tensions of faction more effectively, it exacerbated vertical strains, not just between aristocrats and *hobereaux*, but also within the high nobility itself. The resulting alienation of untitled *grands seigneurs* and their resentment of the titled nobility were structural and ongoing. Such conflicts involved collective identities as well as individual family rivalries, and were already becoming manifest during the personal reign, rather than erupting suddenly during the troubles of the regency or in the later eighteenth century.

¹¹² Also, Rochefort and Lorge may have thought that their own history of problems with the Crown (in their case, the Fronde) gave Créqui and Humières an advantage undeserved in other respects.

¹¹³ It should be emphasised that the change in question was one of balance among criteria rather than wholesale displacement of one criterion by another. Pedigree remained important to the end of the *Ancien Régime*, and perhaps even more so in the later eighteenth century, with the increasingly stringent requirements for presentation at court or for army service: Smith, *Culture of Merit*, pp. 217–19. On the evolution and plurality of early modern French ‘nobility’, see R. Descimon, ‘*Nobles de lignage et noblesse de service: Sociogenèses comparées de l’épée et de la robe (XV^e–XVIII^e siècle)*’, in id. and É. Haddad, eds., *Épreuves de noblesse: Les Expériences nobiliaires de la haute robe parisienne (XVI^e–XVIII^e siècle)* (Paris, 2010), pp. 277–302.

¹¹⁴ Arguments for the traditional nature and stabilising effect of Louis XIV’s policies *vis-à-vis* the aristocracy include Mettam, *Power and Faction*, esp. p. 203, and K. Béguin, ‘Louis XIV et l’aristocratie: Coup de majesté ou retour à la tradition?’, *Histoire, économie et société*, xix (2000), pp. 497–512.

Epistolary ceremonial thus maps the contours of latent social groupings and their common strategies. Unlike the dignitaries, *grands seigneurs* could not appear to be acting collectively with impunity. When members of the untitled nobility assembled and made claims against the dukes in 1716–17, their leaders—Bauffremont included—were thrown in the Bastille.¹¹⁵ But the ban on political mobilisation did not close the door to all forms of collective identity and action. The citing of precedents in disputes, and the Crown’s corresponding attempts to limit their publicity, highlight the potential for linked, if not co-ordinated, action. Inter-personal communication networks such as those of Sévigné and Bussy allowed members with shared aspirations and constraints to exchange information, advice and tactics. More generally, in early modern France as elsewhere, social groups were what they did, not just who they claimed to be. A closer look at the level of actual practices—ordinary and extraordinary, assertive or evasive—can thus offer a deeper understanding of social structures and dynamics.

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¹¹⁵ Ellis, *Boulayvilliers and the French Monarchy*, esp. pp. 181–5; Lassaigne, *Les Assemblées de la noblesse*, pt. 4.