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Villars, Marie Gigault de Bellefonds, Marquise de.

***Letters from Spain: A Seventeenth-Century French Noblewoman at the Spanish Royal Court.* Ed. and trans. Nathalie Hester.**

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series 80. Toronto: Iter Press, 2021. Pp. xi, 100. ISBN 978-1-64959-010-7 (paperback) US\$41.95.

In recent years there has been a surge in scholarly attention towards early modern women's lives and their epistolary practices. A selection of Marie Gigault de Bellefonds-Villars's letters to her friend Marie-Angélique du Gué de Bagnols, Madame de Coulanges, was published in 1749 and in nine subsequent editions. The newly edited and translated volume, *Letters from Spain: A Seventeenth-Century French Noblewoman at the Spanish Royal Court* by Nathalie Hester, is the first one to appear since 1923. Hester's insightful introduction shows the importance of epistolary practices during the early modern period, especially for women.

Bellefonds-Villars was born in a noble family. She met Pierre de Villars, a nobleman who was known for his excellent military skills, charms, and good looks. She benefited from a higher education and elite status and, by the time she joined her ambassador husband in Madrid in 1679, she already had an established status among the aristocrats of France. She was well acquainted with the acclaimed writers the Comtesse de la Fayette and the Marquise de Sévigné. Unlike other women in her circles, Bellefonds-Villars travelled internationally and, as an *ambassadrice*, had an important role in supporting French interests abroad. Bellefonds-Villars utilized her literary skills to keep in touch with her friends in France as well as to unofficially report about the goings-on at the Spanish court.

Bellefonds-Villars wrote many letters throughout her stay in Spain. In this edition, Hester has compiled thirty-seven of those letters written to Coulanges from 1679 to 1681 and three additional letters to the Marquise de Sévigné and to the Marquis de Pomponne, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The themes in these letters are multilayered and include discussions on friendship, gossip, culture, diplomacy, politics, and economics.

Hester provides an insightful and a detailed seven-part introduction to the letters. In the first section of the introduction, "The Other Voice," Hester introduces Bellefonds-Villars as an accomplished woman in the French aristocratic circles. She then introduces the diplomatic life of Bellefonds-Villars

and shows that being born in a noble household and married to a prominent Frenchman had opened many doors of opportunity for her that other women in this period did not have. In the third section, "Women and the Epistolary Arts," Hester writes that seventeenth-century discussion of epistolary writings had established letter writing as a suitable form of expression for women because there was a spontaneity, naturalness, and simplicity in the practice that did not require a deep intellectual effort or scholarly preparation. However, Hester argues that creating an impression of spontaneity and naturalness was a form of art in itself and required thoughtful deliberation. While social letters such as the ones Bellefonds-Villars wrote to Coulanges were addressed to an individual, in this period, everyone knew that the letters were read in private or occasionally aloud to public gatherings. If read in public, the contents of the letters were discussed by the attendees, thus making it important to be cautious in sharing important and private information. The fourth section, "The Marquise de Villars, Letter Writer and Travel Writer," shows that Coulanges was chosen by Bellefonds-Villars because she made a perfect correspondent. Coulanges was a close friend to Louis XIV's mistress, who later became his second wife. This meant that the contents of the letters reached the king's ears. Bellefonds-Villars's letters followed the rules of epistolary writing as well as having the required elements of travel writing. Her letters conveyed close attention to court rituals and etiquette, women's dress and hairstyles, social and religious rituals, and any other tidbits of information regarding the Spanish court. To the French, a country like Spain with Moorish traditions while adhering to Catholic orthodoxy seemed exotic and mysterious.

One of the notable features of the letters, which Hester has made clear throughout the introduction, is the unique way Bellefonds-Villars wrote her letters while remaining discreet, professional, and diplomatic. As a woman, Bellefonds-Villars had access to exclusively female spaces in the Spanish court, which made her a valuable asset to France. Charles II was considered weak, and Louis XIV hoped that Bellefonds-Villars's access to the queen's private domain would influence the queen into taking control over government matters and support French interests. Although she was given a specific assignment by Louis XIV to report on the domestic matters between the king and the queen, she constantly downplayed her role. She explicitly denied any diplomatic role to avoid sabotaging her husband's position at the Spanish court where they were highly suspicious of the French. Furthermore, she skillfully wrote about events

that she witnessed but avoided any controversial topics. For example, while writing about the Inquisition sessions she attended, she avoided describing any details of the gruesome tortures by saying “that is what I cannot write to you” (11). In her letters, she uses language that compels the reader to read between the lines.

This volume is an excellent addition to *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series. The volume is also an excellent addition to scholarship on the history of early modern women and their epistolary practices. Hester’s edition provides a unique look into the lives of women in politics and society and what it meant for a noble woman in the early modern period to be in such a prominent position and to know how to navigate through a male-dominated world. These letters provide valuable insights for both professional historians as well as for general readers who are interested in early modern women’s history.

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