

Elizabeth Charlotte d'Orleans, Duchesse. *A Woman's Life at the Court of the Sun King: Letters of Liselotte von der Pfalz, Elizabeth Charlotte, Duchesse d'Orleans, 1652-1722.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. lx + 287 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-5635-8.



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Elborg Forster here offers an English version of Margarethe Westphal's selection from the von der Pfalz letters, originally published in German in 1958. Forster chose to translate the Westphal edition because it highlights the second *Madame's* reflections on "life and letters, human destiny, religion, the role of princes in society, health of body and mind, and the education of children" (p. ix). Von der Pfalz emerges from these documents as a strong and articulate woman who used her writing to transcend a thoroughly unhappy set of circumstances.

As the only legitimate daughter of the elector of the German Palatinate, Elizabeth Charlotte came out of a family both highly-connected and troubled. Her father, a grandson of James I of England, won his subjects' respect by the hard work through which he rebuilt his country after the end of the Thirty Years' War. However, his fierce temper and unyielding sternness made him a terror to his immediate family. Her mother refused to tolerate Karl Augustin's rages, and also refused to grant a divorce when he repudiated her. Karl Augustin did not let this stop him from marrying

again. Liselotte, as her family called her, was raised by her aunt, mother of the future George I of England, and then by her father's morganatic second wife. The fact of her father's bigamy seems to have been papered over in her mind, but von der Pfalz can have entered upon her own marriage with few illusions about its nature and probable outcomes.

At nineteen she became the second wife of the widowed *duc d'Orleans*, only brother of Louis XIV. Her father and other relatives had worked hard to arrange the alliance, hoping that a family tie might protect their lands from the ambitions of the ascendant Sun King. As a patriot and dutiful daughter, Elizabeth Charlotte agreed to the marriage, converted to Catholicism, and left her country, never to return, though she had doubts about the possibilities of the venture's success.

Her fears proved justified. Her new life in France failed in all its objects. Her relationship with her openly homosexual husband, though friendly at first, fell apart under the machinations of his male lovers. After the deaths of her father and brother, the king whom she had hitherto

liked and respected used her dynastic claim to justify a war which devastated her homeland. When the straightforward *duchesse* showed her dismay too clearly, she became a pariah in the subtle and sophisticated court to which she had never well adapted. Even her two surviving children were encouraged to fear and dislike her until well into their adult lives.

And so she wrote. Letters to her beloved aunt, her half-brothers and sisters, and other German friends and relatives became her chief source of emotional sustenance. She produced as many as forty each week, becoming in the process a skilled rhetorician and a polished *raconteuse*. The reader will find less evidence of the latter ability than might be expected here. One or two very funny stories do turn up, as in her tale of the wedding night of William of Orange and Princess Mary of York (pp. 23-24), but in general Westphal selected letters that illuminate von der Pfalz's personal and intellectual history, rather than the great events to which she was an unwilling witness. They document how a great noblewoman of some education and considerable intelligence understood herself and her world.

For all the relative openness of her upbringing at the small Pfalz court, Elizabeth Charlotte had absorbed a strong belief in the traditional social hierarchy. She revered her brother-in-law, even when she thought him led astray by Françoise d'Aubigné, madame de Maintenon. Maintenon she despised as a greedy, jumped-up *bourgeoise*. Her other great personal hatred she reserved for her daughter-in-law, an illegitimate child of Louis and Madame de Montespan. She believed the product of a double adultery was not fit to associate with the honorably born, much less marry a legitimate prince of the royal blood. She raged against the king for proposing the match, her husband for supporting it, and her son for agreeing to it. Most of all she despised the woman she called "our mousedroppings" (p. 78). She had no time even for the children of the marriage; she

reserved her grandmotherly interest for her daughter's legitimate offspring by the duke of Lorraine.

In the years she lived a solitary life in the midst of the court as estranged wife and unimportant widow, von der Pfalz developed a wider range of intellectual interests than historians have usually credited to her. She loved the French theater, especially the work of Pierre Corneille, collected Roman medals, and corresponded with the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. With him and with relatives both Catholic and Protestant, she endlessly debated over matters of religion, seeking a "little religion of my own" (p. 71) that would rise above the sectarian nastiness with which she was so familiar. Raised a Calvinist, she remained Protestant in her inclinations even after her official conversion but came to believe that Martin Luther and John Calvin would have done more good by teaching quietly and avoiding sectarian violence. She was appalled by Louis XIV's measures against the Huguenots and did what little she could to alleviate them. Haunted by the fear of oblivion after death, she could not understand a God who inflicted her present life with one misery after another. In the end she had to settle for a simple faith in a hidden deity who preferred trust in him to doctrinal correctness. "In this trust I live and die," she wrote to her half-sister: "For the rest, it will have to be as God wishes ..." (p. 276).

Elizabeth Charlotte's life took a turn for the better with the death of Louis XIV and her son's ascension to the position of Regent for the young Louis XV. The letters of this last period of her life are full of lively stories, including an on-going narration of the career of Scottish financier John Law, whose attempt to found a French national bank backed by the American lands held by the French West India company collapsed in the Mississippi Bubble scandal of 1720. Though now sought after by the people who had formerly ignored and persecuted her, von der Pfalz firmly re-

fused to try to influence her son's policies and decisions. She had never been allowed to learn to govern, and now, she said, she was too old to learn. Besides, as she told Princess Caroline of Wales, wife of her cousin, George II, "this kingdom has long been ruled to its detriment by old and young women; the time has come to let the men-folk have their way" (p. 205).

Elizabeth Charlotte's attitudes towards politics and religion seem to foreshadow some of those of the Enlightenment that began during her son's regency. In other ways, too, she seems an enlightened thinker. She was fascinated by science and wrote of her pleasure at receiving a microscope as a gift (p. 240). She collected art, loved the theater, and betrayed a thoroughly commonsensical distaste for the endless ceremonies to which her position bound her. Her account of her role in "baptizing" a new bell for the church of Saint Eustache in Paris is particularly amusing (p. 120). She despised the doctors of her day, which may well, as Forster comments, have accounted for her long life (p. xix). She died at the age of seventy. The book closes with Forster's account of the formal funeral ceremonies, which von der Pfalz would doubtless have found boring and faintly ridiculous. Like the rest of her life in France, her obsequies were not arranged to suit the taste of their subject.

Elborg Forster's introduction and notes splendidly enhance the letters. The introduction concludes with brief but comprehensive biographies of all the major figures mentioned in the text. They are identified again, along with important places and events, in the notes to the individual letters. It is almost impossible to become confused while reading, in spite of the wealth of details the letters contain.

Yet in spite of Forster's efforts, the book remains in some ways unsatisfying. Part of the frustration comes from the absence of any French-language correspondence. Some people important to von der Pfalz, most notably her son and daugh-

ter, did not know German. The omission of her letters to them leaves out important parts of her life and experiences. Forster might also have included one or two of the letters which von der Pfalz received. She notes in the introduction (p. xxxiii) that the excessive formality of one such epistle from her half-sister shows just how illusory von der Pfalz's cherished friendships actually were. The contention seems not at all unlikely, but it would read better with some evidence to back it up.

These lacunae stem from Westphal's original decision to emphasize Elizabeth Charlotte's character and her German background. The letters she included certainly do redeem her subject from the charges of ignorance and innocence often laid against her by past historians. They illustrate vividly the constraints which surrounded even royal women in early modern Europe.

Liselotte von der Pfalz had almost no choice about any major event in her life. Her letters allowed her to achieve and express some sort of autonomy. This edition of them belongs on the shelf beside other recent studies of self-assertive individual women in early modern Europe, such as Natalie Davis' *Women on the Margins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), or Steven Ozment's *The Burgermeister's Daughter* (New York, 1996). In this case, however, the subject wrote most of the text herself.

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