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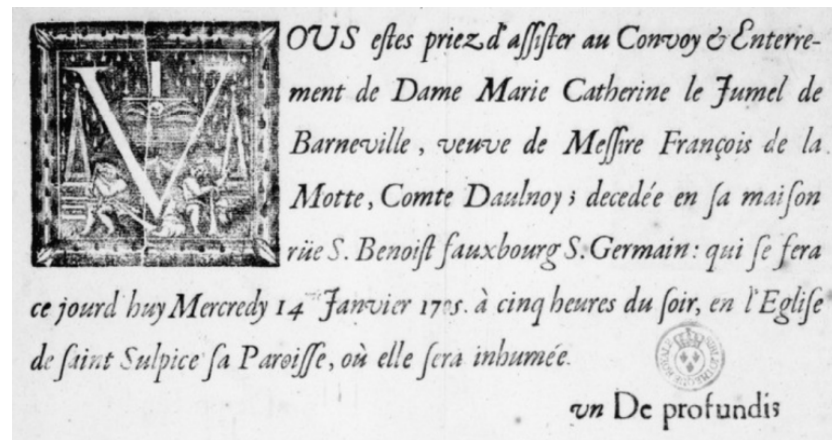
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Baroness or Countess d'Aulnoy?

VS

Among the many mysteries surrounding the life and works of Madame d'Aulnoy is the question of her title of nobility: was she a baroness or a countess? What is certain is that in March 1666, at the age of 13 and a half, Marie-Catherine Le Jumel married François de la Motte, who in May 1654 had agreed to pay Claude Gobelin the sum of 153,000 *livres* in exchange for the barony of Aulnoy, located just north of Provins in the Brie region (not to be confused with another Aulnoy nearby, north of Coulommiers). Yet when Marie-Catherine died in January 1705, the invitation to her funeral identified her as the widow of François de la Motte, “Comte Daulnoy”:



Bibliothèque nationale de France / Gallica

Later that month, her obituary in the periodical *Mercure galant* called the husband “Comte d'Aulnoy,” while the deceased was presented simply as “M^e d'Aulnoy” (Madame d'Aulnoy). In the course of the eighteenth century, “Comtesse d'Aulnoy” became the dominant designation used in anthologies, bibliographies, and biographical dictionaries. The numerous English translations rendered her name in manifold ways (D'Aunoy, D'Aunois, D'Anois, Danois, Dunois...) but invariably included the title of Countess, never that of Baroness.

What had happened? Had Aulnoy been raised from the status of *baronnie* (the lowest rung in the hierarchy of titled lands) to the rarer and more prestigious one of *comté*? It was not uncommon for Louis XIV to grant such *érections* in recognition of a subject's loyalty and services to the Crown. But the history of François de la Motte was not one of lasting social ascent and royal favor. As early as 1667, he sold his office of *secrétaire du Roi* for the sum of 42,000 *livres* to Louis Bouillant. This sale was certainly not sufficient to provide financial stability, and he seems to have been burdened with debts for the rest of his life. In an endnote to her well-researched book on Mme d'Aulnoy's marital calamities, Jeanne Roche-Mazon cited an archival document suggesting that by January 1671 Aulnoy had already been resold.¹ The details of this transaction remain to be uncovered, but there is evidence that in 1676 Aulnoy belonged to Jean Guillemin, *secrétaire du Roi* and *sieur de Courchamp*, who obtained the king's permission to rename his new acquisition after himself: Aulnoy became Courchamp, and Guillemin could now call himself *baron de Courchamp*.² Absent definitive information, I would guess that François de la Motte (who by then was employed by the powerful Condé family) received authorization to keep carrying the title of “baron d'Aulnoy” – a mere honorific that no longer referred to an actual estate and thus had no legal implications.

Information

This entry was posted on October 25, 2021 by VS in [Archives](#), [Biography](#), [Printed Books](#) and tagged [Marriages](#), [Nobility](#), [Titles](#).

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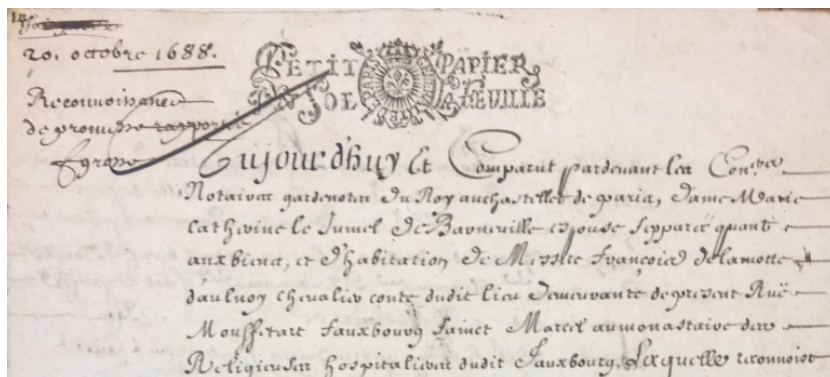
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With the barony of Aulnoy having vanished into thin air, the name became an empty signifier, a *flatus vocis* open to creative manipulation. Since Mme d'Aulnoy was irrevocably tied to her violent and profligate husband (divorce was not an option in the Ancien Régime), why not try to make the most out of this wretched association, for example by converting the ex-baron into a pseudo-count? The earliest appearance of the “comte d'Aulnoy” that I have come across occurs in a notarized declaration signed by Marie-Catherine in Bordeaux in December 1678. Brought to light in 1936, this precious document is the closest we have so far to a proof that she actually did make a trip to Spain.³ Signing as “Marie-Catherine le Jumel de Barneville,” she declares that, being required to travel to Spain, she contracted with a man named Jean Peigne to transport her and her entourage from Paris to San Sebastián. (The journey was a disaster right from the start, but that’s another story.) The notary identifies her as wife of “François Delamotte Seigneur Comte Daulnoy”:



Archives départementales de la Gironde

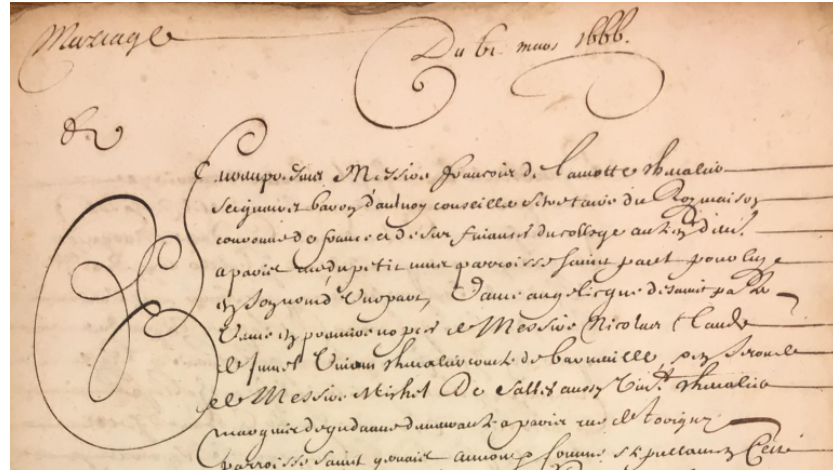
Ten years later, Mme d'Aulnoy is back in Paris, living in the convent of the Hospitalières, rue Mouffetard. In February 1688, she acknowledges in writing that she owes a women’s clothes merchant (*marchande lingère*) 1050 livres for goods and loans received from her, and promises to pay the sum within six months. In October of the same year, this promise is formally registered by a notary who comes to the convent and records her identity as wife of “Messire François Delamotte D’Aulnoy chevalier conte dudit lieu”:



Archives nationales

To be precise, Marie-Catherine’s legal status in relationship to her husband is here characterized as “separée quant aux biens, et d’habitation,” that is, a separation not only of property but also of residence. The former had been established by a court order issued in July 1668, probably to protect her property from his creditors – an arrangement which was quite common at the time, including in harmonious marriages. The latter (also called *séparation de corps*) is much more exceptional and does not appear to have been officially pronounced between Mme d’Aulnoy and her husband. Her detention in the convent, however, amounted *de facto* to such a separation, which may explain why it is mentioned here.

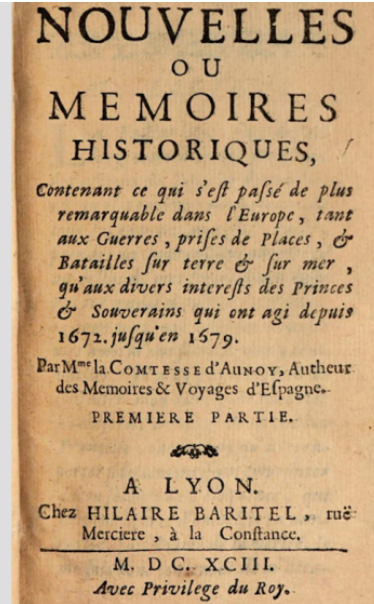
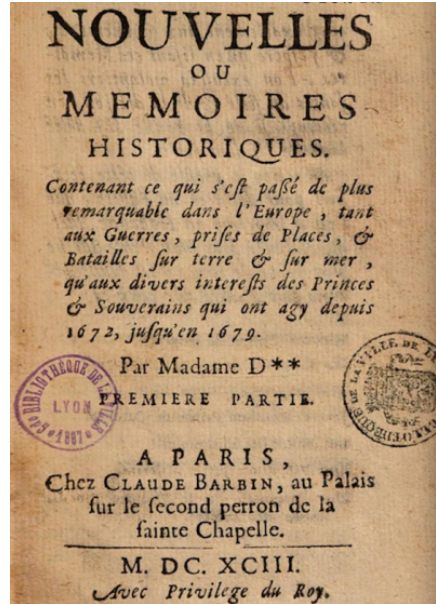
There are thus at least two notarized documents in which François de La Motte is called “comte,” both initiated and signed by Mme d’Aulnoy and predating her literary career. By contrast, as far as I can see today, this title does not appear in any document that was signed by him or that directly concerns his legal affairs, such as the inventory established after his death in August 1700, where he is presented as “Messire François Delamothe Escuyer Seigneur et baron daunoy.” Based on the (admittedly fragmentary) evidence, it would seem that the Count d’Aulnoy was not a real individual but a fictive character invented by Marie-Catherine for her personal purposes. She may have been inspired by the example of her mother, who similarly embellished the rank of her two husbands. In the 1666 marriage contract, dame Angélique de Saint-Pater is presented as widow of the “comte de Barneville” and of the “marquis de Gudanne”:



Archives nationales

The first husband (Marie-Catherine’s father) was “seigneur de Barneville” but not even a baron, let alone a count: Barneville was always an untitled fief. Less than a year after his death, his widow married Michel de Salles, the only son of Hierosme de Salles, baron of Gudanes. Michel was a few months shy of his 30th birthday, which meant that he would have needed his father’s consent. When the baron found out about the unauthorized marriage, he attempted to have it invalidated and (in February 1663) formally disowned his son, who died later that year; rumor had it that his death occurred while he was locked up by his father in a tower of his château in the Pyrenees.⁴ These tragic events triggered a wave of lawsuits around debts and inheritances, which were still not fully resolved in the 1730s. But through this short-lived, contested marriage to the son of a baron, Marie-Catherine’s mother managed to construct for herself a new identity that she would flaunt and exploit for the remainder of her life, that of “marquise de Gudanes.”

The first explicit references to a Countess d’Aulnoy appear in the 1690s, shortly after the start of her literary career. In a recent [online lecture](#), Edwige Keller-Rahbé has drawn attention to several book reviews that she discovered in the *Journal des Sçavans*, a semi-official periodical of science and erudition. The issues of June 11 and 18, 1691, include a digest of d’Aulnoy’s hugely successful *Relation du Voyage d’Espagne*; in these pages, the author is systematically and emphatically presented as “Madame la Comtesse d’Aunoi.” The same wording is used in two shorter articles published in the same journal in 1692 and 1695. This important precedent may well have led the Lyon publishers Thomas Amaulry and Hilaire Baritel to put “Par M^{me} la Comtesse d’Aunoy” on the title page of their edition of her 1693 *Nouvelles ou mémoires historiques*, which the Paris edition presented simply as the work of “Madame D**”:



Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon / Google Books

Foreign publishers promptly adopted this titular usage, beginning with the German translation of d'Aulnoy's *Relation* and *Mémoires* about Spain. Printed in Leipzig in 1695-96, it attributes the works to the "Gräfin D'AUNOY" and even presents an engraved (and surely imaginary) portrait of the said countess:



Private collection

During d'Aulnoy's lifetime, Parisian editions of her works never displayed the word "comtesse" on the title page. But as Keller-Rahbé has demonstrated, it is in the *privileges du Roi* (the printing permissions granted by Louis XIV, which are first recorded in a manuscript register and then included in the published volume) that one can trace a clear shift from "la Dame de B.... D.." or "la Dame de Barneville" (in 1690-91) to "Madame D**," "la Comtesse d'aunoy," and "Madame la Comtesse D***" (in 1697-98). This progression culminates with her last book, *Le Comte de Warwick* (1703): at the end of volume 2 is quoted in full the three-page *privilege* granted to "la Dame Comtesse Daunoy."

And yet, the title page of this novel refrains from pairing the Comte with the Comtesse, presenting the author instead as “Madame DAULNOY.” This act of naming was deliberate, as the writer explains in the opening dedication to her cousin: for the first time in her career, she decided not to “suppress” her name, hoping that this transparency will help combat all those spurious attributions of “books that don’t belong to me.” By signing her final work as “Madame DAULNOY,” the author may have signaled to her readers that titles, whether true or fake, are in the end vain and irrelevant. Baroness or countess – what’s the difference anyway?

Volker Schröder

October 25, 2021

Footnotes

1. Jeanne Roche-Mazon, *En marge de l’“Oiseau bleu,”* Paris: L’Artisan du Livre, 1930, p. 139.
2. See Louis Michelin, *Essais historiques et statistiques sur le département de Seine et Marne*, Melun/Paris: Michelin/Dumoulin, 1841, p. 1652-1654, and Henri Stein & Jean Hubert, *Dictionnaire topographique du département de Seine-et-Marne*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1954, p. 150.
3. This three-page document was discovered and summarized by G. Ducaunnès-Duval (“*Comment on voyageait au XVII^e siècle,*” *Revue philomathique de Bordeaux et du Sud-Ouest*, janvier-mars 1936, p. 34-39). The same year, Paul Courteault pointed out its relevance for the debate around Mme d’Aulnoy’s Spanish travels (“*Le voyage de Mme d’Aulnoy en Espagne,*” *Bulletin hispanique*, 1936, p. 383-384).
4. The Gudanes drama was revealed by Émile Laloy on the basis of two *factums*, i.e. legal briefs printed on behalf of the father (“*Les Aventures de Mme d’Aulnoy et de sa mère,*” *La Nouvelle Revue*, 1^{er} novembre 1929, p. 28-40). The circumstances of the son’s death are alluded to in the handwritten notes of the genealogist Charles-René d’Hozier, who erroneously ascribes this marriage to Mme d’Aulnoy instead of her mother (“remariée ensuite avec un jeune gentilhomme en Gascogne, que son père fit enfermer dans une tour de son château, où il est mort”). Another disconcerting element in this story is the marriage contract signed by Mme d’Aulnoy’s mother in December 1664 with a widower named Bonnaventure Chaiz, “bourgeois de Paris” – this third marriage was apparently not concluded after all, perhaps because of the dispute over the Gudanes inheritance (which was supposed to provide at least part of the bride’s dowry).

