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Predestined for conflict: The consort and her mother-in-law

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When considering power structures at court and how they might impact on the position of the consort, the mistress usually comes to mind. She was certainly an influential figure and someone with whom the consort had to contend.¹ However, a far more influential, because permanent, presence in her husband’s life was his mother, the consort’s mother-in-law. This was a relationship predestined for conflict because both the consort and her mother-in-law had, for their own survival at court, to maintain their status and influence at all costs. In this power struggle the mother-in-law holds three strong cards: 1) prior presence at court; 2) authority as mother and queen; 3) emotional hold over her son.

The mother-in-law’s advantages

1. Prior presence at court

On 31 December 1666, Anna Sophia, Princess of Denmark (1647-1717), made her bridal entry into Dresden.² She was the nineteen-year-old bride of Electoral Prince Johann Georg III of Saxony (1647-91), also aged nineteen, and the young couple had already married in Copenhagen on 9 October 1666. Anna Sophia was fortunate in that she already knew her mother-in-law Magdalena Sibylle of Brandenburg-Bayreuth, Electress of Saxony (1612-87), because Magdalena Sibylle had travelled to Denmark with her son to meet Anna Sophia in 1662 and returned with him to Denmark in 1663, on which occasion the couple became formally engaged.³ The Dresden court put on a large number of impressive spectacles to welcome the bride, culminating in a grand *ballet à entrées* on 5 March 1667 performed in the splendid new opera house.⁴ Its

1 See H. Watanabe-O’Kelly, ‘Consort and mistress: a successful job-share?’ in S. Rode-Breymann and Antje Tumat (eds), *Der Hof. Ort kulturellen Handelns von Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne, Vienna, Weimar 2013), pp. 90-99.

2 See J. Kappel and C. Brink (eds), *Mit Fortuna übers Meer. Sachsen und Dänemark – Ehen und Allianzen im Spiegel der Kunst (1548-1709)*, exhibition catalogue (Dresden 2009).

3 A. Weck, *Der Chur-Fürstlichen Sächsischen weiterberuffenen Residentz- und Haupt-Vestung Dresden Beschreib: und Vorstellung [...]* (Nürnberg 1680), pp. 377f.; The first part of the account is reprinted in J. Ch. Lünig, *Theatrum Ceremoniale Historico-Politicum, Oder Historisch- und Politischer Schau-Platz Aller Ceremonien [...], Anderer Theil* (Leipzig 1720), pp. 400f.

4 F. de la Marche, *Ballet Der Glückseligkeit: mit welchem Die Durchleuchtigste Fürstin und Frau/ Frau Magdalena Sibylla/ Chur-Fürstin zu Sachsen und Burggräfin zu Magdeburg/ [et] c. Die Durchleuchtigste Princeßin und Frau/ Frau Anna Sophien/ gebohrne Königliche Erb-Princeßin zu Dänemarck/ [et]c. und Vermählete Chur-Princeßin zu Sachsen/ [et]c. Nach dem Sie von Dero geliebten Herren Sohne Dem Durchleuchtigsten Hochgebohrnen Fürsten*

title was *Ballet Der Glückseligkeit* [the Ballet of Happiness] and its purpose, as the title page explains, was for Magdalena Sibylla to welcome and receive Anna Sophia. Many of the parts in this ballet were danced by professionals, French dancing masters from Dresden and other neighbouring courts, but early in the performance Ceres, the goddess of fruitfulness and of the harvest, appears, danced by Magdalena Sibylla, the Electress. The aria that accompanies her appearance includes the following lines:

*Ich nehre Land und Strand.
Wer hat nicht Lust an meinen Gaben? [...]
Man ehrt mich weit und breit
Weil ich ümbher die Völcker speise [...]
Man heisset Mutter mich:
Ich bin es auch: Ich nur alleine.
Ich tauer ewiglich.
Mein Essen stärckt die Welt gemeine.⁵*

Italy may give her people citrus fruit, pomegranates, and melons, but the bread Ceres provides is more important for health. Magdalena Sibylla is reminding the new Electoral Princess that she is the 'Landesmutter' [the Mother of her People], she is the source of her subjects' prosperity and nourishment, she is the one whom they revere and honour. This is doubly important for Magdalena Sibylla because Anna Sophia's birth was far higher than her own. Though Anna Sophia gave up her royal status to marry the Electoral Prince of Saxony, she was born a royal and hereditary princess of Denmark, whereas her mother-in-law was born a mere duchess of Brandenburg-Bayreuth.

On the consort's arrival, therefore, her mother-in-law already occupies the premier position at court. This prior presence trumps actual status. When Henriette Adelaide of Savoy arrived in Munich in 1652, she arrived as the ruling Electress of Bavaria. Her mother-in-law Maria Anna, Archduchess of Austria (1610-65), had been widowed the previous year and so the mother-in-law was already the Dowager Electress. However, Henriette Adelaide's husband Ferdinand Maria was still a minor and Maria Anna was regent. Perhaps this was her excuse not to vacate the electress's apartments in the palace in Munich on her daughter-in-law's arrival, but, though Ferdinand Maria came of age in 1654 and the regency was at an end, Maria Anna still did not vacate the electress's apartments. In fact she only left them on her death

und Herrn Herrn Johann Georgen dem Dritten/ Chur-Printzen zu Sachsen/ etc. Aus dem Königreich Dännemarck heimgeführt/ und dem 31. Decembr. 1666. in die Churf. Residentz-Stadt Dreßden glücklichst eingebracht worden/Dem 5. Martii 1667. Hoch-Fürstlich bewillkommen/ und empfangen wolte (Dresden 1667), C1.

5 I nourish the whole territory / Who does not delight in my gifts? [...] / I am honoured far and wide / Because I feed all the peoples round about [...] / They call me mother. / And so I am – only I alone. / I am everlasting. / My nourishment strengthens the world.

eleven years later in 1665.⁶ As a former regent, she also remained a member of the Privy Council until her death, so she also had real political influence. (Henriette Adelaide did not have an easy time at the Bavarian court in general. She was used to wearing low-cut dresses in the French fashion, but was instructed to cover herself up. She liked French food and wanted a French cook, but her mother-in-law insisted on a German cook.⁷ Henriette Adelaide and her entourage were used to eating citrus fruit which had to be imported at great expense, while the Germans thought that their apples should be good enough for her.)

2. Authority as queen and mother

It is hard for us today to conceive the power that early modern parents had over their children and this includes the spouses of their offspring. Neither the son nor his wife could act independently against his mother's wishes either in political matters or in matters relating to the family. Were they to attempt to do so, they could endanger the dynasty. We get a first-hand insight into this from the confidential diary of Friedrich Christian, Electoral Prince of Saxony (1722-63). This is an extraordinarily detailed document covering six years from the middle of 1751 to the middle of 1757.⁸ Friedrich Christian was physically disabled but highly intelligent and thoughtful. He fathered seven sons and two daughters with his equally intelligent wife Maria Antonia of Bavaria. These were the enlightened rulers Saxony never had, because Friedrich Christian, at the age of 41, died suddenly of small pox in 1763 after ruling for only six weeks. He could not only expect to become Elector of Saxony on his father's death but might also hope to be elected King of Poland, following in the footsteps of his father August III, King of Poland, and his grandfather August II. Friedrich Christian's mother had other ideas, however. She was the Habsburg princess Maria Josepha, Electress of Saxony and Queen of Poland since 1733, and was not only Maria Antonia's mother-in-law, she was also her aunt. She had always hoped to make her second son Franz Xaver, Friedrich Christian's brother, King of Poland and restrict Friedrich Christian at the most to ruling over Saxony. She therefore systematically thwarted any attempt by Friedrich Christian and his wife to travel to Poland to enable the Polish aristocracy and the Polish people to become acquainted with them and she similarly prevented them from meeting Empress Maria Theresia, to whom each of them separately was related. Friedrich Christian, who had an excellent relationship with his wife, vents his frustration again and again in his diary and a whole psychodrama is revealed in his detailed accounts. He describes Maria Josepha shouting at his wife on 19 October 1751:

la mamman parla très fortment à AB sur le voyage de Pologne lui disant que nous l'avions fait passer pour menteur, wir hatten sie zur Lügern [=Lügenerin] gemacht [...] AB expli-

⁶ B. Kägler, *Frauen am Münchner Hof (1651-1756)* (Munich 2011), p. 388, fn. 1776.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁸ H. Schlechte (ed.), *Das geheime politische Tagebuch des Kurprinzen Friedrich Christian 1751-1757* (Vienna, Weimar, Cologne 1992) [=henceforward Friedrich Christian, *Tagebuch*].

*que le tout à mamman, mais elle ne put point achever la conversation, le temps ayant été trop court [...] Mamman fut fort fâchée et lui dit elle-même entr'autres qu'elle trouvait que nous avions depuis quelque temps beaucoup changé de sentiments envers elle.*⁹

AB is the code name that Friedrich Christian uses for his wife in the diary. It stands for Antoinette de Bavière. He writes on 17 January 1752 that his mother tries to prevent his wife enjoying any kind of amusement, that she says bad things about his wife to her own mother (Maria Josepha's sister), that she tries to create dissension between him and his wife, and that she treats her coldly and ceremoniously:

*J'ai remarqué que mamman cherche à empêcher à AB toute sorte d'amusement et cherche à lui jouer des tours partout où elle peut jusqu'auprès sa mère. Elle voudrait, à ce que je suis plus que persuadé, nous brouiller ensemble ou du moins mettre quelques bornes à la bonne harmonie qui règne entre nous. Tout ce qu'elle dit ou fait m'en assure. Elle est en cérémonie avec AB, comme si elle la voyait la première fois.*¹⁰

He believes that Maria Josepha is trying to drive a wedge between him, his wife, and his father the king, writing on 13 July 1752: *Elle nous fait tous les torts qu'elle peut, nous éloignant partout où elle peut de notre père, et nous fait sentir tant qu'elle peut le peu d'amour qu'elle a pour nous.*¹¹

But here is the authority structure within the family: *Le respect et la soumission que je lui dois m'empêchent et me retiendront toujours de lui en marquer mon juste ressentiment.*¹² His wife had already surmised a year earlier that Maria Josepha was envious of the good relationship between Friedrich Christian and Maria Antonia: *que peut-être elle lui enviait le pied d'intime confiance, sur lequel nous étions ensemble, parcequ'elle n'avoit été jamais sur ce pied avec son mari.*¹³ Friedrich Christian's accounts reveal frustration and anger but also the impossibility of going against his mother and his queen.

9 Mama spoke very loudly to AB about the trip to Poland, telling her that we had made her into a liar [...] AB explained everything to Mama, but she couldn't finish the conversation as the time was too short [...] Mama became very angry and told her, among other things, that she thought our feelings for her had changed very much in recent times. Friedrich Christian, Tagebuch, pp. 131f.

10 I have noticed that Mama tries to prevent AB from enjoying any sort of amusement and tries to put her in the wrong as often as she can with her own mother. I am convinced that she would like us to quarrel and at least to limit the good harmony which reigns between us. Everything she says or does makes me certain of it. She treats AB with ceremony, as if she were seeing her for the first time. Friedrich Christian, Tagebuch, p. 151.

11 She does us as many wrongs as she can, distancing us as completely as she can from our father, and makes us feel as much as she can how little love she has for us. Friedrich Christian, Tagebuch, p. 184.

12 The respect and the obedience that I owe her prevent me and always hold me back from showing her my just resentment. Friedrich Christian, Tagebuch, p. 184.

13 That perhaps she [=Maria Josepha] envied her [=Maria Antonia] the footing of intimate confidence which we are on with each other, because she was never on the same footing with her own husband. Friedrich Christian, Tagebuch, p. 106.

3. Emotional hold over her son

The third weapon a mother-in-law has against her daughter-in-law is that the mother-son relationship long predates the son's marriage. A good example of this is the relationship between Karl XI, King of Sweden (1655-97), and his mother Hedwig Eleonore of Holstein-Gottorp (1636-1715). Karl XI's father died in 1660 when he was five and Hedwig Eleonore chaired the regency council for twelve years. In several very similar broadsheets with German texts that were published in 1660 Hedwig Eleonore is depicted sitting on the throne, holding the sceptre and the sword, while her young son holds her hand and places his other hand on the Swedish lion. Below them is the grave of the late king Karl X Gustav, legitimating Hedwig Eleonore as regent.¹⁴ Karl XI came of age in 1672 and married Ulrika Eleonora of Denmark (1656-93) in 1680. Though he was a faithful husband, his mother remained the dominant woman in his life. In his *Account of Sueden* published in 1694, Dr John Robinson (1650-1723), who had been the chaplain to the British Embassy in Stockholm and knew the Swedish court well, commented:

*His [i.e. Karl XI's] Respect to his Mother seems to equal, if not exceed, his Kindness to his Consort, who hath the Satisfaction of his Constancy, but little share in his Secrets, and not very much of his Conversation, which he frequently bestows on the Queen-Mother, and usually eats in her Apartment.*¹⁵

It was reported that Karl XI always referred to his mother as 'The Queen' or 'Her Majesty the Queen My Dear Lady Mother', while he referred to Ulrike Eleonora simply as 'my wife'. A daughter-in-law treated in this way can usually rely on the fact that time is on her side. Her mother-in-law will in the nature of things predecease her and she will then become the principal lady at court. This did not happen in the case of Ulrika Eleonora. She died in 1693, Karl XI died in 1697, and Hedwig Eleonora lived until 1715, becoming regent again in 1697 during the minority of her grandson.

Behaviour of the daughter-in-law

How should the daughter-in-law behave? As consort she had constantly to balance loyalty to her natal dynasty with loyalty to her marital dynasty. She also had another balancing act to perform: she had to maintain good relations both with her husband and with her mother-in-law, not always a straightforward task. Her husband was, of course, the more important of the two. He was the reason she had come to the foreign court, he was or would be the father of her children, he was or would be the ruler, she could expect him to outlive his mother. If he was devoted to his mother, as Karl XI of Sweden was, she had to put up with her gracefully or at least grit her teeth and suffer in silence. If he did not get on with his mother, her task was more complicated because, what-

14 For instance, *Über das Höchst-seelige Ableiben Des Durchleuchtigsten [...] Herrn Caroli-Gustavi, Der Schweden/ Gothen und Wenden Königes [...] Wie auch [...] zu Gülich/ Kleve und Berg Hertzogen/ etc.* (n.p. 1660).

15 J. Robinson, *An Account of Sueden: Together with an EXTRACT of the History of that Kingdom* (London 1694), p. 81.

ever her husband's feelings towards his mother, the consort could not afford to quarrel with her. The primary attitude demanded here of the consort was humility, never seeking to threaten her mother-in-law's position and always giving her precedence.

If a consort abases herself really successfully, her mother-in-law may wrongly conclude that she does not need to put her down because she has no ideas or personality of her own. A most successful performance in this regard was put on by Augusta of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Princess of Wales (1719-72), the wife of Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707-51), heir to the British throne. Her mother-in-law was the highly intelligent and strong-minded Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach (1683-1737), the wife of George II, who was both King of Great Britain and Ireland and Elector of Hanover. Queen Caroline, as she is always known in Britain, and her husband George II, for reasons that need not be explored here, were hopelessly estranged from Frederick, their son and heir, and Frederick was very angry with them in return. Augusta, only seventeen, arrived therefore into a battlefield and had to negotiate it without any preparation. She was young, innocent, and knew no English when she arrived and many people thought at the time, just as many historians thought subsequently, that she was neither very clever nor very ambitious. However, the historian John Bullion, basing his analysis on the assessment of the Earl of Shelburne after Augusta's death and of Sir Horace Walpole while she was alive and analysing Augusta's behaviour at various key moments, has shown that Augusta was cleverly playing a part.¹⁶ When she first met her parents-in-law, she threw herself at their feet and convinced them that she had no political ideas of her own and that she was meek and obedient; at the same time she flattered her husband and made clear to him that she would obey him in everything and that she was totally and completely on his side. Supported by Augusta, her husband set about convincing the people of their British sympathies, an important task seeing that he, like his parents and his wife, was German. The couple attended Shakespeare plays rather than the Italian opera, they appeared publicly in the London theatres, they mixed with ordinary people at various amusements, they cultivated British manufactures and only wore clothes made of British cloth. Augusta, unlike Caroline, presented herself as the perfect mother. Her husband was gathering a party round him in Parliament in opposition to his father, and she was well aware of his political views and was acquainted with all the politicians he was working with. But, when her husband died in 1751 before he could become king, Augusta, with great political acumen, realised that she had to distance herself from the party of opposition or she would have her children removed from her care, so she did three things: before she even told anybody her husband had died, she had all her husband's incriminating papers fetched and burned (and it was clear that she knew which papers to burn), she immediately threw herself on the King, her father-in-law's, mercy, and she never again received or had anything to do with opposition

16 Ch. Gerrard, 'Queens-in-waiting: Caroline of Anspach and August of Saxe-Gotha as Princesses of Wales', in C. Campbell Orr (ed.), *Queenship in Britain 1660-1837* (Manchester 2002), pp. 143-61; J. L. Bullion, "'To play what game she pleased without observation": Princess Augusta and the political drama of succession, 1736-56', in *ibid.*, pp. 207-35.

politicians. This worked extremely well: she retained control of her children, she was named regent in the event of the King's death, and she did indeed function as such during the minority of her son George III, remaining his political adviser for the rest of her life. Concealing her shrewdness and capacity for action under a façade of meekness and humility really paid off.

Fatal for the success of the new consort at court was any hint that she was intending to throw her weight around. Jill Bepler's research in the Hessian State Archive in Marburg has brought to light an example of just the kind of behaviour that will inevitably ruin a consort's relationship with her mother-in-law. Louise Dorothea of Prussia (1680-1705) married Friedrich, Hereditary Prince of Hessen-Kassel (1676-1751), in 1700. Louise's father, Friedrich, Elector of Brandenburg, had himself crowned King in Prussia in 1701 and then instructed his daughter not to give precedence to her mother-in-law at the Kassel court now that she, Louise, was a royal princess. Louise was deeply unhappy about this, but could not disobey her father, which angered the ruling Landgravine of Hessen-Kassel, Louise's mother-in-law, who was not prepared to suffer what she saw as an insult at her own court. In a letter to her brother, Landgrave Karl, from 22 March 1701, Charlotte Amalie, Queen of Denmark, protests at this transgression against established protocol.¹⁷

Changing places, changing roles

The balance of power in the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law could, however, change over the course of the consort's life. The relationship between Elisabetta Farnese, Queen of Spain, and Maria Amalia of Saxony, Queen of the Two Sicilies, Queen of Spain, is an excellent example of this.

Elisabetta Farnese, Duchess of Parma and Piacenza (1692-1766), was the second wife of Felipe V, the first Bourbon King of Spain (1683-1746), a marriage that lasted from 1714 until 1746. Elisabetta was constantly accused, both in her own day and down the centuries, in Spain and abroad, of dominating and manipulating her husband during their 31 years of marriage. Modern historians such as Henry Kamen¹⁸ and Pablo Vázquez Gestal¹⁹ have done much to rehabilitate her reputation. Elisabetta's day-to-day life was that of carer for a manic-depressive with severe and worsening psychiatric problems. Charles C. Noel recounts how Felipe had terrible attacks, sometimes lasting for months, in 1717, 1723, 1728, 1731, 1732-33, and 1737.²⁰ Kamen shows how greatly the King's condition worsened in the last decades of his life, so

17 Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg [=henceforward HStAM], 4 a, 57/2: Politische Akten nach Philipp dem Großmütigen: Fürstliche Personalien. Landgraf Karl. Briefe der Schwester Landgraf Karls Charlotte Amalie, Königin von Dänemark, an ihren Bruder 1672-1713, unfoliated. Information kindly supplied by Jill Bepler.

18 H. Kamen, *Philip V of Spain: The King who Reigned Twice* (New Haven 2001).

19 P. Vázquez Gestal, *Una nueva majestad. Felipe V, Isabel de Farnesio y la identidad de la monarquía (1700-1729)* (Seville, Madrid 2013).

20 Ch. C. Noel, "Bárbara succeeds Elizabeth . . .": the feminisation and domestication of politics in the Spanish monarchy, 1701-1759', in C. Campbell Orr (ed.), *Queenship in Europe, 1660-1815. The Role of the Consort* (Cambridge 2004), pp. 155-85, here p. 165.

that sometimes in his worst fits he even beat his wife. Elisabetta not only bore him six living children, but had to subordinate her inclinations to his. This meant accommodating his desire for quiet and darkness, so that they slept by day and worked by night, and supporting him so that he could do his work. Small wonder that she began to control, indeed usurp, his interaction with ministers and diplomats, concealing his condition from them as much as she could, so that, as time went on, the King was no longer accessible to his ministers and to the grandees. Elisabetta was chained to a very sick, indeed psychotic man, as she herself describes in the remarkably frank account that she wrote in cipher to her daughter Maria Teresa, the Dauphine, on 27 May 1745, a year before the King's death.²¹

Felipe V had two sons by his first wife, Marie Louise Gabrielle of Savoy (1688-1714), and each of these sons became King of Spain in turn – Luis (1707-24) for six months in 1724 when Felipe abdicated and hoped to live out his days in retirement – and on Felipe's death in 1746 Fernando VI (1713-59) who reigned for thirteen years. Elisabetta was Fernando's step-mother and she had a bad relationship both with him and with his wife Maria Bárbara of Braganza (1711-58), a homely-looking but very intelligent and cultivated woman. This relationship was so bad that Fernando banished Elisabetta from the court in 1747. Fernando died in 1759, having, on the death of his wife a year before, descended into the same deeply psychotic condition as his father before him. Elisabetta came out of retirement briefly to act as regent until her own eldest son, Carlo di Borbone, King of the Two Sicilies (1716-88), could arrive to ascend the throne of Spain. Maria Amalia of Saxony (1724-60) had married Carlo in 1738 and moved from Dresden to Naples. Carlo had been sent by Felipe V and Elisabetta Farnese to Italy to take possession of the Duchies of Parma and Piacenza and to recapture Naples and Sicily from the Austrians. For many years the Naples court was run from Spain, principally by Elisabetta. Up to his father's death in 1746, Carlo took his orders from his parents, writing them long letters every week,²² and taking instruction from them on how to manipulate his young wife. However, Carlo emancipated himself on the death of his father and Maria Amalia gradually did so too. Once she had given birth to a male heir in 1747 she was allowed to attend her husband's meetings with his ministers and in the twelve years from then until her departure from Naples in 1759 she became well versed in home and foreign affairs and her husband's right-hand woman.

As a dutiful daughter-in-law she had been writing formal letters to her parents-in-law almost once a week for eight years and she continued for a further thirteen years to write to her widowed mother-in-law. These unpublished letters have survived in the Madrid archive.²³ The first of them is a stiff little letter from a timid thirteen-year-

21 M. Torrione and J. L. Sancho (eds), *De una corte a otra 1744-1746. Correspondencia íntima de los Borbones*, 2 vols (Madrid 2010), vol. II, p. 697, fn. 2.

22 I. Ascione (ed.), *Carlo di Borbone, Lettere ai sovrani di Spagna*, vol. I: 1720-1734; vol. II, 1735-1739; vol. III: 1740-1744 (Naples 2002).

23 Archivo Histórico Nacional Madrid [=henceforward AHNM], Estado, Legajo 2746, Legajo 2760 and Legajo 2777.

old bride to one of the most important monarchs in the world, but the letters become only slightly more informal as time goes on. She informed her parents-in-law about the births, illnesses and deaths of her children, she apologized for producing five girls in a row before giving birth to a boy (something Felipe V never lived to see), she gave them news of her health and that of her husband. I can see no sign in these letters that she was aware of the deplorable mental condition of her father-in-law, though she was very aware of that of her half-brother-in-law in the year before his death in 1759, since it had such direct implications for her husband and for herself. She maintained throughout this 21-year correspondence the dutiful humble attitude that was expected of a daughter-in-law, for instance, finishing her letter to both parents-in-law on 22 August 1741 [je] *prie Vos Majestés de laisser en aller ces ceremonies avec moy, mais de m'ecrire comme à une de Leur plus infimes servantes* [I beg Your Majesties to forget all ceremony with me and to write to me as to one of your basest servants].²⁴ Before 1759 or at the earliest 1758, Maria Amalia will not have expected ever to meet her mother-in-law.

Fernando VI died, so in September 1759 Maria Amalia and Carlo, now Carlos III, King of Spain, sailed for that country. Carlos had not seen his mother for 27 years, though he had been faithfully writing her long letters every week in French during that time referring to himself always as *un humble fils qui L'adore et qui n'a autre ambition que de pouvoir la plaire, obeir, se pouvoir server* [a humble son who adores you and who has no other ambition but to be able to please, obey, and serve you].²⁵ On his arrival in Spain, as though filled with excitement at the thought of seeing her again, he launched into Spanish, addressing her in a letter of 13 September with the formula that was usual in the letters of the Spanish Bourbons to each other, as *Madre mia de mi alma* and intensifying this on 16 September by beginning *Madre mia de mi alma y de mi vida*.²⁶

According to the Austrian minister, later ambassador in Madrid, Franz Xaver Wolfgang von Orsini, Count von Rosenberg (1723-96), it was Carlos who insisted that Elisabetta, now aged 67, should reside with them in the Buen Retiro palace in Madrid.²⁷ So, after more than 20 years of marriage, Maria Amalia found herself living with her mother-in-law. In the years since her marriage, Maria Amalia had transformed herself from the pre-pubescent girl who travelled to Naples in 1738 into her husband's right-hand woman. By the time she reached Spain as queen, her husband was discussing all political matters with her, as noted by Count Rosenberg, and she was fully *au fait* with what was going on in the world. At that time the most pressing matter on the international stage was the Seven Years' War, which affected Maria Amalia personally both as Saxon princess and as Queen of Spain. Elisabetta, on the

24 AHNM Estado, Legajo 2760.

25 AHNM Estado, Legajo 2777.

26 AHNM Estado, Legajo 2777.

27 H. Juretschke (ed.), *Berichte der diplomatischen Vertreter des Wiener Hofes aus Spanien / Despachos de los representantes diplomáticos de la Corte de Viena*, vol. I *Regierungszeit Karls III. (1759-1788). Die Berichte des Grafen Rosenberg 1759-1761* (Madrid 1970), p. 213.

other hand, had been cut off from world affairs since her banishment on the accession of her step-son Fernando thirteen years before, but thought she was still pulling the strings. Maria Amalia, sick, missing Naples and her eight-year-old son, whom she had had to leave behind as the next King of the Two Sicilies, had no patience with her mother-in-law – whom she called in private ‘la vecchia’ – but court etiquette dictated that she should spend a couple of hours a day shut up with her. She was only able to get through this by gritting her teeth, pretending not to hear certain suggestions and dissembling.

We know all this because of Maria Amalia's as yet unpublished extremely frank letters to the Prime Minister Bernardo Tanucci (1698-1783) in Naples and his replies.²⁸ Tanucci had been a key figure in the government of Naples and was left in charge when Carlo and Maria Amalia sailed for Spain. He was both a fatherly friend as well as a shrewd and wise politician and enjoyed Maria Amalia's complete confidence. On 18 December 1759, for instance, she wrote to him: *Le cose seguitano con pace e quiete sopra un buon piede, benché un poco incomodo per me che mi conviene perdere ogni giorni quasi due hore con la vecchia, ed jo che ho pocco tempo da perdere non mi ci trovo comoda* [Things continue here peacefully and quietly and on a good footing, although a bit inconvenient for me because I have to give up almost two hours every day to the Old Woman, so I who have little time to waste don't find that very convenient].²⁹ On 1 January 1760 it seems that she has got the measure of her mother-in-law, for she wrote: *Il figlio mostra gran tenerezza per la madre, e non e finzione ma realtà, ma (questa lo posso dire solo a Tannucci) hà sugezione di me di farla mischiare in niente di modo ché se vedo ché mai il discorso possa inoltrarsi e diventar serio facendo qualche cenno egli cangia discorso* [The son shows great affection for his mother and this is not pretend but real, but (and this is something that I can only say to Tanucci) at my suggestion he does not let her stick her nose into anything in such a way that the conversation should never go too far and become serious, so, making some sign, he changes the subject].³⁰

In the same letter she describes her mother-in-law's attempts to propose a bride for Maria Amalia's son Carlos, the future Carlos IV, and her own strategy for countering this by playing dumb: *jo facendo la sturdita*, a tactic she clearly often employed because on 15 April 1760 in letter no. 27 she again writes how she was *con somma flemma facendo la sturdita* [very phlegmatically playing dumb]. This was of course the only way to avoid a quarrel. Things did not get better but worse, for on 27 May 1760 Maria Amalia wrote: *a me hà dispiaciuto molto, nemeno un giorno lasciarmi respirare senza vederme la sopra la nuca del collo, quella benedetta conversazione con Lei [...] nella quale bisogna misurare tutte le parole, e fingere continuamente per il mio naturale* [What really annoys me is that I don't get a breather on even one

28 This correspondence is to be published as follows: P. Vázquez Gestal (ed.), *Carteggio tra Maria Amalia di Sassonia e Bernardo Tanucci, ottobre 1759-ottobre 1760* (Naples 2017). Quotations here are from the original: Archivo General de Simancas [=AGS], Estado, Libro 317.

29 AGS, Estado, Libro 317, letter no. 10.

30 AGS, Estado, Libro 317, letter no. 12.

day without seeing her breathing down my neck, that dratted conversation with her ... in which it is necessary to measure all one's words and constantly pretend to be what I am not].³¹

She has to watch what she says and dissemble all the time. On 8 July 1760 she wrote angrily but resignedly: *solo mi resta l'esercizio della pazienza di quella benedetta conversazione* [all that I can do is to exercise patience during that dratted conversation].³² From Naples Tanucci praises her stoicism and assures her that she is doing wonderful work, keeping her husband free for the immense task he has taken on, taking up the reins of government of a kingdom and an empire which had effectively not had a ruler for an entire year during his half-brother's mental collapse and at the same time modernising Spain. She says again and again that she only hopes her health will improve, as the King needs her so much.

It did not improve and Maria Amalia died after a year in Spain, never living long enough not to have to dread another pregnancy or to grow to love Spain as she had loved Naples. Maria Amalia may have been the most important woman in her husband's life but the three factors set out at the beginning of this article meant that she could not displace her mother-in-law at the Madrid court: prior presence, authority as queen and mother, and emotional hold over her son. Only if she had outlived Elisabetta, could Maria Amalia have attained a pre-eminent position.

Elisabetta's fortunes also changed dramatically during her life. Having arrived in Spain as a wife, she increasingly became the carer, guardian, and assistant of her husband, concealing his illness as best she could and enabling court and country to function. She accepted his abdication in 1724 and the retreat to the Palace of San Ildefonso that he imposed on her, just as she accepted his decision to reside in Seville from 1729 to 1733 and his subsequent return to Madrid. As a widow, she also had to put up with her banishment from court by her step-son Fernando VI in 1746, to be succeeded by her joyful return when her own son ascended the throne in 1759. Ultimately Elisabetta won the contest with her German daughter-in-law simply by outliving her by six years, but no one can maintain that her life was an easier one.

31 AGS, Estado, Libro 317, letter no. 33.

32 AGS, Estado, Libro 317, letter no. 39.