

POLITICS, PATRONAGE, AND PEACE:
THE CORRESPONDENCE OF VOLTAIRE
AND THE MARQUIS D'ARGENSON

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In 1776, an anonymous book about Voltaire titled the *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l'auteur de La Henriade, &c. Avec les pièces originales & les preuves* was published in Basle. At one point, the author turned to the relationship between Voltaire and the late René Louis de Voyer de Paulmy, Marquis d'Argenson (1694-1757), political writer and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1744 to 1747. 'Ce Ministre citoyen avait toujours eu dès son enfance une tendre amitié pour Mr. De V...', wrote the author; 'J'ai vu une très-grande quantité de Lettres de l'un et de l'autre.'¹ The author of these words was none other than Voltaire himself, and of this 'très-grande quantité de Lettres' 103 are known today.

Voltaire and D'Argenson were indeed old friends who had attended Louis-le-Grand together between 1709 and 1711. Cardinal Fleury, who didn't like either one, allegedly said of D'Argenson in 1741, 'pour tout dire, c'est le digne ami de Voltaire, et Voltaire son digne ami.'² Of the 103 extant letters, 93 are from Voltaire and 10 from D'Argenson.³ The one-sided nature of the extant correspondence unfortunately makes it difficult to recover a full dialogue between the two, but analyzing their correspondence as a single corpus nonetheless reveals a great deal about both letter writers and about the political and intellectual life of the early Enlightenment.⁴ The subjects covered ranged from the personal to the highest affairs of state, and a few of them are quite

1 [Voltaire], *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l'auteur de La Henriade, &c. Avec les pièces originales & les preuves* (Basle, Paul Duker, 1776), p.47.

2 René-Louis de Voyer d'Argenson, *Journal et mémoires du marquis d'Argenson*, ed. Edmé-Jacques-Benoît Rathery, 9 vols. (Paris, Vve de J. Renouard, 1859), vol.3, p.297.

3 One of these letters, D1998a, dated 1 May 1739, only came to light recently; see Andrew Jainchill, 'An unpublished letter from the Marquis d'Argenson to Voltaire', *Revue Voltaire* 14 (2014), pp.199-213. A full calendar of their correspondence can be found as an appendix to *ibid.*, pp.208-13.

4 For an outstanding example of analysis of a single corpus, see Christiane Mervaud, *Voltaire et Frédéric II : une dramaturgie des lumières, 1735-1778*, SVEC 234 (1985).

widely quoted, such as Voltaire's letter to D'Argenson on 26 January 1740 lamenting the manner in which history had traditionally been written: 'On n'a fait que l'histoire des rois, mais on n'a point fait celle de la nation. Il semble que, pendant 1400 ans, il n'y ait eu dans les Gaules que des rois, des ministres et des généraux, mais nos mœurs, nos lois nos coutumes, notre esprit, ne sont ils donc rien?' (D2148).⁵ In the pages that follow, I will analyze this corpus with a focus on four themes: the style or 'cérémonial de l'écriture'⁶ of their correspondence and how this represented D'Argenson's political 'self-fashioning'; D'Argenson's role as Voltaire's occasional 'protector'; their discussions of politics and the French state; and their exchanges about international relations and war.

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Letter-writing was one of the most important forms of 'self-fashioning' in the eighteenth century. As Grimarest advised in his widely read *Traité sur la manière d'écrire des lettres, et sur le cérémonial*, the manner in which a letter-writer arranged thoughts, chose words, and mastered etiquette was essential to demonstrating merit and 'bon usage.'⁷ The style and 'cérémonial de l'écriture' one practiced, as Christiane Mervaud explains so well, instantiated a 'représentation de soi-même': 'Tous les auteurs de ce "jeu de lettres" maîtrisent les protocoles et codes de la lettre. Sans doute peut-on marquer quelques différences dans leur pratique, mais tous connaissent le bon usage de cet acte de la vie sociale qui se situe au carrefour de la relation avec autrui et de la représentation qu'on entend donner de soi-même.'⁸ The style and ceremonial of the D'Argenson-Voltaire correspondence combined friendship and a sort of anti-hierarchical egalitarianism that reflected D'Argenson's 'self-fashioning' as a political thinker, his egalitarian political values and the disgust he felt at the culture of *politesse* then prevalent.⁹ D'Argenson was a titled noble and Voltaire's

5 In this letter Voltaire also complained about the narrative style of most history writing, arguing that 'il faut dans une histoire comme dans une pièce de théâtre, exposition, nœud et dénouement'.

6 Christiane Mervaud, 'Un jeu de lettres : jeux et enjeux', in *Voltaire : Un jeu de lettres, 1723-1778*, ed. Nicholas Cronk et al. (Orléans, Paradigme, 2011), p.40.

7 Grimarest, *Traité sur la manière d'écrire des lettres, et sur le cérémonial, avec un discours sur ce qu'on appelle usage dans la langue françoise* (La Haye, Adrian Moetjens, 1709), pp.1-2. On bon usage, see Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac, *Voltaire dans ses lettres de jeunesse, 1711-1733 : la formation d'un épistolier au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1992), pp.25 sqq.

8 Christiane Mervaud, 'Un jeu de lettres : jeux et enjeux', p.42. It is worth adding here that the 'art épistolaire' was taught at Louis-le-Grand when d'Argenson and Voltaire studied there. See Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac, *Voltaire dans ses lettres de jeunesse*, pp.139 sqq.

9 On D'Argenson's political ideas, see Jean Lamson, *Les Idées politiques du marquis d'Argenson*, thèse, Université de Montpellier, 1943; Gerald John Cavanaugh, 'Vauban, D'Argenson, Turgot: From Absolutism to Constitutionalism in Eighteenth-Century France', Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1967; Nannerl O. Henry, 'Democratic Monarchy: The Political Theory of the Marquis D'argenson', Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1968; Peter Balázs, 'La philosophie politique et morale du marquis d'Argenson (1694-1757)', thèse, Université de Paris, 2003.

sometimes 'protector', and thus set the tone for their correspondence; Voltaire's letters then followed that tone (and Voltaire was a master at such adaptation). As Marie-Claire Grassi has written, letter-writing was governed by 'règles de la bienséance' that reflected and instituted 'les normes d'une sociabilité fondée essentiellement sur la maîtrise de soi et le souci du respect d'autrui dans la hiérarchie des personnes.'¹⁰ D'Argenson weakened or set aside many of those norms in his correspondence with Voltaire and thereby initiated a more informal and less hierarchical tone.

The result was a correspondence characterized by what Courtin, in his celebrated manual *Nouveau Traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens*, called the 'style simple et naturel.' This style, wrote Courtin, 'est une manière de parler ingénue et familière mais qui pourtant est noble dans cette familiarité.' 'Amitié' was a subset of this style, defined as 'non un honneur de cérémonie, mais un honneur d'amitié. [...] D'égal à égal si on se connaît beaucoup, la familiarité est une bienséance.'¹¹ The D'Argenson-Voltaire correspondence has the tone of a correspondence between equals in just this manner due to D'Argenson's disarming of the normal rules of etiquette. In one telling example, D'Argenson, answering a now-lost letter from Voltaire requesting 'protection', responded 'pourquoi allez vous parler de protection et de respect à un ancien ami et qui le sera toujours ?' (D1860) D'Argenson here fashioned himself as a friend doing a favor rather than a politically-connected noble and conseiller d'État (his post at the time) protecting a writer. A few months later, Voltaire invoked D'Argenson's lack of interest in titles and explained that this led him to do the same: 'Je ne sçai pas pourquoi j'ay toujours manqué monsieur à vous appeller *excellence*, [...] j'ay oublié les titres comme vous les oubliez vous même' (D1999). Distinctions of rank would never be altogether effaced – Grimarest, in his *Traité*, explained that even in 'les Lettres familières' when 'c'est à son ami que l'on parle, ou à une personne à qui on peut écrire avec la même liberté', it was necessary to 'conserv[er] le respect qui lui est dû, si son rang, sa naissance, ou son âge exigent des différences'¹² – but they could be, and in this case were, weakened so that the normal rules of hierarchy and supplication were set aside. Further markers of this disarmed

On *politesse* and shifting sensibilities about etiquette, see Christophe Losfeld's excellent *Politesse, morale et construction sociale : pour une histoire des traités de comportements (1670-1788)* (Paris, H. Champion, 2011).

10 Marie-Claire Grassi, 'L'étiquette épistolaire au XVIII^e siècle', in *Étiquette et politesse*, ed. Alain Montandon (Clermont-Ferrand, Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1992), p. 144.

11 Courtin, *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens*, quoted in Grassi, 'L'étiquette épistolaire au XVIII^e siècle', pp. 146-47.

12 Grimarest, *Traité sur la manière d'écrire des lettres*, p. 33.

ceremonial are the fact that Voltaire used Monsieur and not Monseigneur to address D'Argenson, except when D'Argenson served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1744 to 1747; the placement of the date at the top of their letters rather than the end, which Courtin had described as a sign of intimacy;¹³ and a variety of informal endings to their letters, including a striking 'Je vous adore' from Voltaire to D'Argenson in 1745 (D3121). Again, this tone was set by D'Argenson and, to quote Mervaud again, instantiated a 'représentation de soi-même' that reflected his political values.¹⁴

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D'Argenson's disarming of the standard rules of etiquette is all the more noteworthy given that many of the letters between them involved Voltaire asking for 'protection,' a register that normally demanded excessive supplication. Indeed, protection was an enduring, even omnipresent, theme in their correspondence. Voltaire repeatedly asked D'Argenson for help – 'protection' – in the various literary disputes in which Voltaire seemed to be endlessly embroiled. The work of Enlightenment was always dependent on the protection accorded by those in power – think of Malesherbes's indispensable protection of the *Encyclopédie* – and Voltaire was adept, to say the least, at cultivating and mobilizing individuals and networks of protection. His longstanding friendship with D'Argenson and his brother, the Comte d'Argenson, afforded Voltaire an important source of such 'protection' at this stage of his literary career. As Voltaire put it in a supplicating letter to D'Argenson in June of 1747, 'Je suis né pour être vexé par les Defontaines, les Rigoley, les Mannouri, et pour être protégé par les Dargenson' (D3526).

'Protection' appears in the earliest extant letter we have between them – from Voltaire to D'Argenson in 1730 (D385), sending him a 'nouvelle édition' of *La Henriade* and requesting 'protection' – and the first extant intensive exchange in their correspondence revolves around D'Argenson protecting Voltaire in the Desfontaines affair.¹⁵ This exchange begins with the letter quoted above in which D'Argenson admonished Voltaire not to 'parler de protection et de respect à un ancien ami,' dated 7 February 1739. D'Argenson, while rejecting the word 'protection,' simultaneously pledged his support against the 'vilain homme,' the abbé Desfontaines, and reassured Voltaire that 'les puissances'

¹³ Courtin, quoted in Mervaud, 'Un jeu de lettres : jeux et enjeux', p.42.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, there is not enough of a corpus to pursue the question of D'Argenson's epistolary self-fashioning more broadly.

¹⁵ The Desfontaines affair turned on Voltaire and the abbé Desfontaines having published libelous pamphlets against one another in 1738 and 1739. A resolution by which both Voltaire and Desfontaines would sign disavowals of their respective texts, and then publish those disavowals, was reached through the intervention of high-ranking officials such as D'Argenson. On this episode, see *Mémoire du sieur de Voltaire*, critical edition by Olivier Ferret, OCV, vol.20A (2003), pp.13-29; John Bennett Shank, *The Newton Wars and the Beginning of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp.390-402.

would be lined up in his favor. 'Je vous assure que cela sera bien mené, [...] j'embrasse vos intérêts avec chaleur et avec plaisir' (D1860). Voltaire responded with deep, almost fawning, gratitude. The convention established in 'les traités de civilité' was to 'exagérer le service rendu,'¹⁶ and Voltaire did not hold back. On 7 March he told D'Argenson that he was his 'ange gardien' and exclaimed that 'je vivray pour vous être à jamais attaché avec la plus respectueuse et la plus tendre reconnaissance' (D1924). Later, on 16 April, Voltaire wrote to the marquis that he was 'le meilleur protecteur que j'aye à Paris' (D1982).

D'Argenson's 'protection' of Voltaire's literary endeavors also extended into the realm of publication. On 20 June 1737 Voltaire wrote to Henri Pitot that D'Argenson, 'avec qui j'ai eu l'honneur d'être élevé, et qui, depuis vingt-cinq ans, m'a toujours honoré de ses bontés,' would ensure safe publication of the *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*. Likewise, in June of 1739 D'Argenson wrote to Voltaire that he had been in touch with Sauzet, his book dealer in Amsterdam, about looking after publication of Voltaire's *Histoire du siècle de Louis XIV* (D2032). Indeed, Sauzet had written to Voltaire earlier that month that he had spoken to D'Argenson about the work and that D'Argenson had signaled his enthusiasm about it, promising that he would do everything he could. D'Argenson, added Sauzet, had spoken 'cordialement, & non en Ministre' (D2025).¹⁷

The theme of protection never disappeared from their correspondence. On 5 March 1745 (when D'Argenson was Minister of Foreign Affairs) Voltaire wrote him that 'Monsieur Racine fut moins protégé par Messieurs Colbert et Segnelay Monseigneur que je ne le suis par vous' (D3081). D'Argenson's patronage at this point, along with that of the duc de Richelieu, helped in Voltaire's being appointed 'historiographe de France' on 1 April 1745. In fact, D'Argenson continued to serve as Voltaire's protector even after his withdrawal from public life (D3526; quoted from above). The Voltaire-D'Argenson correspondence is a classic and revealing case of 'protection' in the Enlightenment. Moreover, this register, in a manner that revealed a great deal about their relationship, blended easily in their correspondence with another, that of two philosophes discussing politics and how best to reform the French state.

Politics first emerged in their correspondence in May of 1739 when D'Argenson sent Voltaire an excerpt from a manuscript he had completed two years earlier titled 'Jusqu'où la démocratie peut être admise dans le gouvernement monarchique?'. This work would be posthumously published in 1764 as the *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France* after Rousseau cited the manuscript four times in *Du contrat social* (1762), but

¹⁶ Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac, *Voltaire dans ses lettres de jeunesse*, p.295.

¹⁷ See Jainchill, 'An unpublished letter...', p.206, for fuller quotes from this letter.

D'Argenson had begun to circulate the manuscript at the end of the 1730s. In addition to Voltaire, it was read at that time by Saint-Pierre, Fontenelle, Claude Dupin, and perhaps others.¹⁸ D'Argenson and Voltaire corresponded about the manuscript throughout the summer of 1739, and, in the estimation of René Pomeau, this exchange had a lasting effect on Voltaire: 'd'après sa correspondance avec Frédéric et le marquis d'Argenson, ses préoccupations sont devenues politiques.'¹⁹

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D'Argenson sent Voltaire the excerpt on 1 May 1739, announcing that 'Je suis auteur, j'ai fait un livre il y a deux ans, je voulais vous prier de le lire. [...] C'est de la Politique.' The letter summarized the principles animating the manuscript, emphasizing D'Argenson's aim of balancing local government – the rights of the commune – with central or royal authority: 'Pourquoi n'entend-on plus parler d'*officiers du peuple* et du droit de commune au milieu de cette foule d'officiers à fonctions pour Justice police et finance. La commune assemblée pour ses Intérêts serait-elle incapable de rien voir, de rien proposer, de rien exécuter pour le bien public. Mais il lui faudrait liberté et même autorisation.' D'Argenson, however, was not simply advocating a return to communal self government. He wanted at the same time to augment central, royal authority. The key was the elimination of intermediary bodies that blocked direct relations between the sovereign and the people, namely the power of the nobility (D1998a). Or, as he put it in a later letter to Voltaire, 'ma folie est de croire que j'augmente beaucoup le Pouvoir absolu en diminuant les tyrannies subalternes [...] je voudrais le règne d'Henry 4 au lieu de celui de m. Orry, voilà tout' (D2013).

Voltaire replied immediately to D'Argenson's letter, heaping praise on the excerpt. It was in the spirit of Fénelon's *Télémaque* and Saint-Pierre's various writings, he wrote, but more 'réel' (D2008).²⁰ He implored D'Argenson to send him the rest of the manuscript as soon as possible. Once D'Argenson found a way to send it safely,²¹ Voltaire wrote again and lauded the text even more fully:

18 René-Louis de Voyer, marquis d'Argenson, *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France* (Amsterdam, Marc Michel Rey, 1764). Rousseau's citations are in *Du contrat social, ou Principes du droit politique* (Amsterdam, Marc-Michel Rey, 1762), pp.7, 57, 114, 317-18. Saint-Pierre (who mentions Fontenelle) sent a commentary that can be found at the head of one copy of the manuscript, 'Jusques-où La Démocratie peut être admise dans le Gouvernement Monarchique. Ce Traitté de Politique a esté composé à l'occasion de ceux de Mr de Boulainvilliers touchant l'ancien gouvernement féodal de France. 1737', Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 2337. Dupin's note regarding the manuscript can be found in an essentially identical copy of the manuscript, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 2334.

19 René Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, 5 vols. (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1988-1994), vol.1, p.375.

20 See Jainchill, 'An unpublished letter...', p.206, for fuller quotes from this letter.

21 D'Argenson refused to send the manuscript by 'voitures publics' [*sic*] (D2013); given the radical political program outlined in the text and his own political ambitions, D'Argenson insisted on every caution and would only send it with a trusted courier.

'Je viens Monsieur de lire un ouvrage qui m'a consolé de la foule des mauvais dont on nous inonde. Vous m'avez fait bien des plaisirs, mais voicy le plus grand de vos bienfaits. [...] Je ne crains que d'être trop prévenu en faveur d'un ouvrage où je retrouve la plupart de mes idées. Vous m'avez deffendu de vous donner des louanges mais vous ne m'avez pas deffendu de m'en donner. Je vais donc me donner à moy de grands coups d'encensoir.' Voltaire then concluded this letter with the thought that 'tout se réduira à regarder l'auteur comme un excellent serviteur du roy, et comme l'amy de tous les citoyens. [...] vous vous êtes dépouillé du préjugé le plus cher aux hommes en faveur du public' (D2035). He praised the treatise again on 28 July as the 'meilleur ouvrage que j'aye lu, depuis vingt ans' (D2054).

Voltaire's adulation of the manuscript was undoubtedly motivated in part by D'Argenson's status as Voltaire's 'protector'. This was spring and summer of 1739, just as the Desfontaines affair was being resolved and D'Argenson was looking after Voltaire's *Histoire du siècle de Louis XIV*. Voltaire was obviously not about to alienate D'Argenson. That said, Voltaire did seem to genuinely esteem D'Argenson's text and to maintain that esteem for many years to come. He praised it in his *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l'auteur de La Henriade* and recommended the published version, the *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France* (1764), in a handful of letters later in his life.²²

Politics, broadly speaking, endured as a topic of discussion throughout their correspondence. In August of 1743, for example, Voltaire wrote to D'Argenson from the Hague and quite openly and stridently criticized the French political scene at that moment. The War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) was going poorly for France but D'Argenson's own future seemed bright, as Cardinal Fleury – who did not like D'Argenson – had passed away in January. Voltaire began by flattering D'Argenson and then invoking his view of France's politics at the moment: 'Soyez chancelier de France, monsieur, si vous voulez que j'y revienne ; rendez nous la gloire des lettres quand nous perdons celles des armes. Les hommes sont faits originairement, ce me semble, pour penser, pour s'instruire, et non pour se tuer.' The true object of his ire in this letter, however, was censorship. He complained of the 'comble de barbarie et [...] excès de petitesse' that could send the abbé Lenglet to the Bastille and refuse 'qu'on imprime des livres où l'on explique Newton, et où l'on dit que les rêveries de Descartes sont des rêveries ! J'aime encore mieux l'abus qu'on fait ici de la liberté d'imprimer ses pensées, que cet esclavage dans lequel on veut chez vous mettre

²² In addition, a number of scholars have noted the influence of D'Argenson's text on Voltaire. See, e.g., Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, quoted above; Ira Owen Wade, *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 317; Shank, *The Newton Wars*, p. 257.

l'esprit humain.' Voltaire then turned to praising the political life of the Dutch Republic, which made a powerful contrast to that of France. The effects of liberty were so strong that they 'rend les hivers moins rudes'. 'Il y a des partis,' he continued, 'et il faut bien qu'il y en ait dans une république : mais l'esprit de parti n'ôte rien à l'amour de la patrie, et je vois de grands hommes opposés à de grands hommes.' Then, in a reference to the manuscript D'Argenson had sent in 1739, Voltaire noted that 'Ce gouvernement-ci vous plairait infiniment, même avec les défauts qui en sont inséparables. Il est tout municipal, et voilà ce que vous aimez' (D2802). The pointed contrast between France and the Dutch Republic that Voltaire drew is striking both in its unvarnished criticisms of French politics and in the confidence it showed in their epistolary relations. D'Argenson's career was on the upswing at this moment; in little over a year he would be appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his brother was already Minister of War. The fact that Voltaire was willing to write such strong criticisms at this moment – just as D'Argenson was willing to share his manuscript with Voltaire four years earlier – speaks to the extent to which this was a correspondence between two philosophes as much as between a philosophe and a Minister-to-be. They openly shared political opinions in full confidence that the other would guard those opinions closely.

Politics in their correspondence was not only reforming the state, censorship, and what we would label 'domestic politics.' It was also, beginning in November of 1744, when D'Argenson was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in the middle of the War of Austrian Succession, international relations, war, and peace. Indeed, this would emerge as the dominant theme of their correspondence over the next few years. Moreover, since D'Argenson was Minister, these were not merely abstract ideas. They were matters of policy and possibility.

The theme first appears in their extant correspondence in a letter from Voltaire dated 1 January 1745, not long after D'Argenson had been appointed Minister. Voltaire wrote D'Argenson a short poem about international relations (especially with England) in which great powers are said to behave like 'aragnes [araignées] carnassières' (D3060). The poem was in response to 'jolis vers,' as Voltaire put it, in a recent letter from D'Argenson that is now lost which contained a line to the effect that 'Les puissances sont comme les araignées, dont les grosses dévorent les petites ; voilà en quoi consiste l'équilibre Européen.'²³ 'Araignées' then became a favorite reference of Voltaire's in his

²³ This is a quotation provided by D'Argenson's great nephew but which is more prudently treated as a paraphrase. The quotation is given in Charles-Marc-René de Voyer de Paulmy d'Argenson, *Quelques mots sur les manuscrits du marquis d'Argenson et sur les extraits qui en ont été donnés par M. de Sainte-Beuve* (Paris, impr. de Dubuisson, 1856), p.9. However, in the edition of d'Argenson's *Mémoires* that C.-M.-R. d'Argenson prepared at around the same

letters to D'Argenson over the course of 1745 and 1746 (see also D3103, D3147, D3176, D3307, D3349).

These playful references to 'araignées' in international power politics speak to D'Argenson's and Voltaire's shared commitment to ending the war and to a broader politics of peace. It was widely known that D'Argenson's ministerial agenda was the pursuit of peace above all else, even his inveterate anti-Austrianism. Indeed, his commitment to a politics of peace was so well-known that people referred to him simply as 'd'Argenson la paix,' in contrast to his brother, then Minister of War, 'd'Argenson la guerre'.²⁴ In fact, before D'Argenson was even appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, but when his appointment seemed likely, he wrote to his brother asking for support in securing the appointment but also telling him that 'Je me sentirois cependant bien disposé à travailler contre votre ministère en procurant et entretenant la paix.'²⁵ The association of D'Argenson with a politics of peace became so deeply engrained that, thirty years later, in 1775, Frederick the Great scolded Voltaire that 'Vous me prendrez pour d'Argenson la paix' (D19652).

It was at just this time, not coincidentally, that, according to Pomeau, 'L'engagement de Voltaire dans la politique de paix devient une sorte de *leitmotiv* de sa correspondance.'²⁶ Voltaire's letters to D'Argenson throughout 1745 and 1746 overflow with praise for D'Argenson's policy of pursuing peace. He urged D'Argenson to 'Guérissez la maladie épidémique de l'Europe, empêchez les araignées de se manger' (D3103), and praised him as an 'ange de la paix' (D3115). Later, Voltaire added 'Vous ferez de grandes et de bonnes choses, et vous les ferez durables, parceque vous avez justesse dans l'esprit et justice dans le cœur' (D3328) and 'Vous avez de la philosophie dans l'esprit et de la morale dans le cœur. Il y a peu de ministres dont on puisse en dire autant' (D3337). Then, in June 1746: 'La paix monseigneur, la paix et vous êtes un grand homme' (D3412).

Voltaire, excited that D'Argenson might achieve the triumph of *philosophie* over the typical calculations of great power politics, did more than write letters of encouragement to D'Argenson. He also put his pen to work for the Ministry, as D'Argenson commissioned him to write a number of pieces. The

time he attributed these lines to 'l'éditeur de Kehl'. René-Louis de Voyer, Marquis d'Argenson, *Mémoires et journal inédit du marquis d'Argenson, ministre des Affaires étrangères sous Louis XV*, publ. and annot. by C.-M.-R. d'Argenson, 5 vols. (Paris, Jannet, 1857), vol.1, p.lxvi. However, I have not yet found this reference in the Kehl edition. Regardless, D'Argenson seems to have written something to this effect to Voltaire as Voltaire made multiple references to 'araignées' in this way in his letters to D'Argenson.

²⁴ *Mémoires et journal inédit du marquis d'Argenson*, vol.3, p.23.

²⁵ René-Louis d'Argenson to Marc-Pierre de Voyer de Paulmy, Comte d'Argenson, 2 October 1744, Bibliothèque universitaire de Poitiers – Archives d'Argenson, P12.

²⁶ Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, vol.1, p.455.

most famous of these is certainly the manifesto on behalf of Prince Charles Edward, in the name of Louis XV, for his ‘invasion’ of Great Britain and which has been dubbed ‘the most bizarrely polite invasion proclamation ever issued.’²⁷ Other works Voltaire wrote include a *Représentations aux États-Généraux de Hollande* in September, 1745.²⁸ Later, in his *Commentaire historique* about himself, Voltaire would write that ‘le Secrétaire d’Etat employa l’Homme de Lettres dans plusieurs affaires considérables pendant les années 1745 1746 & 1747. C’est probablement la raison pour laquelle nous n’avons aucune pièce de théâtre de notre auteur pendant le cours de ces années.’²⁹ Voltaire’s writings in the service of the Ministry were meant to strengthen France’s position at the negotiating table and help secure peace.

D’Argenson’s and Voltaire’s shared politics of peace would cede, however, before the glory of France’s great victory at Fontenoy on 11 May 1745. D’Argenson, along with the king and other ministers, was at the front and witnessed the victory first hand. Voltaire, who had been appointed ‘historiographe de France’ on 1 April, wrote D’Argenson immediately upon hearing news of the victory the night of 13 May: ‘Ah le bel employ pour votre historien ! Il y a trois cent ans que les rois de France n’ont rien fait de si glorieux. Je suis fou de joie’ (D3117 ; Voltaire noted the time of composition of the letter as ‘onze heures du soir’). Four days later, on 15 May, D’Argenson composed a long letter to Voltaire describing the battle in detail. Voltaire would later quote this letter in its entirety in his *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l’auteur de La Henriade*.³⁰

D’Argenson addressed the letter to ‘Monsieur l’historien,’ and signaled his intention to provide Voltaire with material for a piece on the battle: ‘Voicy des anecdottes que j’ay remarqué ou que l’on a remarqué pour moy.’ He began the narrative with excessive, even obsequious, praise for the king, whom D’Argenson gave credit for the victory (the letter was destined for public consumption as well as for Voltaire): ‘Le vray, le sûr, le non flatteur c’est que c’est le Roy qui a gagné luy même la bataille, par sa volonté, par sa fermeté.’ The battle was going badly, the English artillery was winning the day, and ‘Quelques uns de nos généraux [...] donnèrent des conseils fort prudents. [...] A cela le Roy se mocqua de tout’ and ordered that the French keep up the attack. Along with a contingent of Irish soldiers, who, D’Argenson noted, were ‘excellents surtout quand ils marchent contre des anglois et hanoveriens,’ the French rushed at the

²⁷ Laurence Bongie, *The Love of a prince: Bonnie Prince Charlie in France, 1744-1748* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1986), p.126.

²⁸ Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, vol.1, p.467.

²⁹ [Voltaire], *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l’auteur de La Henriade*, p.47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-45.

English ‘comme les chasseurs ou des fourageurs, pèse mêle, la main baissée, le bras racourci, maîtres, valets, officiers, cavaliers, Infanterie, tout ensemble. Cette vivacité françoise, dont on parle tant est bien placée là, rien ne luy résiste, ce fut l’affaire de 10 minutes que de gagner la bataille avec cette botte secrète.’ He gave ultimate credit to the French artillery for the ‘affreuse boucherie’ that left 14,000 English dead on the battlefield (the number D’Argenson provided) and yielded France’s great victory (D3 118).

After celebrating France’s victory, D’Argenson reflected on the cost, announcing that he would relate ‘le mal comme le bien.’ He wrote of ‘des morts nuds, des ennemis agonisants, des spectacles affreux, des playes fumantes. [...] Le triomphe,’ he continued, ‘est la plus belle chose du monde, [...] mais le Plancher de tout cela est du sang humain, des Lambeaux de chaire humaine’ (D3 118). The explicit depiction of suffering in this letter is remarkable. David Bell, in his study of the eighteenth-century culture of war, emphasizes just how ‘exceptional’ it was in eighteenth-century portrayals of war and just how powerful a contrast it made to standard accounts of glory.³¹

Voltaire responded to D’Argenson’s letter with the highest praise: ‘Vous m’avez écrit monseigneur une lettre telle que madame de Sévigné l’eût faite si elle s’étoit trouvée au milieu d’une bataille’ and signed off with the words ‘Je vous adore,’ an exceptionally warm and informal closing to a letter (D3 121).³² D’Argenson composed the letter in part to provide Voltaire with material, and it undoubtedly influenced Voltaire’s composition of *La Bataille de Fontenoy*, the first version of which he published just days later – Voltaire then wrote to D’Argenson on 26 and 29 May asking whether the king liked it (D3 124, D3 127). Voltaire’s *Fontenoy* echoed D’Argenson’s letter in its celebration of victory but almost entirely set aside the suffering and carnage D’Argenson had so poignantly evoked.

D’Argenson and Voltaire continued to correspond for the remainder of D’Argenson’s Ministry. After D’Argenson’s dismissal and retreat from public life in 1747, their letters became less frequent. They may have simply seen each other more, and thus corresponded less, and there was certainly less to write about since much of their correspondence in 1745 and 1746 was about foreign affairs and issues related to the Ministry. Voltaire would nonetheless occasionally write about protection (e.g., D3 526, partially quoted above) or other matters, and wrote D’Argenson on 4 September 1749 about the birth of Émilie Du Châtelet’s daughter on the 3rd and then on 11 September about

31 David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2007), p.46.

32 An unscientific search on the database Electronic Enlightenment done in May 2015 reveals only 28 instances of ending a letter with this phrase, 21 of them by Voltaire.

his grief following Châtelet's death on the 10th (D4005, D4017). The last extant letter in their correspondence was sent by Voltaire on 9 May 1750 announcing to D'Argenson that he was coming to D'Argenson's country home in Segrez (D4140).³³ Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing why their correspondence broke off like this. Did they stop corresponding or are the letters simply lost?

The 103 letters that do remain, when studied as a single corpus, testify to how central letters and correspondence were to the intellectual world of the eighteenth century. They discuss a range of topics from 'protection' to reforming the French state to international affairs, peace, and war, and speak to D'Argenson's 'self-fashioning' as a political thinker. The letters exchanged between perhaps the most famous writer of the century and the eccentric philosophe-minister demonstrate, abundantly, the vital role played by letters and correspondence in the intellectual world of the eighteenth century and their indispensable place in our understanding of that world.

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³³ D'Argenson wrote in his journal later that month that Voltaire was indeed staying with him at Segrez and was working on his *Histoire de la guerre de 1741* (published in *Précis du siècle de Louis XV*). *Mémoires et journal inédit du marquis d'Argenson*, vol.5, p.146.