

From the King's Hunt to the Ladies' Cavalcade: Female Equestrian Culture at the Court of Louis XIV

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Focusing on the court of Louis XIV between 1680 and 1715, this article considers how the royal hunts gradually became a crucial site for the establishment of a thriving female horseback riding culture. At first gracious ornaments to the King's retinue, courtly Amazons went on to develop independent habits by the turn of the eighteenth century. Embracing current approaches to sport history, this paper traces the evolution and changing significance of early modern athletic practices, acknowledging their ritualistic and antagonistic elements. Information from contemporary accounts, most importantly the Journal of the Marquis de Dangeau, is complemented by close reading of letters and memoirs that illuminate the diarist's entries with glimpses into the physical sensations and emotional experiences of these pioneering sportswomen.

Nowadays the six million visitors that stroll around the grounds of Versailles every year are treated to an exquisite selection of baroque arias that accompany the complex play of the water features. During the reign of the Sun King, however, the park offered a very different soundscape, the gentle sound of the fountains being drowned out by the tumult of galloping horses, packs of hounds barking in the distance, and the shrill note of the hunting horn.¹ In Louis XIV's day, the carefully trimmed groves and elaborately designed parterres of the *petit parc* that we admire today were surrounded by the *grand parc*, a vast hunting ground entirely reserved to the cynegetic pleasure of the King and his court.² Consisting of 86,000 acres — ten times the size of the formal gardens —

¹ Louis XIV acquired a passion for Versailles at the start of his personal reign in 1661; from that point the château was gradually enlarged and embellished until it became the official court residence in 1682.

² Vincent Maroteaux and Jacques de Givry (eds), *Versailles: Le Grand Parc* (Les Loges-en-Josas, 2004).

this domain was enclosed in 1683 to provide the perfect setting for increasingly frequent hunting parties.

Intimately connected with the performance of royal power since Merovingian times, the hunt progressively acquired a ritualised form during the reign of Louis XIV and came to occupy a central part in the routine of the French court.³ At Versailles, Madame Palatine noted in 1701, ‘there is hunting every day; on Sundays and Wednesdays it’s my son’s turn. The King hunts on Mondays and Thursdays; on Wednesdays and Saturdays Monseigneur the Dauphin hunts wolf, the Count of Toulouse hunts on Mondays and Wednesdays, the Duke of Maine, his brother, on Tuesdays’.⁴ Such gatherings usually took place in the afternoon and lasted several hours, filling the time between lunch, habitually served between one and two, and the *soirées d’appartements*, a variety of amusements organised from seven in the evening. During the royal *voyages*, when the court relocated to other royal residences for an extended period of time, they could last even longer.⁵ The *voyage* to Fontainebleau between September and November, a tradition inaugurated by François I, was especially dedicated to cynegetic exercise as it included the feast of Saint Hubert (3 October), patron of the hunt and huntsmen. Louis XIV in addition took to spending the first part of each spring at Compiègne and began making more and more frequent brief trips to Marly from 1683. The date of these escapes was determined by his majesty’s pleasure, and invitations were particularly coveted as only a select group of courtiers was allowed each time.⁶

Frequent changes of location were accompanied by variations in the type of prey and technique chosen. Seen as the quintessential regal pastime, the *vénerie* or *chasse à courre* involved the pursuit of a wild animal — usually a stag or roe buck but occasionally a boar or a wolf — with a

³ Philippe Salvadori, *La chasse sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1996), pp. 194-243; Frédérique Leferme-Falguières, *Les courtisanes: une société de spectacle sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2007), pp. 245-7.

⁴ Elisabeth-Charlotte (1652–1722) daughter of the Elector Palatine married the King’s brother, Philippe, Duke of Orléans in 1671. Quote from her letter of 13 October 1701, in G. Brunet (ed. and trans.), *Correspondance complète de madame duchesse d’Orléans née Princesse Palatine* (Paris, 1855) [hereafter, *Correspondance*], vol. I, p. 56. All translations from French are my own.

⁵ Salvadori, *La chasse sous l’Ancien Régime*, pp. 199-200.

⁶ Vincent Maroteaux, *Marly: L’autre palais du Soleil* (Geneva, 2002).

pack of hounds.⁷ The boar could also be gathered beforehand and put in a designated area fenced with special *toiles* [wicker screens] where sportsmen and women could more easily chase and finish them off in what was usually a bloody spectacle enjoyed by a large audience. Despite the fact that its popularity increased throughout the seventeenth century, this use of the *toile* was generally believed to be a less refined and skilful practice than the kill in the open, which is probably why French huntsmen liked to assume that it was a habit brought in from foreign courts.⁸ Under the reign of Louis XIV it also became more common than in previous decades to hunt small birds and rabbits with firearms; this was known as *chasse à tir*. The practice of the *volerie*, hawking or falconry, by contrast, underwent a steady decline in the second half of the century, becoming nothing more than a hollow ritual.⁹

Inseparable from the practice of horsemanship, hunting constituted a pillar of French aristocratic culture and played an essential part in the constant performance of a specific lifestyle, that *vivre noblement* which distinguished the First Estate and consolidated its privileges.¹⁰ In the first place it reflected and constantly reasserted feudal rights of land ownership.¹¹ Its importance also derived from the connection with the military profession that had long been the *raison d'être* of the French aristocracy and was still deemed the most suitable career choice for young men of noble birth in the seventeenth century.¹² More generally, asserting one's dominance over the natural world, animals as well as the land itself, reflected the gentleman's accomplished mastery over his own passions and therefore his fitness as a military leader. It was also a clear testimony to his innate

⁷ Claude d'Anthenaise, 'La chasse courtoise', in *Chasse à courre, chasse de cour: Fastes de la vénerie princière à Chantilly au temps des Condés et des Orléans, 1659–1910* (Tournai, 2004), pp. 13-19.

⁸ D'Anthenaise, 'La chasse courtoise', p. 19; Salvadori, *La chasse sous l'Ancien Regime*, p. 200.

⁹ Salvadori, *La chasse sous l'Ancien Regime*, pp. 200-01.

¹⁰ Daniel Roche, *La culture équestre occidentale, XVIe-XIXe siècle: l'ombre du cheval* (Paris, 2008–2015), vol. II, pp. 15-50.

¹¹ Salvadori, *La chasse sous l'Ancien Regime*, pp. 15-35.

¹² Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570-1715* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 46-68.

ability to control and guide society's weaker members, such as women of all ranks and men from the lower classes.¹³

Female courtiers, however, were far from acting as mere spectators relegated to the periphery of courtly cynegetic spectacles. Madame Palatine herself was already known at the time as an indefatigable devotee of the chase, and modern biographers have usually depicted her as a lone and eccentric Amazon at the court of the Sun King.¹⁴ Little attention has therefore been paid to other aristocratic huntswomen and riders of that period. Women appear conspicuously absent in Philippe Salvadori's meticulous study of the royal hunts during the Ancien Régime and confined to a mere few pages in Daniel Roche's ample history of horsemanship in France.¹⁵ To a large extent this is due to women's exclusion from nearly all French treatises on horseback riding and hunting until the late eighteenth century.¹⁶ By turning their attention away from prescriptive literature and towards different kinds of contemporary accounts and legal sources, medieval historians have revealed how European noblewomen hunted extensively.¹⁷ A careful look at the visual and material culture of the period has more recently informed a first attempt to reconstruct a broad history of women's equestrianism in early modern France.¹⁸ Traditional narratives had long established, and to a certain extent overplayed, the central role of individual figures such as Catherine de' Medici and Diane de Poitiers, but more remains to be said on the involvement of female courtiers as a group.¹⁹

¹³ Lynda E. Boose, 'Scolding Bridles and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2 (1992), p. 199.

¹⁴ Arlette Lebigre, *La Princesse Palatine* (Paris, 1986); Claude Pasteur, *La Princesse Palatine* (Paris, 2001); Daniel Des Brosses, *La Palatine: l'incorrigible épistolière aux 60.000 lettres* (Paris, 2004); Christian Bouyer, *La princesse Palatine* (Paris, 2005).

¹⁵ Daniel Roche, *La culture équestre occidentale*, vol. II, pp. 205-15.

¹⁶ A notable exception is the 1669 equestrian manual by Gabriel de Hollande, Sieur du Breuil Pompée, which claims to be addressed to women as well as men. For a more substantial discussion of women's riding in France, one has to wait until 1741, when François-Alexandre de Garsault published his treatise, *Le Nouveau Parfait Maréchal ou la connaissance générale et universelle du cheval*.

¹⁷ Richard Almond, *Daughters of Artemis: The Huntress in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2009) and Amanda Richardson, "'Riding like Alexander, Hunting like Diana'", Gendered aspects of the Medieval Hunt and its Landscape Settings', *Gender and History* 24.2 (2012), pp. 253-70.

¹⁸ Isabelle Veauvy, Adélaïde de Savray and Isabelle de Ponton d'Amécourt (eds), *Chevalières Amazones: Une histoire singulière* (Paris, 2016), pp. 57-100.

¹⁹ Lida Fleitmann Bloodgood, *The Saddle of Queens: The Story of the Side-Saddle* (London, 1959), pp. 15-20; Gillian Newsum, *Women and Horses* (London, 1988), pp. 11-28.

With a focus on the court of Louis the XIV between 1680 and 1715, this article considers how the royal hunt gradually became a crucial site for the establishment of a thriving female horseback riding culture. At first merely ornaments to the King's retinue, courtly Amazons went on to develop independent habits by the turn of the eighteenth century. Embracing current approaches to sport history, I endeavour to trace the evolution and changing significance of early modern athletic practices acknowledging their ritualistic and antagonistic elements.²⁰ I do so with the help of contemporary accounts, most importantly the voluminous *Journal* penned by the Marquis de Dangeau, complemented by the close reading of letters and memoirs by other contemporaries that illuminate the diarist's entries with glimpses into the physical sensations and emotional experiences of these pioneering sportswomen.²¹

By the King's Side

In the late 1670s the estate and the palace of Versailles were still undergoing major expansion projects, and yet an anonymous pamphlet, *The Royal Pastime*, informs us that Louis XIV was already keen to escape from Paris and retire to that 'place full of enchantment'.²² The author, in all likelihood a courtier himself, then describes the sovereign indulging in the pleasures of the hunt with 'the group of ladies which habitually accompany his majesty in that exercise'.²³ Unfortunately none of the participants is singled out by name except Madame Palatine, commonly referred to simply as Madame, who is acknowledged as 'one of the ladies most passionate about that exercise'.²⁴ It was only in April 1683, when Dangeau started recording the minutiae of courtly routine, that more is revealed about these sportswomen at court. A close analysis of his daily reports confirms that Madame Palatine was by far the keenest of the female riders, taking part in nearly every hunt organised both by the King and his son, the Dauphin.

²⁰ Daniel O'Quinn and Alexis Tadié (eds), *Sporting Cultures, 1650–1850* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2018).

²¹ Eudore Soulié, Louis Dussieux *et al.* (eds), *Journal du marquis de Dangeau* (19 vols; Paris, 1854-60) [hereafter referred to as *Journal de Dangeau*].

²² *Le Passe-Temps Royal ou les Amours de Mademoiselle de Fontanges* (ca. 1680), p. 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

The Duchess of Orléans herself admitted that she had never ridden whilst in Heidelberg, where she lived for the first twenty years of her life. The Elector Palatine, in fact, would not permit his daughters to ‘hunt or mount on horseback’.²⁵ Soon after her arrival at the French court, however, she wrote about how she would rather have galloped than walked on a cold February afternoon in 1672.²⁶ It was only in August of the following year, two months after the birth of her first child, that the twenty-one year-old princess declared her intention of taking riding lessons.²⁷ The same day the *Gazette* reported that Madame had accompanied their Royal Highnesses on the occasion of a hunting party at Vincennes.²⁸ Progress must have been swift, for a few months later in October Madame noted how the King formally requested her company twice a week during the chase. The prospect, she commented ‘was entirely to [her] taste’, so much so that in the space of a few years she became the most accomplished Amazon at court.²⁹ Indeed, as the magazine *Mercure Galant* affirmed in June 1680, ‘there are few men who practise that exercise more vigorously’.³⁰ Unlike those men, however, Madame would mount exclusively *en amazone*, seating side-saddle according to the contemporary custom at the French court.³¹

The passion for riding and her reputation as a horsewoman *hors pair* became a fundamental element of Madame’s public persona as it was portrayed by contemporary artists and witnesses, as well as a key topic in her own writings (figure 1).³² Mareike Böth has cogently argued how her frequent rides provided Madame Palatine with much-needed *Handlungspielräume*, opportunities with scope for action necessary to her psycho-physical well-being.³³ Indeed her voluminous

²⁵ Letter dated 3 April 1699, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 36.

²⁶ Letter dated 5 February 1672, in Olivier Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame, duchesse d’Orléans, née princesse Palatine* (Paris, 2012), p. 40.

²⁷ Letter dated 5 August 1673, in Elborg Forster (ed. and trans.), *A Woman’s Life in the Court of the Sun King: Letters of Liselotte von der Pfalz* (Baltimore, 1997), p. 9.

²⁸ Dirk Van de Cruysse, *Madame Palatine, princesse européenne* (Paris, 1988), p. 201.

²⁹ Letter dated 10 October 1673, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 41.

³⁰ *Mercure Galant* (June 1680), p. 252.

³¹ Lacking any mention of women in contemporary prescriptive literature (see note 16), the female practice of riding side-saddle at the French court is attested primarily by visual sources.

³² William Brooks, *Artists’ Images and the Self-Descriptions of Elisabeth Charlotte, Duchess of Orleans (1652–1722), The Second Madame* (Lewiston, 2007), pp. 131–55; Mark de Vitis, ‘Sartorial Transgression as Socio-Political Collaboration: Madame and the Hunt’, *Konsthistorisk tidskrift / Journal of Art History*, 82:3 (2013), pp. 205–18.

³³ Mareike Böth, *Erzählweisen des Selbst: Körperpraktiken in den Briefen Liselottes von der Pfalz (1652–1722)* (Köln, 2015), pp. 205–21.

correspondence abounds with references to the therapeutic nature of her equestrian escapades.

‘Watching plays amuses more than hunting these days’, she wrote in 1699, ‘but I hunt because of my health, since if I do not take a lot of exercise I suffer terrible pains in my heart’.³⁴ Exceptional though they were, Madame’s vigorous riding and pursuit of the chase are not to be regarded as an anomaly or a breach of etiquette. On the contrary, they constituted the expression of a court culture that encouraged female display of equestrian skill, the King’s own daughters setting the example.

Going through Dangeau’s earliest records from 1684, it appears that the King’s favourite hunting companions were in fact his eldest legitimated daughters: Marie-Anne, Princess of Conti, then eighteen, and Louise-Françoise, Mademoiselle de Nantes, future Duchess of Bourbon, aged only eleven (figures 2 and 3).³⁵ Together with Madame they travelled in the King’s carriage to reach the point of the *laisser-courre*, where the actual chase started. Then Madame would always mount on horseback to join the company of sportsmen that had followed the royal carriage. The two young princesses instead often remained seated with the King, accompanying the hunt at a distance. Unlike his son the Dauphin, a furiously keen rider, Louis XIV would sometimes opt for the comfort of a carriage and female company. When he did ride, however, female courtiers were encouraged to join. In April 1684 the King went hawking in the park of Mouchy accompanied by the Princess of Conti and her ladies-in-waiting, all mounted on horseback.³⁶ In August, the King spent an entire afternoon riding around the park of Versailles surrounded by female courtiers.³⁷ During the voyage to Fontainebleau later that year, all the ladies were riding on the occasion of a boar hunt.³⁸ All the ladies, that is, except Madame la Dauphine, who on account of her fragile state of health was rarely seen outside, and never on horseback.³⁹

³⁴ Letter dated 3 April 1699, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 36.

³⁵ Marie-Anne de Bourbon (1666–1739), daughter of the King’s first official mistress, Louise de La Vallière, had married Louis-Armand, Prince of Conti, in 1680; Louise-Françoise de Bourbon (1673–1743), daughter of La Vallière’s successor, Madame de Montespan, would marry Louis III, Duke of Bourbon, in 1685.

³⁶ Entry for 25 April 1684, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, pp. 8-9.

³⁷ Entry for 19 August 1684, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, p. 49.

³⁸ Entry for 25 October 1684, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, p. 63.

³⁹ Maria Anna Victoria of Bavaria (1660–1690) had married Louis the Grand Dauphin in 1680. She held the highest position at court after the death of the Queen Marie-Thérèse in July 1683.

The image of Louis XIV surrounded by a dashing squadron of courtly Amazons does tally with Philippe Salvadori's observation that the King enjoyed hunting as a break from the performance of power, during which he could withdraw from the public stage and enjoy greater intimacy with a few people of his choice.⁴⁰ However, the relatively easy and intimate atmosphere did not mean that such occasions were devoid of political significance. On the contrary, Salvadori himself considers how hunting provided rare opportunities for courtiers to bring sensitive matters to the King's attention in an informal fashion, far from indiscreet ears.⁴¹ A careful reading of Dangeau also shows that for ladies of the court such intimacy was often extended from the hunting ground itself to the *petits soupers*, informal suppers reserved exclusively for the sportswomen, with the rare addition of the Dauphine. Depending on the sovereign's direct invitation, participation in the hunt therefore represented a clear and unmistakable marker of distinction that conferred upon the courtier the *crédit*, meaning respect and credibility, which legitimised his or her position in the eyes of fellow nobles.⁴² Royal privileges, however, could be withdrawn with the same ease as they were granted, and courtiers strove constantly to show off their worth and establish their place within a surprisingly fluid hierarchy.⁴³ Indeed Giora Sternberg's work has revealed how every moment of courtiers' public lives was characterised by status interaction.⁴⁴ Especially crucial were instances that were not regulated by the strict norms of courtly ceremonial and depended instead upon the King's will. Not formalised until 1732, the protocol regulating participation in the royal hunts constituted the perfect occasion for courtiers to break into Louis XIV's most intimate circle and for the King himself to accord or withdraw favour. The experience of Madame Palatine is a poignant testimony to the extent to which the hunt was connected to court micro-politics. At various times when her relationship with the sovereign was troubled for some reason, she found herself banned

⁴⁰ Salvadori, *La chasse sous l'Ancien Regime*, p. 215.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.

⁴² Clare Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France* (Durham, NC, and London, 2013), esp. pp. 21-32.

⁴³ Jay Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, 1996).

⁴⁴ Giora Sternberg, *Status Interaction During the Reign of Louis XIV* (Oxford, 2014).

from the hunts, thus losing her only occasion to talk to him undisturbed. This became a more common occurrence following Louis XIV's involvement with Madame de Maintenon, towards whom Madame harboured an intense and ill-concealed hostility.⁴⁵ In 1688, for example, wishing to talk to the sovereign concerning a matter of some urgency, she complained that:

If I were on friendly terms with the King, like before, and he still took me with him to the hunt, I could very easily find a way to talk to him about this matter, but he is prevented from taking me anywhere (according to the will of the old woman [Madame de Maintenon]) and if I have something to tell him, I am obliged to ask for a regular audience.⁴⁶

A similar dynamic characterised the Palatine's relationship with Louis the Dauphin. After having spent nearly twenty years in perfect agreement and enjoying each other's trust, the heir to the throne became closer to the circle of his half-sister the Duchess of Bourbon, an enemy of Madame. Since that moment, the Palatine later complained, 'I no longer went hunting with His Royal Highness; I stopped entertaining any relationship with him until his death and he behaved as if he had never seen or known me'.⁴⁷ Not even the King's favourite child and most habitual hunting companion, the Princess of Conti, was protected from his ill humour. During a journey to Chambord in September 1685, Dangeau reports how the Princess had not been invited to the hunt, and she believed 'with good reason' that she had displeased the King due to her support of her disgraced husband.⁴⁸ As a consequence of this ban the Princess 'was deeply upset all day long and cried a great deal'.⁴⁹

If being invited to the hunt represented an unequivocal badge of royal favour for a princess, it was certainly no smaller matter for one of her ladies in waiting. These too, in fact, were invited into the King's carriage and then to the *petit soupers*, thus getting a chance to enter the sovereign's

⁴⁵ Françoise d'Aubigné (1635–1719) initiated an amorous liaison with Louis XIV in the late 1670s. They were probably united in a morganatic marriage around 1683–84 and lived as husband and wife until the King's death.

⁴⁶ Letter dated 2 August 1688, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 117.

⁴⁷ Letter dated 21 May 1716, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 238. Louis stopped hunting with Madame in 1701, after the death of Monsieur; the Dauphin himself died in 1711.

⁴⁸ Entry for 12 September 1685, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, p. 220. The Prince of Conti and his brother François-Louis de Bourbon had both fallen in disgrace when their correspondence mocking the King and Madame de Maintenon was intercepted and read. Dangeau here mentions a letter written by the Princess herself during her husband's absence.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

most intimate circle. Such intimacy, however, was not devoid of dangers. The visiting Italian nobleman Primi Visconti relates how in 1678 the Princess Palatine had marked out Mademoiselle de Fontanges as a particular favourite amongst her ladies by offering to ‘take her to the hunt, which was the Princess’ favourite passion’.⁵⁰ It was probably on the occasion of one of these outdoor gatherings that this eighteen-year-old beauty caught the King’s eye, eventually becoming his lover until her sudden and possibly suspicious death three years later.⁵¹ The story of Mademoiselle de Fontanges exemplifies the risks a woman incurred when she decided to mount a horse and break into the still heavily homosocial space of the hunt. That bold intrusion entailed being in close quarters not just with the sovereign, but also with a small entourage of officers, each with keen eyes and his own agenda. The integrity of a girl’s honour at the time was of paramount importance as it ensured her position within the marriage market. Any social — let alone physical — intercourse between the sexes was therefore closely monitored. This was all the more true within the highest echelons of society, where dynastic considerations were the most pressing.⁵² At court even the slightest indiscretion was enough to generate rumours which would then spread uncontrolled.⁵³ A surprisingly heavy atmosphere reigned in the halls of Versailles, vividly described by Primi Visconti as early as 1677: ‘Except when they are conversing, princesses in France are kept in a state of slavery which is harsher than that of women in a seraglio; their looks are observed and there is not a single man around them which is not a spy of the King.’⁵⁴

Even Madame, whose general conduct was agreed to be beyond reproach, had to face repeated accusations of entertaining liaisons with this or that officer. She explained the origins of such rumours to her aunt Sophia, Electress of Hanover:

⁵⁰ Jean-François Solnon (ed.), *Mémoires de Primi Visconti sur la cour de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1988), p. 115.

⁵¹ Marie-Angélique de Scorailles was born in 1661 and died 28 June 1681. See Henri Pigaillem, *La Duchesse de Fontanges* (Paris, 2005).

⁵² Roger Duchêne, *Etre femme au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 2004), pp. 117-26.

⁵³ Nicholas Hammond, *Gossip, Sexuality and Scandal in France (1610–1715)* (Oxford, 2011).

⁵⁴ Solnon (ed.), *Mémoires de Primi Visconti*, p. 114.

when I am riding during the King's hunt, I am placed just behind the Captain of the Guards, thus being always surrounded by all the officers, who pay me small services when the occasion arises, without there being any actual intercourse between us.⁵⁵

On the other hand, getting too far away from the watchful male gaze could be even more dangerous. During a trip to Marly, Dangeau reports that when some female courtiers accompanied the Dauphin on the hunt, 'unfortunately one or two of the younger ladies were left behind, and this caused some rumours.'⁵⁶ Sadly for the historian, the author of the *Journal* does not habitually indulge in gossip, and even in this circumstance the Marquis voluntarily omits the identity of the courtiers concerned as well as the details of the rumour that was spreading on their account. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the two young ladies were not in fact alone, but they had been left behind in the company of some officers, or — worse still — they might have arranged to meet someone in the woods. Sexual slander was a damaging enough inconvenience for a married lady like Madame to endure, but it could be ruinous for a girl's reputation and prospects. Swift action was therefore taken, and Dangeau informs us that 'the young ladies have been forbidden to ride, because there has been some displeasure during the last ride at Marly'.⁵⁷ It is likely that such orders came straight from the King, and were certainly not to be taken lightly. During the following *voyage* to Fontainebleau in fact the princesses were seen riding without their habitual entourage.⁵⁸

Despite the potential social hazards involved in the exercise, by the mid-1680s more women at court had taken up riding regularly, as attested by Dangeau's chronicle of a trip to Marly in September 1686. On Monday the 23rd, 'Monseigneur, Madame de Bourbon, Madame the Princess of Conti and all the ladies who can ride on horseback went to join the King and accompanied him to the hunt'.⁵⁹ The following day too 'all the ladies rode on horseback', and finally on Thursday they

⁵⁵ Letter dated 19 September 1682, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 75.

⁵⁶ Entry for 26 September 1686, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, p. 392.

⁵⁷ Entry for 10 October 1686, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, p. 398.

⁵⁸ Entries for 11, 13 and 14 October 1686, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, pp. 399-400.

⁵⁹ Entry for 23 September 1686 in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, p. 390.

enjoyed one last ride before their return to Versailles.⁶⁰ This was to become the norm during the traditional voyage to Fontainebleau for the rest of the 1680s.⁶¹ The habit of frequent horseback exercise seems to have caught on rather quickly, especially amongst the younger generation, and indeed it appears as though being a keen horsewoman had become a key prerequisite for being invited to accompany the royal family. In January 1690 a small number of courtiers followed the King to Marly, and another of his legitimated daughters, the Duchess of Chartres, is recorded to have brought only one lady-in-waiting, Mademoiselle de Bouillon, ‘because she rides on horseback and will take part in the hunts’ (figure 4).⁶² The fact that Dangeau immediately remarked that Mademoiselle de Bouillon ‘never before had been invited to stay in Marly’ suggests that her equestrian skilfulness had helped her to gain favour with the young princess. In preparation for the following royal *voyage*, the criteria for being invited were spelled out more clearly. The King himself ‘demanded of the princesses the names of those ladies who will mount on horseback in order to define who will go to Compiègne’.⁶³ A list of courtly Amazons had to be drawn up. On the occasion of another journey to Chantilly in March 1693, the Duchess of Humières and the Countess of Courtenvaux were asked to accompany the princesses for the express purpose of riding ‘with them during the hunts and the military reviews’.⁶⁴

Ladies Take the Lead

As more and more women became keen to ride, the King appeared less inclined to do so himself. Indeed between the late 1680s and the early 1690s, Louis XIV hardly ever hunted on horseback. To be sure, he would still set off straight after lunch, taking groups of ladies in his carriage, as was his

⁶⁰ Entries for 24 and 26 September 1686, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. I, pp. 391-2.

⁶¹ For example entries for 5 October 1687, 9 October 1688 and 16 October 1689, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. II, pp. 51, 184; and vol. III, p. 8.

⁶² Entry for 14 January 1693, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. IV, p. 222. The second legitimated daughter of the Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan, Françoise-Marie de Bourbon (1677–1749) married the King’s brother’s only son, Philippe, Duke of Chartres. Marie-Elisabeth de La Tour d’Auvergne (1666–1725) was the eldest daughter of Godefroy-Maurice, Duke of Bouillon, and the King’s former mistress, Maria Anna Mancini.

⁶³ Entry for 17 February 1690, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. III, p. 68.

⁶⁴ Entry for 1 March 1693, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. IV, p. 241. The ladies mentioned are Louise-Antoinette de la Châtre, Duchess of Humières (1635–1723), former lady-in-waiting to the Queen, Marie-Thérèse of Austria, and Anne Catherine d’Estrées, Countess of Courtenvaux (1663–1741).

custom. Once the party reached the *laisser-courre*, however, all female courtiers mounted on horseback while the King moved into a little *chaise* from which he could follow the hunt, driving himself. By April 1701, Dangeau was describing the following routine: ‘After lunch the King got in a little carriage with Madame and went to hunt deer. When they reached the *laisser-courre*, Madame always mounts on horseback, and the King takes his place in a carriage which is even smaller and he drives himself’.⁶⁵ One year later Madame Palatine, having driven in the new vehicle herself, assures us that the King’s carriage and horses are indeed very little ‘but they run so well that they always manage to keep up with the hounds and not lose the hunt, so much so that one has the impression of being on horseback’.⁶⁶

At the turn of the century the role of lead horseman left vacant by an ageing Louis XIV was about to be filled by what would appear at first a rather unlikely candidate, his teenage granddaughter Marie-Adélaïde of Savoy. The Piedmontese princess had arrived at court in 1696, aged eleven, to marry Louis, Duke of Burgundy, the Dauphin’s eldest son and third in line to the throne.⁶⁷ The King took an immediate liking to this lively and pretty child, whose sole objective seemed to please and entertain. Soon after her arrival, the acute eye of Madame Palatine had already discerned how the apparently careless and naïve behaviour of Marie-Adélaïde was in fact ‘tremendously political’.⁶⁸ She certainly had a talent for falling in with the preferences of her new ‘grandpapa’, including his love of hunting. Once her education was completed at the Collège de Saint-Cyr, the King took it upon himself to introduce the young Duchess to the ways of Versailles. Dangeau first recorded her participation in the hunt in the autumn of 1698, describing the royal grandfather and granddaughter travelling together in the King’s little carriage.⁶⁹ It would take two more years, however, before the Duchess would be deemed ready to start taking riding lessons

⁶⁵ Entry for 26 April 1701, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 88.

⁶⁶ Letter dated 16 May 1702, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, pp. 318-19.

⁶⁷ Martial Debriffe, *La Duchesse de Bourgogne: Mère de Louis XV* (Paris, 2007).

⁶⁸ Letters dated 3 and 25 November 1696 in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, pp. 201, 203.

⁶⁹ Entries for 24 October and 4 November 1698, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VI, pp. 448, 454.

herself, and the records of her progress in becoming proficient on horseback provide a unique insight into the equestrian training of a young woman at the very start of the eighteenth century.

It was August 1700 when Marie-Adélaïde paid a visit to the Duchess of Noailles in her residence at Saint-Germain. There the young Duchess of Burgundy ‘mounted on horseback for the first time in the paths of the park.’⁷⁰ The exercise was repeated the following week, and this second time the princess ventured beyond the gardens’ perimeter to take a promenade to a neighbouring village.⁷¹ The fact that Dangeau, ever the selective chronicler, should choose to give a precise account of the Duchess of Burgundy’s first equestrian exploits is alone a strong indicator that they represented a key moment in the formation of a young girl who might, one day, become queen. An intimate of Madame de Maintenon, and the female head of one of the most powerful clans at the French court, Madame de Noailles had already managed to obtain a place for one of her daughters, Madame d’Estrées, as lady-in-waiting to the young Duchess.⁷² To supervise, however informally, the equestrian education of the future Dauphine was yet another clear sign of her favour and influence. Madame de Noailles was no Amazon herself; in April that same year Madame de Maintenon had noted how she would not be invited to a *voyage* at Marly on account of the excursion being ‘reserved for the ladies who mount on horseback.’⁷³

Dangeau does not provide further updates concerning the equestrian training of the little Duchess throughout the autumn, but it must have progressed successfully since on the 26th of December the Marquis announced that she would ‘mount for the first time the following Thursday to hunt hares.’⁷⁴ Which she did, on the 30th:

Madame the Duchess of Burgundy mounted on horseback at the gate of the park and went in the *grand parc* to hunt some hares with the greyhounds, and then joined the

⁷⁰ Entry for 2 August 1700, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VII, p. 350. Marie-Françoise de Bournonville, Duchess of Noailles (1656–1748).

⁷¹ Entry for 9 August 1700, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VII, p. 353.

⁷² Lucie-Félicité de Noailles (1683–1745) married Count Victor-Marie d’Estrées in January 1698 and was made *Dame du Palais* soon afterwards. Adolphe Chéruel (ed.), *Mémoires complets et authentiques du duc de Saint-Simon sur le siècle de Louis XIV et la Régence* (Paris, 1856–58), vol. II, p. 10.

⁷³ Letter dated 7 April 1701, in Théophile Lavallée (ed.), *Correspondance générale de Madame de Maintenon* (Paris, 1865–66), vol. IV, pp. 421-2.

⁷⁴ Entry for 26 December 1700, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VII, p. 465.

King; she observed him shooting and went back to the Ménagerie, where she had lunch at four o'clock. She had never ridden a horse anywhere else than in Madame de Noailles' garden in Saint-Germain; she is very graceful and not at all awkward in conducting her horse.⁷⁵

Marie-Adélaïde was naturally talented and rapidly developed a taste for riding, and in February 1701 an official announcement was issued, requesting that all the ladies — dames and demoiselles — who knew how to ride should be ready to follow the Duchess on occasion of the *cavalcades*, which she enjoyed greatly.⁷⁶ The first cavalcade took place on Monday 21 February, when the Duchess appeared accompanied by six ladies, including Madame d'Estrées and her younger sister the Duchess of La Vallière.⁷⁷ Endowed with 'more wit, more reason and more cunning than all the Noailles put together', according to Saint-Simon, Madame de La Vallière gained the Duchess's favour and was appointed lady-in-waiting in 1707 following the death of Madame de Montgon.⁷⁸ On the next occasion, 1 March, 'in addition to all those [ladies] who were present the first time, there were also the Duchess of Lesdiguières and Madame de Villacerf.'⁷⁹ Then again on the 10th of the same month, 'Madame the Duchess of Burgundy rode on horseback with many ladies; Mademoiselle d'Enghien et Mademoiselle de Bouillon were present, in addition to all those that have already taken part'.⁸⁰ Dangeau deliberately provides the information in a cumulative way, as if to show that Louis XIV's orders had been duly followed and a squadron of Amazons had been formed to please the Duchess. The King himself took part in the first two outings and went hawking with the ladies. An easier and more relaxed type of hunt, falconry allowed for the company of female courtiers to meander at a slow pace whilst admiring the birds' flight across the landscape

⁷⁵ Entry for 30 December 1700, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VII, p. 468.

⁷⁶ Entry for 21 February 1701, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 40.

⁷⁷ Entry for 21 February 1701, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 42.

⁷⁸ Marie-Thérèse de Noailles (1684–1784) married Charles-François de La Baume Le Blanc, Duke of La Vallière, in 1698. *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, vol. V, p. 333.

⁷⁹ Entry for 1 March 1701, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 48. Louise-Bernarde de Durfort, daughter of the Marshal of Duras (born 1676); and Geneviève Larcher, Marquise of Villacerf (d. 1712).

⁸⁰ Entry for 10 March 1701, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 53. Marie-Anne de Bourbon, Mlle d'Enghien (1678–1718), daughter of the Prince of Condé.

(figure 5). On the occasion of the third cavalcade, the sovereign left the ladies to their own amusements, preferring instead the quiet of Trianon and Madame de Maintenon's company. From then onwards, Louis XIV appears to have given up the habit of going out in the afternoon, even in his little carriage, thus causing Madame Palatine to lament in 1703 that 'the King does not hunt any more'.⁸¹ Time would prove Madame's concerns to be excessive, since in the following years Louis XIV did occasionally hawk or simply follow the ladies. The grounds of Versailles and other royal residences, however, were left mostly at the disposal of the Duchess of Burgundy to organise her outings as she pleased.

Dangeau's particular use of the term *cavalcade* to indicate such occasions should not pass unnoticed. This word of Italian origin indicated a 'ceremonial march where courtiers and people on horseback accompany and honour their prince', but it could also be used 'to describe a promenade or a short journey made by people on horseback to reach a destination close by'.⁸² Though lacking the pomp and almost liturgical aura of a royal equestrian procession, the cavalcades led by the Duchess did become the embodiment of her power and right to command, if only a small group of ladies. Other noblewomen at Versailles were surrounded by their own coterie, and indeed Marie-Adélaïde engaged in more or less open confrontation with other female members of the royal family such as the Duchess of Bourbon, supported by the *cabale* de Meudon, and the Duchess of Maine who held her own court at Sceaux.⁸³ Traditionally such rivalries had found expression in the patronage of the arts. The Duchess of Burgundy had instead shifted this very female confrontation to horseback and the traditionally masculine arena of the hunt. Never, in fact, had the King's own daughters aspired to set up an independent riding equipage at court, nor had the skilled Madame ever considered taking such a lead. They all accepted that they occupied a subordinate position to

⁸¹ Letter dated 18 January 1703, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 327.

⁸² Entry in Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (Rotterdam, 1690). This appears unchanged in the 1702 re-edition (vol. I, p. 331).

⁸³ Louise-Bénédicte de Bourbon (1676–1753), daughter of the Prince of Condé, married the King's illegitimate son Louis-Auguste, Duke of Maine, in 1692. Catherine Cessac, 'La duchesse du Maine et la duchesse de Bourgogne: d'une cour à l'autre', in Fabrice Preyat (ed.), *Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie (1685–1712), Duchesse de Bourgogne, enfant terrible de Versailles*, Etudes sur le XVIII^e Siècle XXXI (Brussels, 2014), pp. 127-38.

the man who was at once the head of the Bourbon family and of the French monarchy. The sight of a cavalcade of ladies led by the Duchess of Burgundy must have appeared novel in the eyes of an observer such as Dangeau, a fact that accounts for the considerable space these occasions take up in his journal. Moreover, Marie-Adélaïde's equestrian activities took place at the heart of the court, on the very sites that were most directly associated with the display of royal power. Her physical conquest of the *grand parc* and other hunting grounds with the King's permission signified her political influence and granted her the status of an almost-kingly surrogate. Pierre Gobert portrays her in 1704 as a confident *maîtresse des lieux*, sporting a scarlet riding dress, one arm akimbo and the other pointing at the Grand Canal at Fontainebleau (figure 6).⁸⁴

Stepping into the King's riding boots, the Duchess of Burgundy did not simply try to reproduce the model of the royal hunts. On the contrary, the cavalcades lacked any strictly ritualised form or even organic planning. Female courtiers would just gather in the afternoon at the Ménagerie, which had been renovated in 1698 by order of the King and then offered to the Duchess as a personal retreat in the park.⁸⁵ From there the party would set off to ride around the park or a longer journey, the destination often being chosen on the spur of the moment. One day in August 1707, the Duchess had already mounted on horseback when she was informed that her father-in-law the Dauphin had organised a breakfast party at Chaville, some six miles away. The gathering had been organised, Dangeau adds, in honour of the Duchess of Bourbon and the Princess of Conti 'who would mount on horseback, despite the fact that they hadn't ridden in a long time'.⁸⁶ Determined not to be left out, Marie-Adélaïde and all the ladies of her suite 'galloped at full speed' to get there in time.⁸⁷ By this period, news of the young Duchess's equestrian activities must have reached far beyond the walls of Versailles and attracted considerable interest. On 5 September 1707, Dangeau informs us that when the Duke and Duchess of Burgundy went out for a ride from Versailles to the park of Boulogne accompanied by many ladies, 'an infinite number of people

⁸⁴ Pierre Gobert, *The Duchess of Burgundy in Hunting Dress*, 1704. Château de Versailles.

⁸⁵ Pierre-André Lablaude, *Les Jardins de Versailles* (Paris, 1995), p. 72.

⁸⁶ Entry for 29 August 1707, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 450.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

came from Paris by carriage to witness the cavalcade'.⁸⁸ The *Mercure Galant* also reported the event, describing how 'the Duchess of Burgundy went for a long promenade in the park with around twenty ladies'. This is the one instance, in what little remains of her personal correspondence, when Marie-Adélaïde herself refers to her riding activities. Writing to her grandmother in Turin, she apologises: 'I will not write a longer letter because tomorrow I will go for a promenade at the park of Boulogne'.⁸⁹

The informal and easy atmosphere of these cavalcades is accompanied by another crucial change in the conception of female courtly horseback riding. Releasing the practice of riding from the ritualised, performative, and ostensibly functional character of the hunt, horseback exercise was now being undertaken for its own sake, and placed at the very centre of courtly activity. In other words the cavalcades separated the display of athletic skill from the act of the chase, thus allowing some space for experimentation with riding techniques. On one occasion Dangeau observed some ladies at the Ménagerie, 'trying to mount one leg on each side, to keep a better balance on the saddle'.⁹⁰ The quiet pace of the promenade was sometimes abandoned in favour of a gallop whose dangerous speed tested the skill of the riders, sometimes with painful consequences. One June afternoon of 1707, the Duchess went out on a ride with four female companions, her husband and her brother-in-law, the Duke of Berry. They galloped all the way to the tower of La Bretèche, around eight miles northwest towards Marly, and on the way back one of the ladies 'had a bad fall'. Accidents were a common occurrence during the vigorous *chasses à courre*, and ladies were particularly susceptible on account of riding side-saddle. Facing left and with her right leg wrapped around the saddle's pommel, the Amazon must balance her weight by means of a constant tension in the lower back's left side. Especially when galloping or jumping, the necessity constantly to lean forward renders the body's balance more precarious and increases the possibility of a fall.⁹¹ To prevent such falls, an extra horn had already been added to the saddle towards the end of the

⁸⁸ Entry for Monday 5 September 1707, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, p. 454.

⁸⁹ Albert Gagnière (ed.) *Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie: Lettres et Correspondances* (Paris, 1897), pp. 264-5.

⁹⁰ Entry for 28 August 1707, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. VIII, pp. 449-50.

⁹¹ Janet W. Macdonald, *Riding Side-Saddle* (London, 1995), pp. 53-60.

sixteenth century, thus creating a *fourche*, that is a space where the female rider could wedge the lower part of her right leg.⁹² Despite such precautions, even an experienced rider was bound to suffer a number of falls. Madame Palatine herself admitted to having been unseated no fewer than twenty-six times, although, she added proudly, ‘I was seriously injured only once’.⁹³ In another letter penned in the aftermath of one of those falls, Madame stressed the importance of learning how to dismount safely and rapidly in case of an emergency.⁹⁴

Even in the absence of accidents, royal hunts were a rather demanding exercise as they entailed spending long hours in the saddle, often in far from ideal weather conditions. As Dangeau’s records confirm, hunting was practised throughout the year regardless of the weather, no exceptions being made for the ladies present. Twice in the autumn of 1687, the Marquis notes how the hunt had taken place under such heavy rain that the ladies who rode ‘got extremely wet and were covered in mud.’⁹⁵ Only once in March 1689 the King and the usual contingent of female courtiers on horseback were forced to retire due to a sudden snowfall.⁹⁶ In addition to all this, ladies had to endure prolonged exposition to sun and wind that would damage their complexions and threaten the pallor that was considered a marker of aristocratic beauty. ‘Hunting is certainly more beneficial to my health than my complexion’, remarked Madame Palatine in 1693.⁹⁷ Later in 1706 she further commented, ‘I know full well how it feels to expose oneself to a burning sun on occasion of the hunt; many a time I have spent the day out hunting from the morning until five in the afternoon; even nine in summer. I used to come back red like a lobster, my complexion entirely burnt’.⁹⁸ However uncomfortable and tiring, ‘it is not the hunts that have made me grow old and ugly’, explained Madame in 1678, ‘but rather court intrigues, which in the last seven years have caused me so many wrinkles all over my face’.⁹⁹ And it was to find relief from the many disappointments

⁹² Lida Fleitmann Bloodgood, *The Saddle of Queens: The Story of the Side-Saddle* (London, 1959), pp. 15-30.

⁹³ Letter dated 9 November 1709, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 122.

⁹⁴ Letter dated 29 September 1683, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 95

⁹⁵ Entry for 6 and 8 November 1687, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. II, pp. 61, 63.

⁹⁶ Entry for 17 March 1689, in *Journal de Dangeau*, vol. II, pp. 353-4.

⁹⁷ Letter dated 13 October 1693, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 160.

⁹⁸ Letter dated 12 June 1706, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 88.

⁹⁹ Letter dated 14 November 1678, in Amiel (ed.), *Lettres de Madame*, p. 50.

and frustrations of life at court that Madame kept riding until she started fearing that her horse could not carry her weight any more. The Duchess of Burgundy too seems to have found exercise therapeutic, keeping her body busy in order to cope with personal and political anxieties, which increased during the last years of her brief life. In the summer of 1710, Madame de Maintenon noticed how the princess ‘strives to exhaust herself: she runs on foot, on horseback, in a carriage, and her worries with her.’¹⁰⁰ Marie-Adélaïde’s last years at the French court in fact proved more challenging as she loyally stood by her husband and supported his political views and military career. Nevertheless, the princess managed to retain her active and joyous disposition. When she died of smallpox in February 1712, followed by her husband only six days later, Saint-Simon wrote: ‘With her disappeared all the joy, pleasures, amusements even, and all things agreeable; darkness covered the surface of the court: it was she who kept it animated, filling every place at once’.¹⁰¹

Despite her premature disappearance, the Duchess of Burgundy was to leave a lasting mark on the life of Versailles and those places that she had so vivaciously ‘filled’. Under her leadership the traditionally masculine arena of the royal hunt was transformed into a space for ladies to exercise, initiating a love affair between equestrianism and female courtiers that did not wane until the very end of the French monarchy itself. Moreover, that passion for horseback riding that she had instilled in the heart of many women at court continued to flourish and thrive beyond palace walls and aristocratic circles. Thus was born a new and distinctly French ideal of athletic femininity that found its natural place in the saddle.¹⁰² Four years after Marie-Adélaïde’s death, Madame Palatine reflected on the personality of her two grand-daughters. Of one, the twenty-one-year-old Marie-Louise-Elisabeth, Madame said, ‘I often mock Madame de Berry saying that she affects a liking for the hunt, whereas what she really likes is just the movement from place to place’.¹⁰³ And about the

¹⁰⁰ Letter dated 19 July 1710, in *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon à M. le Duc de Noailles* (Amsterdam, 1756), p. 160.

¹⁰¹ Chérueil (ed.), *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, vol. IX, p. 203.

¹⁰² Catherine Tourre-Malen, *Femmes à cheval: La féminisation des sports et des loisirs équestres: Une avancée?* (Paris, 2006).

¹⁰³ Letter dated 28 October 1716, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 275. Marie-Louise-Elisabeth (1695–1719), daughter of Philippe d’Orléans and Françoise-Marie de Bourbon, youngest legitimised daughter of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan. She had married the King’s third grandson, Charles, Duke of Berry, in 1710.

other, Mademoiselle de Chartres: ‘she persists in her desire to become a nun, but I cannot believe that she has a true vocation, for she has all the inclinations of a boy; she likes dogs, horses, the hunt, and gunshots’.¹⁰⁴ Different though they were, these girls had one thing in common. Their female character was to be shaped by, and measured against, their relationship to horseback riding and the hunt.

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¹⁰⁴ Letter dated 12 August 1716, in *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 263. Louise-Adélaïde, Mlle de Chartres (1698–1743) indeed took the veil in 1717, and later became Abbess of Chelles.