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Grand Tour Correspondence in the Time of War: The Early Stages of the War of the Spanish Succession in the Letters of Henry Bentinck, Viscount Woodstock and His Tutor Paul Rapin-Thoyras (1701–1702)

Summary: Letters sent during a Grand Tour, an early modern educational journey, are often considered important sources for the history of tourism and travel, history of diplomacy or family relations. However, the example of the correspondence of the Anglo-Dutch nobleman Henry Bentinck, Viscount Woodstock and his Huguenot tutor, Paul Rapin-Thoyras with Woodstock's father, Hans Willem Bentinck, the 1st Earl of Portland, demonstrates that these letters can also contain important information on various military aspects and provide another view on known events such as during the War of the Spanish Succession. In this article, several examples of such cases are examined, together with the alternative, fuller story of the capture of the French Marechal De Villeroy by the Imperial forces. Portland, whose letters are not preserved, was a close friend of King William III of England and was a key figure in Anglo-Dutch politics at the time, thus being in the midst of the events. The analysis is conducted based on Grand Tour letters written in French and sent from various locations both by the pupil and his tutor.

Keywords: War of the Spanish Succession, Grand Tour, correspondence, letters, intelligence, army, military

Introduction

The Grand Tour was the highest point of one's education in the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries. It was a journey, which was supposed to get the young man (as it was usually males who undertook it) acquainted with the traditions of different countries, their languages, as well as to reinforce family relations with



foreign connections and present the offspring to them.¹ It was therefore the obvious choice for the aristocracy of the time to send their offspring on such an educational journey. When in the summer of 1700, Hans Willem Bentinck, the 1st Earl of Portland, a prominent Anglo-Dutch politician and courtier, a close friend of William III, Stadtholder of Holland and King of England, decided upon the grand tour for his son, Henry Bentinck, Viscount Woodstock, the political situation in Europe was aggravated by growing tensions between the Holy Roman Empire and France, who were both interested in obtaining the Spanish crown for their respective heirs. Although there were talks concerning the possible outbreak of war, Portland decided that the journey should nonetheless proceed.²

Portland decided that Woodstock's head tutor, Paul Rapin-Thoyras, the future author of the first comprehensive history of England, should plan the trip and accompany Woodstock as his travelling tutor. He was tasked with overseeing the journey, taking care of finances and reporting to the father on the trip's progress. The Grand Tour began in the second half of 1701 from The Hague in the United Provinces, and eventually lasted until May 1703, though the last year was undertaken by Woodstock alone, with his tutor returning to the United Provinces in the autumn of 1702. During the Grand Tour, it was customary for the offspring to write letters home, as is the case here, in order to report on the journey's progress and the most important events. The War of Spanish Succession broke out in the spring of 1702, but the first signs were already being seen in the summer of 1701, just as Woodstock and Rapin were finalising their preparations. It was therefore present in the background of the Grand Tour from the start.

The correspondence from Woodstock and Rapin to Portland is fully preserved, whereas Portland's responses are not. This collection provides a unique perspective on the early stages of the war, sometimes presenting alternative versions of well-known events, as I will discuss further in the article. In the following passages, I will analyse some of the references Woodstock and Rapin made to the war, which was never the main subject of their letters, in particular focussing on potential intelligence information and on the capturing of the French commander, the Duc de Villeroy, which is portrayed differently here compared with existing scholarship. While previous studies have explored the educational aspects of their Grand Tour and have examined the correspondence in terms of privacy, its war-related content remains underexplored.³

1 There is a wide range of scholarly research on the nature of the Grand Tour, such as: Chaney E. 1998; Black J. 2003; Sweet R., Verhoeven G., Goldsmith S. (eds), 2017.

2 For a details study of the War of the Spanish succession see: Pohlig M., Schaich M. (eds), 2018.

3 I have edited the entire correspondence in: Green M. (ed.), 2021. The original introduction in English to this volume has been published as: Green M. 2025. Previously, I have also written about the educational aspect of this grand tour in: Green M. 2014, 465–478. The event of capturing Villeroy has been briefly discussed in the introduction to the correspondence edition. All references in this article as to the printed edition of this correspondence, translated by the author from French to English.

Before delving into the subject matter of this article, let us briefly understand the type of source that we encounter here. Letters are one of the components of the so-called egodocuments, which are texts written by oneself about oneself.⁴ In the case of family letters, to which the correspondence discussed here belongs, they are part of the realm of private writing, i.e. aimed at a specific circle of people.⁵ Importantly, one needs to take into account that letters sent in the early modern period could be intercepted and read by an unauthorised person, despite some legislation on that matter in countries like Denmark-Norway and France. Even when the letters had reached the addressees untouched, they would have often been read by the secretary, or read aloud to the family or members of the household. The household is considered to be one of the so-called heuristic zones of early modern privacy, which means that there was a certain amount of access to information between various inhabitants of the house.⁶ It was therefore understood by the writer that not everything could be confined to paper. Besides that, letter-writing in this specific case had an educational purpose, as it was customary for children, even older ones to write to their parents to practice their epistolary skills, and during the grand tour the goal was to inform the family of the whereabouts of the travellers and their well-being. Building on this context, the focus can move to several letters written as part of the previously mentioned Grand Tour correspondence that address various aspects of the War of the Spanish Succession.

After six months of preparation by Jean Rou (1638–1711), who tutored the young Viscount Woodstock in the history of Europe for context, and endless negotiations with his father over the route, the journey began on October 22, 1701, from The Hague, proceeding through the German States to Italy and back.⁷ The journey ended on May 30, 1703. The correspondence, written in French, mentioned the word ‘guerre’ (war) for the first time in the first letter, written by Rapin to Portland from The Hague, before the journey started: ‘I take the liberty of sending you [Portland – M.G.] a project of the journey abridged as I made before all these noises of the war.’⁸ This initial plan also mentioned, in addition to those previously listed Hungary, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Southern Italy, as well as France to Calais. All these would be abandoned due to the conditions on the ground. Woodstock echoes the rumours, as on March 29, 1701, Woodstock writes, still from his residence in The Hague, that he doubts it would be a good idea to travel, as if the war starts, and he would not be

4 Dekker R. 1989, 61–71.

5 On letter writing, see: Daybell J., Gordon A. (eds), 2016; Daybell J. 2024.

6 Zones of privacy were developed by Mette Birkedal Bruun, and elsewhere I have proposed an alternative version of this methodological tool. See: Birkedal Bruun M. 2022, 12–6; Green M., Huysman I. 2023, 13–26.

7 Green M. 2015, 350–353.

8 ‘Je prends la liberté de lui envoyer un projet de voyage en abrégé tel que je l’avais fait avant tous ces bruits de guerre.’ Green M. (ed.), 2021, 81.

part of the army, he would then be considered coward.⁹ His preference was to join the army instead, as the Dutch and the English would connect their powers to fight against the old enemy – the French.

The first letter written from the journey dates October 31, 1701, and was sent from Dusseldorf, and Woodstock reassures his father that: '[...] my journey will be as it is marked on the paper that Mr Rapin had the honour to give you, in case that any minor change could happen, I will not neglect to inform you about it as soon as possible.'¹⁰ This makes it clear that the travelling party is aware that the war would probably make significant changes to their plans.

On the way through various German towns, it seems that Rapin and Woodstock were also collecting intelligence for Portland that could be useful for the war. For example, in a letter sent by Rapin from Frankfurt on November 15, 1701, he informs the earl that after dinner they climbed up to the castle of Eberstein (mentioned as *Erbreitein* by the author), in a carriage of six horses, something that Rapin thought would be impossible because of the steepness of the mountain. The position of this castle, which is located on a hill on the river Murg in Bavaria, is so advantageous that it can only be attacked from one point, and it takes no less than three armies to block it. In the book *Topographia Archiducatus Carinthiae*, the author explains that it is very big and built in an 'old-fashioned' way.¹¹

The French cannonaded and bombarded it while the Elector was in his house, which made the Elector very angry, as far as I was able to understand from his speeches. Mr. Baron de Saffich¹² told us that Mr. de Boufflers¹³ had shown him an order signed by the King of France, to sack and destroy everything that belonged to the Elector of Trier without sparing anything, being in despair because the Elector had not wanted to put Coblenz in his hands, at the time of the King's [William III – M.G] passage to England.¹⁴

9 Green M. (ed.), 2021, 84.

10 '[...] mon voyage, ce sera comme c'est marqué sur le papier que Mr. Rapin a eu l'honneur de vous donner, en cas qu'il y puisse arriver le moindre changement, je ne manquerai pas de vous le faire savoir aussitôt.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 97.

11 Valvasor J.R. 1688, 33.

12 Most likely it is Carl Caspar, baron of Leyen zu Saffig (d. 1703) and held the position of obermarschall of the city of Treves. See: Green M. (ed.), 2021, 103, footnote 80.

13 Louis François duke of Boufflers and count of Cagny (1644–1711), one of the French generals during the War of the Spanish Succession. See: Green M. (ed.), 2021, 104, footnote 81.

14 'La situation de ce château est si avantageuse qu'il ne peut être attaqué que par un seul endroit, et il ne faut pas moins de trois armées pour le bloquer. Les Français le canonnèrent et bombardèrent pendant que l'Électeur [Maximilian II Emmanuel] était dans sa maison; ce qui fâcha beaucoup l'Électeur, autant que je l'ai pu comprendre de ses discours; et Mr. le baron de Saffich nous dit que Mr. de Boufflers lui avait fait voir un ordre signé par le roi de France, de saccager et détruire tout ce qui appartiendrait à l'Électeur de Trèves sans rien épargner, étant au désespoir de ce que l'Électeur n'avait pas voulu lui mettre Coblenz entre les mains, dans le temps du passage du roi [Guillaume III] en Angleterre.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 104.

In the passage above, Rapin informs Portland in disguise of telling an old story of 1689, from the time of the Glorious Revolution, that the castle is located at a strategic point and cannot be easily taken. Yet, in 1701, Maximilian II Emanuel was on the French side, rather than the Holy Roman Empire, and as such was a potential enemy. Therefore, this information can indeed have a certain military value. This also reinforces the assumption that perhaps the letters sent to Portland from the Grand Tour were meant not only to inform about the whereabouts and deeds of the travelling party, but also to pass intelligence to the earl, who in turn would forward it to William III.



Fig. 1. Castle Eberstain (Source: Valvasor J.R. 1688, 34)

Such intertwining of information that could be considered militarily important with daily life during the Grand Tour happened repeatedly. Particularly interesting is Rapin's letter written in Munich on December 1, 1701. In the first part of the letter, he informs Portland of the people Woodstock and himself had met while passing through Frankfurt and Nuremberg. The last section of this description concerns the city of Augsburg, where after the usual meetings Rapin begins to detail something that potentially could have dual interpretations:

[...] the towers, by which the water is raised to more than 200 feet, to then distribute it into the various fountains of the city; a postern or secret door of a very particular invention, by which people can be let in during the night without there being any fear of surprise; this postern is composed of 4 or 5 large doors, and a drawbridge,

which open and close by themselves, without anyone ever being found in their path; a servant who is in the middle of a house more than 200 paces away, moves all these springs with surprising ease and promptness.¹⁵

While this passage could be completely innocent, telling Portland about the wonderful mechanical construction that Woodstock and Rapin observed along the way, this information could also be used by military intelligence to help capture the city.

The Capture of the Duc de Villeroy

Due to the limited scope of this article, it is worthwhile focusing on the most important piece of information that this correspondence provides – the capture of François de Neufville (1664–1730), duc de Villeroy, the commander of the French forces. Marechal de Villeroy gained his position following the injury sustained by Marechal Nicolas de Catinat (1637–1712) at the Battle of Chiari. Villeroy's Imperial counterpart was Prince Eugene of Savoy, who defeated his predecessor in Chiari, and then having conducted the siege of Mantua, captured the duke himself during the Battle of Cremona.

Rapin writes on February 11, 1702, from Vienna that Woodstock and himself were planning to go to Innsbruck, where they wanted to see the duke, who, according to rumours 'makes a very bad impression' (*fait une très mauvaise figure*), promising Portland to send a more detailed account of his capturing.¹⁶ Woodstock, who sent his letter the same day as usual, echoes Rapin's words, saying that Villeroy 'resembles a knight in poor shape' (*ressemble au chevalier de la triste figure*).¹⁷

In a letter sent from Innsbruck on February 28, Rapin recounts that he and Woodstock had visited the Marechal the previous day (February 27, 1702). The Marechal received them amicably, trying to appear as one of Portland's friends. The obvious question is naturally why Woodstock and Rapin visited an enemy commander, and why they would express care for him and make an effort to help him in his captivity? This can be explained to some extent by the fact that both Woodstock and Rapin accompanied Portland, as already mentioned above a personal friend of William III, during his one-year-stay in Paris as the diplomatic envoy to the French Court in 1698, where they probably had the opportunity to meet Villeroy in person and establish

15 '[...] les tours, par lesquelles on élève l'eau à plus de 200 pieds, pour la distribuer ensuite dans les diverses fontaines de la ville; une poterne ou porte secrète d'une invention très particulière, par laquelle on peut laisser entrer les gens durant la nuit sans qu'il y ait à craindre aucune surprise; cette poterne est composé de 4 ou 5 grandes portes, et d'un pont-levis, qui s'ouvrent et se ferment d'elles même[s], sans qu'on trouve jamais personne en son chemin; une servante qui est dans le milieu d'une maison éloignée de plus de 200 pas, fait mouvoir tous ces ressorts avec une facilité et une promptitude surprenante.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 109.

16 Green M. (ed.), 2021, 145.

17 Green M. (ed.), 2021, 146.

personal connections with him.¹⁸ There was obviously mutual recognition between Villeroy and Woodstock since the duke agreed to receive him in his prison. Perhaps, due to his very poor state and being frightened, he was hoping that through Woodstock he could somehow get some of his pleas to William III. Importantly, Rapin states that:

What he told me agrees quite well with what I had the honour of writing to Your Excellency these last few days, except for a few circumstances which I did not know; He was taken by an Irish captain named Macdonnal, whom he offered 3,000 pistols and a regiment in France if he would let him go, but he refused him. Mr de Villeroy was slightly wounded by a blow from a partisan, which grazed his stomach, and by a sword wound to the hand, which is not much: he is very worried about his future.¹⁹

Here, the letter reveals details that the known accounts of the duke's capture do not mention. The existing accounts, for example, fail to mention the wounds he sustained in battle, yet they refer to Marquis de Crenan, who was with him during the battle and died from his injuries.²⁰ The diary of the Duc de Saint-Simon, often used by historians to gather information about the court of Louis XIV, states that Macdonnal (or Macdonald) requested 1,000 pistols for the duke's release.²¹ Interestingly, the memoirs of Prince Eugene of Savoy mention a considerable amount of 10,000 pistols.²² It appears that, due to the first-hand information provided by Villeroy to Woodstock and Rapin, this account is likely the most accurate.

On February 28, 1702, the day after the visit, Rapin informs Portland in his letter that Woodstock could not write a letter to his father because he visited the duke and offered the duke money (probably to help him maintain himself), which he refused.²³ Curiously, Rapin also states that Villeroy asked both Woodstock and himself to send a letter on his behalf to the Cardinal d'Estrées, which was nothing but an account of what had happened in Cremona.²⁴ The account of Woodstock of the same meeting with the duke was written on March 3, 1702, and sent from Venice. It is a slightly more

18 Bentinck represented at the court his friend William III, Stadtholder of Holland and King of England. See: Bezemer-Sellers V. 1990, 99–130, here 99. On the almost lifelong friendship between the two, see the classic work: Grew M.E. 1924.

19 'Ce qu'il me dit s'accorde assez bien à ce que j'eus l'honneur d'écrire à Votre Excellence ces jours passées, à quelques circonstances près, que je ne savais pas; c'est un capitaine irlandais, nommé Macdonnal qui l'a pris, il lui offrit 3 mille pistoles, et un régiment en France, s'il voulait le laisser aller, mais il le refusa. Mr. de Villeroy fut un peu blessé d'un coup de pertuisane, qui lui effleura le ventre, et d'un coup d'épée à la main, qui n'est pas grand-chose : il est fort inquiet sur sa destinée.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 150–151.

20 Daniel G. 1722, 420.

21 Saint-Simon 1876, 196.

22 Eugène of Savoy 1811, 263. See: Green M. (ed.), 2021, 150–151.

23 Green M. (ed.), 151.

24 'qui n'était qu'une relation de ce qui était arrivé à Crémone.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 153.

detailed repetition of the text of Rapin, without the details about the circumstances of his capture but with those of the kindness shown to him by the captives.²⁵

This particular example is a good illustration of how egodocuments can shed additional light and provide unknown details regarding important events. In this case, it is a first-hand account of Villeroy, told to a witness, from which the reader learns that the capture of the Marechal was violent, and he sustained two injuries. The size of the bribe he offered to the captor was also stated, which is probably a more realistic account than those reported by other, second-hand sources.

This meeting, though among people acquainted with each other previously, also poses the question of the reality of the war – how was it possible for people from two different sides of the war to maintain good relations with each other and even attempt to assist in difficult situations? Rapin and Woodstock were part of the conflict, though not actively participating, but belonging to the side of the Holy Roman Empire, siding with the emperor Leopold I against France and its king Louis XIV. Yet what can be seen in the depiction above is that not only were they allowed to visit an enemy prisoner and converse with him, but they were also allowed to receive a letter from him to deliver. It can be assumed that the letter was verified before being sent, but nonetheless, the situation seems extraordinary, particularly because they agreed to assist an enemy general with his request. This type of relationship requires further investigation and analysis. Nonetheless, throughout the correspondence, it can be seen how Woodstock and Rapin, who started their journey in what was already in 1701 enemy territory, passed into the territory of the allies without particular difficulty. Their main concern was to avoid capture by the enemy army and to avoid being robbed on the roads.

Yet, despite the rather friendly exchange, the plans of the travellers were changed, probably because it was no longer safe for Dutchmen to travel on French-controlled territory, especially in the second half of 1702. The plans to visit Southern Italy were cancelled, because of the presence of the enemy army. On May 20, 1702, Rapin writes from Rome:

We had intended to go and see Naples before leaving this country, but it was not possible and no one advised us to apply for a passport, since they had already been refused to so many others [...] I had planned [for us – M.G.] to go from Genoa to Turin, and from Turin to Geneva, but Milord Woodstock is disgusted by it, because of the difficulty of the roads, because it is necessary to make large detours in the mountains to avoid passing into the lands of Spain.²⁶

²⁵ Green M. (ed.), 2021, 153.

²⁶ 'Nous avions dessein d'aller voir Naples avant que de quitter ce pays, mais il n'a pas été possible et personne ne nous a conseillé de demander un passeport, puisque on l'avait déjà refusé à tant d'autres [...] J'avais projeté d'aller de Gènes à Turin, et de Turin à Genève, mais Milord

The difficulties that the war posed on the life of the travelling party are clearly seen in the passage above. It would have been necessary to avoid passing through enemy territory in order not to be captured. The echoes of war were reported in almost every letter sent from Italy, highlighting the fear of the city's inhabitants of a possible attack. These letters also detailed various confirmed and unconfirmed rumours circulating in the region. Moreover, the correspondence is full of information regarding the dangers for travellers on the roads, especially in the mountain areas of Northern Italy, where the thugs were awaiting to attack and rob passers-by. The lack of income caused by the war increased the possibility of this happening. One such noteworthy example is written by Rapin to Portland in his letter from Florence, dating July 1, 1702:

[...] it is better to use too much precaution than to be lacking; for if by misfortune Milord Woodstock were to be taken by the French or the Spanish, you [Portland – M.G.] would have difficulty in getting him back during the war, and [not] without paying a large ransom; and the example of a son of Mr. de Louvois frightens me, for in the past war, he was arrested in Milan by the Spanish, and kept for three years, although he had a passport from the King of Spain, under the pretext that the passport had been given before the declaration of war, for when one is in the hands of one's enemies, it is up to them to explain passports as they wish.²⁷

The dangers of being captured were known to the travellers and as the letter above shows, they did their utmost to avoid such situations, even at the cost of cancelling parts of the travel plan. Additionally, Woodstock in his letters mentions this danger, as in the letter sent from Florence on July 15, 1702:

[...] we had intended to go to Livorno and Genoa, but everyone gives us contrary advice because of the risk that there are brigantines of Final, Spaniards and French that there are on the coasts, only to wait for passers-by, and as there is an envoy from France here and another in Genoa, they could easily give each other some advice, there would be no pleasure in falling into the hands of the enemies at present.²⁸

Woodstock en est dégoûté, à cause de la difficulté des chemins, car il faut faire de grands détours dans les montagnes pour éviter de passer dans les terres d'Espagne.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 195.

27 '[...] il vaut mieux user de trop de précaution que d'en manquer; car si par malheur Milord Woodstock venait à être pris par les Français ou par les Espagnols, vous auriez de la peine à le retirer pendant la guerre, et sans payer une grosse rançon; et l'exemple d'un fils de Mr. de Louvois me fait peur, car dans la guerre passée, il fut arrêté dans le Milanais par les Espagnols, et gardé durant trois ans, quoiqu'il eut un passeport du roi d'Espagne, sous prétexte que le passeport avait été donné avant la déclaration de la guerre, car quand on est entre les mains de ses ennemis, c'est à eux à expliquer les passeports comme ils veulent.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 204–205.

28 '[...] nous avions dessein d'aller à Livourne et à Gênes, mais tout le monde nous donne un conseil contraire à cause du risque qu'il y a des brigantins du Final, des Espagnols et Français qu'il y a sur les côtes, seulement pour attendre les passants, et comme il y a un envoyé de France ici

Once again Woodstock not only informs Portland of the dangers but cleverly depicts the diplomatic network of the enemy – he identifies the envoys located in Florence and Genoa, who would probably exchange information with each other regarding potential targets for attack and capture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this brief overview presents how specific sources categorised by historians as Grand Tour correspondence contain a wealth of information that can also interest historians of military conflict. The reader can learn particular and sometimes unknown details of warfare, the mood of the population, military preparations, and, as mentioned previously, alternative versions of famous events. The correspondence examined here exemplifies this. While much more in-depth research would be required to uncover whether both travellers were also serving as spies for William III, which is a strong possibility, given that the accounts of fortifications and the nuances of the terrain would likely be of great interest to the King, there is little doubt that the letters reveal a different perspective on warfare, which often escapes historians' attention or is simply unknown to them.

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et un autre à Gênes il pourraient facilement se donner quelque avis, il n'y aurait aucun plaisir de tomber présentement dans les mains des ennemis.' Green M. (ed.), 2021, 208–209.

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