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The Perfect Ambassador? The Life and Career of the Early Modern French Diplomat Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux (1640–1709)¹

Elvira Tamus

Abstract

European diplomacy was born of the relations between northern Italian city-states during the Renaissance, and developed from occasional delegations to resident embassies in the early modern period. In the seventeenth century, the Kingdom of France became the protagonist of European political and military affairs, particularly under the reign of Louis XIV. This article analyses the personality, family background and professional career of Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux (1640–1709) through a range of diplomatic documents to assess the extent to which he met the expectations and diplomatic objectives set by the Sun King. I argue that although d'Avaux was a successful and appreciated Louisquatorzien ambassador, his personal views and approach to diplomatic matters did not always align with royal guidelines.

Keywords: Early Modern diplomacy, Comte d'Avaux, ambassador, Louis XIV, Kingdom of France, Dutch Republic, Peace of Nijmegen, James II, Irish expedition

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¹ I would like to thank Dr. Maurits A. Ebben (Institute for History, Leiden University) for his valuable advice in the autumn of 2019 in the course of writing the paper which served as the basis of this article. Figure on the cover page: Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Portrait of Jean-Antoine de Mesmes 4th son of Jean-Jacques de Mesmes* (France, 1702), Wikimedia Commons, 2019, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Jean-Antoine_de_Mesmes_\(1640-1709\)_by_Hyacinthe_Rigaud.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Jean-Antoine_de_Mesmes_(1640-1709)_by_Hyacinthe_Rigaud.jpg), accessed 23.12.2019. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

In the seventeenth century, the custom of establishing permanent embassies and sending resident ambassadors to represent their sovereigns in other countries became common in Europe. The key actor in European diplomacy was King Louis XIV (r.1643–1715), whose large-scale political and military endeavours made France the principal power on the continent. The diplomatic machinery that evolved under his reign had a crucial impact on the foreign policy practices of various European states. Thus, along with the status quo set by the Peace of Westphalia which ended the European wars of religion in 1648, Louis instituted the roots of modern diplomacy.

The selection criteria of Louis XIV has been widely discussed in the historiography of French diplomacy. The seventeenth and early eighteenth-century evolution of ambassadorial characteristics, tasks, and responsibilities was carried out by Dutch diplomat Abraham de Wicquefort (1606–82) and French diplomat François de Callières (1645–1717). Wicquefort wrote in his *L'Ambassadeur et ses fonctions* that an ambassador should possess unquestionable loyalty towards his monarch and a perfect understanding of the issues under negotiation, in order to act in accordance with the interests of his prince.² Callières described ambassadors' responsibilities as representing their princes' interests and discerning the intentions of other sovereigns. He claimed that a negotiator is first and foremost the executor, rather than the originator of diplomatic decisions which should be made only in consultation with the prince or the principal ministers.³ In this regard, as William Roosen has argued, Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux was an exception, since Louis relied heavily on d'Avaux's insight into political conditions gained during his long experience in The Hague and in Sweden.⁴ Orloue N.

² Abraham de Wicquefort, *L'ambassadeur et ses fonctions. Par Monsieur de Wicquefort*, P. Marteau (ed.) (Cologne, 1690, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k93844c>, accessed 08.12.2019, p. 6, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica — The BnF digital library, Paris (BnF).

³ François de Callières, *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains* (Amsterdam, 1716), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936753>, accessed 08.12.2019, pp. 85–90, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica — The BnF digital library, Paris (BnF).

⁴ W. Roosen, *The Ambassador's craft: a study of the functioning of French ambassadors under Louis XIV* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1967), p. 106.

Gisselquist has concluded that the decade of 1678–88 was a ‘critical period’ for Louis’ foreign policy.⁵ As the French ambassador in the Dutch Republic, d’Avaux frequently used bribery and propaganda (in the form of widely distributed pamphlets) to influence the many officials involved in decision-making, and to promote French interests.⁶ Moreover, Gisselquist notes that the centralised nature of French diplomacy required that its ambassadors dealt only with the local issues around their residencies, and therefore, they were often provided with limited information regarding the broad horizon of French foreign affairs.⁷ Due to this feature and the exceptionally long time spent in the Dutch Republic, d’Avaux occasionally misunderstood the king’s intentions. Marie-Hélène Côté highlights that the selection procedure of ambassadors included many aspects, such as their social and financial status, appearance, attitude, morals and education, along with the Louis’ personal confidence in the diplomatic candidates selected.⁸

Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d’Avaux served as Louis’ ambassador and envoy in several of countries throughout his own illustrious career and the Sun King’s reign.⁹ This case study, therefore, offers an opportunity to consider a detailed picture of the lives, duties, personal and professional specialties of Louisquatorzien ambassadors.

In this article, I will analyse the personal background and diplomatic career of Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d’Avaux, with an emphasis on his service as Louis XIV’s peace negotiator during the Franco-Dutch War; as ambassador to the Dutch Republic; and as an envoy to James II of England’s Irish expedition. These missions represented a critical period of Louis’ reign when the king was engaged in several political and military conflicts. Thus, I will consider the extent to which d’Avaux carried out his diplomatic missions in line with the brief given to him by Louis. I

⁵ O. N. Gisselquist, *The French ambassador, Jean-Antoine De Mesmes, Comte D’Avaux, and French diplomacy in The Hague, 1678–1684* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1968), pp. 336–60.

⁶ The terms ‘Dutch Republic’ and ‘United Provinces (of the Netherlands)’ are used to refer to the same territory and political unity in this article.

⁷ Gisselquist, *The French ambassador*, pp. 361–64.

⁸ M-H. Côté, ‘What Did It Mean to be a French Diplomat in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries?’, *Canadian Journal of History — Annales canadiennes d’histoire*, 45 (2010), pp. 235–58, 242–50.

⁹ These countries include the Republic of Venice, the Dutch Republic, Ireland, and the Kingdom of Sweden.

argue that foreign service, remote from regular contact with the French court and his monarch, influenced d'Avaux to the extent that his diplomatic interactions became increasingly independent. Through these observations, I consider the development of the ambassadorial role in this period. I further reflect on the shifting relationship between ambassador and their monarch back home, and the impacts of this for foreign policy decision-making.

Family background, youth and early career (1640–76)

Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux was born in 1639 or 1640 into a highly prestigious intellectual family whose members had acquired their title for serving the French government in judicial, administrative and diplomatic positions –members of the *Noblesse de robe*.¹⁰ His grandfather, Jean-Jacques was a knight (*chevalier*) and seigneur of Roissy, while his father, Jean-Antoine possessed one of the most significant mandates of justice at the Parlement of Paris as *président à mortier*.¹¹ His uncle, Claude de Mesmes, comte d'Avaux was a prominent diplomat and ambassador under cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin in Venice, Rome, Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The family's involvement in state affairs is documented in Claude's correspondence with his father, in which they frequently discussed French and European political news as well as the son's career progress.¹² In the 1640s, Claude de Mesmes served at the peace negotiations in Münster which ended the Thirty Years' War.¹³ Although Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux may be a less well-known diplomat than his uncle, he was nevertheless a crucial agent of French diplomacy in the Dutch Republic for a significant period of

¹⁰ W. Roosen, 'The True Ambassador: Occupational and Personal Characteristics of French Ambassadors under Louis XIV', *European History Quarterly*, 3 (1973), pp. 121–39, 122.

¹¹ The *présidents à mortier* were the principle magistrates of the *parlements*, the appellate courts of the Ancien Régime. Louis Moréri, *Le grand dictionnaire historique ou Le mélange curieux de l'histoire sacrée et profane*, vol. 7, 3rd ed., C.-P. Goujet, & É. F. Drouet (eds.) (Paris, 1759), <https://archive.org/details/MoreriGdDictHist07bnf.pdf>, accessed 20.12.2019, p. 495.

¹² Claude de Mesmes, comte d'Avaux, *Correspondance inédite du Comte d'Avaux (Claude de Mesmes) avec son père Jean-Jacques de Mesmes, Sr de Roissy (1627–1642)*, A. Boppe (ed.) (Paris, 1887), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9601491s.textelimage>, accessed 12.12.2019, pp. 197–99, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica — The BnF digital library, Paris (BnF).

¹³ A. Tischer, 'Claude de Mesmes, Count d'Avaux (1595–1650): The Perfect Ambassador of the Early 17th Century', *International Negotiations*, 13 (2008), pp. 197–209, 203.

time, in one of the most critical periods of Franco-Dutch relations. Jean-Antoine followed a traditional judicial career, becoming firstly *conseiller* at the parliament in 1661, and then *maître de requêtes* in 1667.¹⁴ These administrative offices provided the young noble with expertise in law and government. His sufficient but not ‘too high-level’ education and remarkable background accord with Wicquefort’s argument that a prestigious family was more influential in determining a potential ambassador’s success than were schooling and professional experience.¹⁵ Additionally, Callières believed that it was beneficial for a diplomat to have a sufficiently pleasing face to charm an audience.¹⁶ The French duke Louis de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon mentioned the Mesmes family several times in his memoirs and described d’Avaux’s appearance and behaviour as follows: ‘C’étoit un fort bel homme et bien fait, galant aussi, et qui avoit de l’honneur, fort l’esprit du grand monde, de la grâce, de la noblesse, et beaucoup de politesse.’¹⁷ Saint-Simon also noted that d’Avaux had never possessed the title ‘comte d’Avaux’ but nevertheless liked to be referred to as count throughout his career.¹⁸

Due to a period of almost continuous warfare, Louis needed an efficient, professional diplomatic service to represent his interests abroad and, occasionally, to address disputes by diplomatic means. D’Avaux met these criteria, and was given his first ambassadorial commission to the Republic of Venice between 1672 and 1673. Although this period was relatively peaceful in the series of the Ottoman-Venetian wars, d’Avaux had an important diplomatic task. He needed to reconcile the relationship between the republic and France after the Cretan War (1645–69) in which the Venetians attributed the Ottoman victory at the Siege of

¹⁴ The *maîtres de requêtes* were judicial counselors of the *Conseil d’État* (Council of State). *Gazette de France*, no. 35, 20 August 1695, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k57029613.item>, accessed 18.12.2019, p. 395.

¹⁵ Wicquefort, *L’ambassadeur et ses fonctions*, p. 77.

¹⁶ ‘...il ait un noble extérieur & une figure agréable qui lui facilite les moyens de plaire.’ in Callières, *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Louis de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon, *Les grands écrivains de la France (tome XVII): Saint-Simon. Mémoires* A. Régnier (ed.) (Paris, 1879), <https://archive.org/details/memoiresdesaints17sain>, p. 100.

¹⁸ ‘He was a strong handsome man and good-looking, also brave, and who had honour, strong spirit of the great world, grace, nobility, and a lot of politeness.’ Saint-Simon, *Les grands écrivains de la France*, p. 110.

Candia (1648–69) to the failures of the allied French army.¹⁹ In addition to this effort, d’Avaux also dealt with commercial affairs by acting as mediator for the acquisition of Italian artefacts by the French court.²⁰ In a letter from Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83) to d’Avaux, the Minister of Finances thanked the ambassador for sending him an item of luxury clothing as well as for his remarks on Venetian traders, suggesting that d’Avaux had contributed significantly to economic agreements between France and Venice.²¹

The Treaty of Nijmegen and the ambassadorial service in The Hague (1675–88)

One of the major political aspirations of the Sun King concerned the Spanish Succession, an ongoing European-wide dilemma of the late seventeenth century. The problem originated with Charles II of Spain, who was physically and mentally disabled and childless in both of his marriages. Louis initiated the War of Devolution (1667–68) by staking his claim for the Spanish throne through his wife, the sister of Charles, Maria Theresa of Spain. The Triple Alliance of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, England and Sweden in 1668 made Louis step back from his plans and thus became, along with the Dutch embargo on French products, one of the causes of the Franco-Dutch War between 1672 and 1679.²²

Louis launched a war of conquest for territorial and commercial benefits and triumphed over the alliance that William III, Prince of Orange, had forged with Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. It was in the final stage of this conflict that the young d’Avaux truly grounded his future diplomatic career through his valuable negotiating skills. In 1674, Louis was primarily concerned with dismantling any form of alliance that opposed his interests, such as the one which was soon to emerge between the Dutch Republic and England. To negotiate the best conditions for France, the Sun

¹⁹ K. M. Setton, *Venice, Austria, and the Turks in the seventeenth century* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 225–27.

²⁰ Jean-Baptiste Colbert, *Lettres, instructions et mémoires de Colbert*, P. Clément (ed.) (Paris, 1863), <https://archive.org/details/p2lettresinstruc02colbuoft>, accessed 16.12.2019, pp. 660–61.

²¹ Colbert, *Lettres, instructions et mémoires de Colbert*, p. 672.

²² P. Geyl, ‘Johan de Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1653–72’, *History – New Series*, 20 (1936), pp. 303–19, 311.

King needed loyal, dedicated and well-trained diplomats. In December 1675, Louis appointed three plenipotentiaries to represent his interests directly in the negotiations: Colbert de Croissy (1625–96), brother of Minister of Finances Jean-Baptiste Colbert; Godefroi, Comte d'Estrade (1607–86); and Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux.²³ Their main responsibility was to assure the delegates from other states of Louis' benevolence and willingness to cooperate.²⁴ They relayed the King's offers which consisted of trading benefits; the withdrawal of formerly installed restrictive duties; and the return of territories which had been occupied by French troops such as Maastricht and the Principality of Orange-Nassau. The latter concession was particularly important, since Louis had previously seized a number of European fortresses of strategic importance.²⁵ The mission enhanced the professional reputation of all three and proved to be an ideal entry-point into successful ambassadorial careers. From the French perspective, the treaty, which was signed by the representatives of France and the Dutch Republic on 10 August 1678, aimed to utilise and increase the political and military glory that Louis XIV had gained with his territorial captures.

The more than six years of hostility had fundamentally damaged the relations between the two states, and careful diplomatic steps were needed to reconcile them. Louis sent an *ambassadeur extraordinaire* to reinvigorate his relationship with the United Provinces, to extend the political, diplomatic and commercial successes which he had gained from the war and, most importantly, to uncover more about William III's potential future military endeavours. For this, Louis chose d'Avaux as the key figure of the diplomatic rapprochement between France and the United Provinces. When the Prince of Orange challenged the Treaty of Nijmegen in August 1678 and called for resistance against France with a planned coalition with England, d'Avaux was put in charge of disentangling the issue by convincing the Dutch leadership of Louis' trustworthiness. The king justified his appointment by stating

²³ *Recueil des instructions données aux ambassadeurs et ministres de France depuis les traités de Westphalie jusqu'à la Révolution française. XXI–XXII: Hollande*, L. André, & É. Bourgeois (eds.) (Paris, 1922–1924), pp. 344–45.

²⁴ John B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (New York, 1968), pp. 193–211.

²⁵ André & Bourgeois, *Recueil des instructions ... Hollande*, pp. xxxviii xl.

that d’Avaux’s ‘présence donnera beaucoup plus de force aux assurances’.²⁶ Additionally, he instructed the diplomat to communicate with other ambassadors in The Hague and to convince them that the ratification of the remaining treaties with France would bring peace and friendship.²⁷ After d’Avaux’s success in resolving post-war interstate issues with Venice, Louis had confidence that d’Avaux could facilitate trust between the two sides. The latter was pleased to receive his commission in September 1678 and travelled from Nijmegen to The Hague at the end of that month.²⁸

Court life was particularly expensive and Louis’ ambassadors never felt they were provided with sufficient means to maintain an appropriate degree of opulence – the Sun King’s envoys were meant to represent his superiority both materially and ceremonially. Callières similarly argued that ambassadors should possess considerable wealth, ‘afin d’être en état de soutenir les dépenses nécessairement attachées a cet emploi.’²⁹ In 1679, d’Avaux began his commission as the new French ambassador to The Hague with an impressive ceremony to celebrate French successes gained with the Peace of Nijmegen.³⁰ The language of d’Avaux’s *Mémoires* shows that he, as any of Louis’ ambassadors, was primarily and almost exclusively to represent the *Roi Soleil* personally, rather than the *gouvernement* and still less the *peuple*. The King’s name, titles and laudation were permanent elements of d’Avaux’s records, negotiations and widely circulated pamphlets.³¹ One of the main benefits he had gained in the preceding years was his great circle of acquaintances and a few confidential relations. Most importantly, Colbert de Croissy, his fellow negotiator, became Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1679. D’Avaux had several relatives and friends in high administrative positions at the royal court who

²⁶ ‘... presence will give much more strength to the assurances.’ André & Bourgeois, *Recueil des instructions ... Hollande*, pp. xl–xlili.

²⁷ André & Bourgeois, *Recueil des instructions ... Hollande*, pp. 396–98.

²⁸ André & Bourgeois, *Recueil des instructions ... Hollande*, p. 382.

²⁹ ‘... in order to be able to support the expenses necessarily attached to this job.’ Callières, *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains*, p. 46.

³⁰ S. Van Zuylen Van Nyevelt, *Court life in the Dutch Republic, 1638–1689* (London & New York, 1906), p. 292.

³¹ For instance: Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d’Avaux, *Mémoires de S.E. mr. le comte d’ Avaux, ambassadeur extraordinaire de sa majesté très-Chrétienne, présentée aux États Généraux des Provinces Unies* (le 28 avril 1685), Leiden University Libraries – Special Collections, Leiden (UBL).

provided him with a regular flow of information of considerable value in the following years.³² During the negotiations, the policy of aggressive expansion that Louis had initially pursued fundamentally changed. Taking advantage of the political tension between the trading leaders and the Prince of Orange, Louis turned towards a more subtle approach by trying to create favourable conditions for the Dutch merchant elite.³³ In 1684, d’Avaux successfully negotiated with the Dutch provinces to have Louis’ proposals accepted by the States General, the legislature body of the Republic – in spite of the efforts of secrétaire général Gaspar Fagel (1634–88), a key representative of William III.³⁴

A contemporary of d’Avaux, Louis-Henri de Loménie, comte de Brienne (1635–98) praised the diplomatic skills of the diplomat:

M. d’Avaux est un beau génie et fort facile; il a de grandes vues, beaucoup de pénétration et un grand usage des affaires. Il sait parfaitement les intérêts des princes de l’Europe, écrit et parle bien. Il seroit très digne d’être secrétaire d’État.³⁵

D’Avaux dedicated considerable efforts to the resolution of two further issues. The first of these was the interception in the United Provinces of Huguenot refugees who had fled France after the enacting of the Edict of Fontainebleau in October 1685. With this decree, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, in which Henry IV of France had granted free exercise of religion for Calvinists in 1598. The persecution of French Protestants forced many of them to leave their home country for more religiously

³² For example, during James II of England’s Irish campaign where he worked as the king’s advisor. D’Avaux to Louis XIV on 30 August 1689 in Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d’Avaux, *Négociations de M. le comte d’Avaux en Irlande, 1689–90*, J. Hogan (ed.) (Dublin, 1934), p. 428, Nationale Bibliotheek van Nederland – Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague (KL).

³³ Gisselquist, *The French ambassador*, pp. 9–10.

³⁴ François Michel Le Tellier de Louvois, *Letters of Louvois*, J. Hardré (ed.) (Chapel Hill, 1949), pp. 365–66.

³⁵ ‘M. d’Avaux is a nice and very easy-going genius; he has great views, a lot of understanding, and a great use of business. He knows the interests of the princes of Europe perfectly, writes and speaks well. He would be very worthy of being secretary of state.’ Louis-Henri de Loménie, *Mémoires de Louis-Henri de Loménie, comte de Brienne, dit le jeune Brienne*, P. Bonnefon (ed.) (Paris, 1916), <https://archive.org/details/memoiresdelouish03brie>, accessed 16.12.2019, pp. 261–62.

tolerant states, notably the Dutch Republic. The revived persecution of Protestants not only undermined the diplomatic relations of France, but caused economic harm due to the absence of a great number of Huguenots, who were diligent merchants and tradesmen.³⁶ D’Avaux was trying to tempt some of these craftsmen back by offering them benefits, as long as they were willing to reconvert to Roman Catholicism. Politically, the growing number of Huguenot refugees in the Dutch Republic contributed to the deterioration of the States General’s attitude towards France, potentially frustrating d’Avaux’s plans to foster the conflict between them and William III.³⁷

D’Avaux deployed espionage and bribery to gain access to the Huguenot community, with the intent that they be returned to France where they would have to abandon Protestantism. The ambassador addressed this problem with the help of a spy in Haarlem, Sieur de Tillières, who had been providing him with information about the refugees for years. This issue prompted d’Avaux to express his concerns regarding the negative impact of the persecutions. He indicated in his letters to Louis that the most effective technique to reduce the emigrations would be decreasing state aggression against the Protestants, instead of the continued policy of catching and returning them home.³⁸

D’Avaux strongly encouraged Louis to cement his diplomatic relationship with the Dutch. However, William III of Orange, Stadtholder of the United Provinces approached the other Protestant maritime power, the Kingdom of England, hoping for an anti-French alliance. William had had aspirations to become the heir to the English throne since his marriage to Princess Mary in 1677, niece of the then sovereign Charles II. Mary’s father was crowned James II, King of England in 1685, but was not viewed favourably at home, due to his Catholic affiliations. His situation was threatened in June 1688, when a son was born to his second wife Mary of

³⁶ D. Ogg, *Europe in the seventeenth century* (London, 1960), p. 293.

³⁷ *Correspondance administrative sous le règne de Louis XIV, entre le cabinet du roi, les secrétaires d'état, le chancelier de France*, G. B. Depping (ed.) (Paris, 1855), <https://archive.org/details/correspondancead04depp/page/406>, accessed 19.12.2019, p. 406.

³⁸ C. L. Chappell, ‘Through the Eyes of a Spy: Venom and Value in an Enemy’s Report on the Huguenot Emigration’, in J. McKee, & R. Vigne (eds.), *The Huguenots: France, exile & diaspora* (Brighton, 2013), pp. 77–88, 81–84.

Modena. The birth of a Catholic prince provoked fears that through the heir, Catholicism would be restored and become the official religion.³⁹ D’Avaux was sufficiently confident to urge his king in the strongest terms: ‘J’avertis le Roi, pour la dixième fois, que tout ce qui se passoit de plus secret dans le Conseil du Roi d’Angleterre, étoit révélé au Prince d’Orange.’⁴⁰ Indeed, d’Avaux was proved correct when William ‘invaded’ at England Protestant request in the Glorious Revolution in November 1688.⁴¹

Eventually, a large-scale European clash of political and economic interests developed in the guise of the Nine Years’ War (1688–97), mainly consisting of a Dutch, English (Williamite), and Holy Roman alliance against France’s ever increasing commercial and political superiority.⁴² During the initial phase of the English dynastic rivalry, Louis had supported his cousin James, hoping that Catholicism, and his own influence, would be revived in England. D’Avaux dedicated considerable efforts to obtaining intelligence regarding William III’s maritime preparations. He reported on the danger he discerned in the plans of the Prince of Orange, particularly towards the English throne. To gather as much information as possible, d’Avaux followed Louis’s recommendation of establishing relations with the the republicans (members of the States party), who generally opposed the aspirations of the Stadtholder and the Orangist (pro-William) party.⁴³ He also found informants in the council of Amsterdam, a rich city with many republican supporters.⁴⁴ In addition, d’Avaux made use of William’s unpopular plan of

³⁹ D’Avaux to Louis XIV on 20 July 1688 in Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d’Avaux, *Négociations de Monsieur le comte d’Avaux en Hollande depuis 1679 jusqu’en 1688*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1704), pp. 168–69, Leiden University Libraries – Special Collections, Leiden (UBL).

⁴⁰ ‘I warn the King, for the tenth time, that everything that is going on in the greatest secrecy in the Council of the King of England has been revealed to the Prince of Orange.’ D’Avaux to Louis XIV on 24 June 1688 in d’Avaux, *Négociations... en Hollande...*, p. 164.

⁴¹ J. Miller, *James II* (New Haven, 2000), pp. 186–96.

⁴² G. N. Clark, *The Dutch Alliance and the War Against French Trade, 1686–1697* (Manchester, 1923), p. 1.

⁴³ André & Bourgeois, *Recueil des instructions ... Hollande*, p. 399.

⁴⁴ *A memorial of His Excellency the Earl of Avaux, extraordinary ambassador from the most Christian king; delivered to the States General, concerning the false interpretation, made to be the meanings of his intercepted letter* (1684). London: Given at the Hague on 28 February 1684, and reprinted in London for Walter Davis, Early English Books Online (Images reproduced by courtesy of Bodleian Library),

<https://search.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240854408/fulltextPDF/B3750F6599ED4111PQ/1?accountid=12045>, accessed 12.12.2019.

increasing the size of the army against a possible French advancement in the Spanish Netherlands. D'Avaux was expected by the French administration to send alerts about every single movement of William and his Troupes, and his reports illustrate his diligence in this respect. Nonetheless, he did not hesitate to report about the States General's decreasing sympathy towards the French cause:

Les Ministres du Roi d'Angleterre dirent que leur Maitre auroit une grosse Flotte en mer : cela servit de prétexte au Prince d'Orange pour faire un plus grand armement, car il étoit bien éloigné d'en rien craindre, puisqu'il étoit assuré que le Roi d'Angleterre n'étoit pas en état de mettre plus de sept à huit Vaisseaux. (...) Que supposé que le Prince d'Orange eut tous ces desseins, j'étois obligé de dire á Sa Majesté qu'il ne trouvat du secours dans les Etats-Generaux, que tous les fugitifs de France avoient tellement animé les Calvinistes de Hollande, qu'on n'oseroit se promettre que les Etats entrassent dans leurs véritables interets, comme ils auroient fait autrefois, si pareille occasion s'étoit présentée.⁴⁵

From these reports, Louis learned that in addition to the followers of the prince, many supported William's goal of promoting Protestantism and Dutch trade in England. However, the French court could not be fully aware of, or prepared for, the upcoming developments, due to William's well-organised and cautious steps and the gradual erosion of d'Avaux's intelligence circle. The inefficacy in providing sufficient information about William's project can be regarded mainly as the result of

⁴⁵ 'The ministers of the King of England said that their master would have a large fleet at sea: this served as an excuse for the Prince of Orange to make a greater armament, for he was far from fearing anything, since it was assured that the King of England was not in a condition to apply more than seven to eight ships. (...) That supposing that the Prince of Orange had all these designs, I was obliged to tell His Majesty that he found no help in the Estates-General, that all the fugitives from France had invigorated the Calvinists of Holland so much that one would not dare to promise that the States would join their genuine interests, as they would have done in the past, if such an opportunity had risen.' D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 10 June 1688 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Hollande...*, vol. 6, pp. 160–62.

the prince's precautionary and increasing support, rather than d'Avaux's failure as ambassador.

Irish expedition with James II (1689–90)

In early 1689, Louis appointed d'Avaux as advisor to James II of England, to help him reorganise his army in Ireland comprising both Protestants and Catholics.⁴⁶ D'Avaux's correspondence from Ireland with Louis and Louvois, the French Secretary of State for War, provides us with a valuable insight into James II's intentions and also into the diplomat's endeavours and judgment of the situation during the campaign in Ireland in 1689–90. James II aimed to seize absolute control over Ireland in order to retaliate against William III, and thus to restore his royal power with a considerable social and military force behind him. However, the French king, and hence his ambassador, had a different priority in this campaign – to occupy William III's attention and army away from the continent as much as possible.⁴⁷ Consequently, the clash of these interests was virtually inevitable.

William III was the central figure of the anti-French European coalition but his new English crown resulted in several challenges to this leadership.⁴⁸ Although d'Avaux did not arrive in Ireland in 1689 as an ambassador, he did bear a large share of the responsibility of Louis's military success in Britain and Ireland. His extensive experience as both observer and influencer of public and political opinion facilitated his orientation in the Irish question. D'Avaux's role in James II's expedition in Ireland was essential as the diplomat realised the importance of William's obstruction in the success of France and the Jacobites, and kept emphasising the interests of the French crown in the entire course of his engagement. In this expedition, James II was advised by the Irish soldier Richard Talbot, 1st Earl of Tyrconnell; the Scottish politician John Drummond, 1st Earl of Melfort; and d'Avaux. In the course of the first month, d'Avaux perceived a promising situation regarding the acceptance of James' expedition. Nonetheless, upon arrival, d'Avaux found

⁴⁶ L. André, *Louis XIV et l'Europe* (Paris, 1950), pp. 256–57.

⁴⁷ J. A. Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667–1714* (London, 1999), p 203.

⁴⁸ G. W. Symcox, *Louis XIV and the war in Ireland, 1689–1691: A study of his strategic thinking and decision-making* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, 1967), pp. 97–98.

himself in disagreement with James over the crucial question of the Act of Settlement – the king wanted to maintain it, while the diplomat wished to terminate it. The 1662 law had caused problems because it had provided land for Protestants by taking land from Catholics. Consequently, either its upkeep or its dissolution would have resulted in dissatisfaction with James in Ireland. The land issue between Catholics and Protestants made Louis XIV reconsider his ideas about the clash of religious denominations. The Sun King appreciated d’Avaux’s suggestions of creating a compromise, and encouraged him to keep working on the improvement of James’ support among Irishmen:

En sorte que non seulement les Irlandois Catholiques . . .
puissent espérer qu’il leur fera justice, mais aussy que les
Protestants... puissent estre assurez, que la différence de leur
religion ne leur fera aucun prejudice aupres de luy.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, a parallel can be drawn with the situation in The Hague, when the ambassador was closer to the actual situation than was the court he was serving, and thus assessed the situation differently from Louis. Firstly, d’Avaux’s judgement that the deteriorating situation was due to James’ incompetence and vanity was nurtured by his own experience of the English King. Secondly, Louis’ solution to the land question did not prove to be feasible—d’Avaux found out what the king had not: namely, that the religious division in Ireland was deeper than expected, and the initial objectives of the campaign should be adjusted to this reality. One of d’Avaux’s earliest reports expressed his discontent with James II’s leadership and organisational skills:

La seule chose, Sir, qui pourra nous faire de la peine, est
l’irrésolution du Roy d’Angleterre, qui change souvent d’avis,

⁴⁹ ‘So that not only the Irish Catholics... can hope that he will do justice to them, but also that the Protestants... can be assured, that the difference of their religion will not do any harm to them by him.’ Louis XIV to d’Avaux on 12 March 1689 in d’Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 31–32.

et ne se détermine pas toujours au meilleur. Il s'arrête aussy beaucoup à de petites choses où il employe toujours son temps et passe légèrement sur les plus essentielles.⁵⁰

D'Avaux urged James to thoroughly strengthen his social support and military forces in Ireland in order to prepare for the continuation of the war with William III. The diplomat believed that this support would be gained by reconciling with the Protestants of the north, or at least by ensuring they did not view James with hostility. D'Avaux urged caution, contrary to the King's wishes to capitalise on his early successes and continue his campaign in Scotland as soon as possible. D'Avaux was confident enough – almost daring – to voice his disagreements with the royal decisions when he judged them to be hazardous or oppositional to French interests. This attitude, however, led to significant tension with James and the Earl of Melfort, the former's chief counselor in military matters.⁵¹

Moreover, d'Avaux complained about the difficulty of acquiring adequate information about James II's supporters and opponents, telling Louis that 'le Roy d'Angleterre n'a nulle correspondance en Angleterre, ny en Ecosse'.⁵² In spite of the relatively short time he had spent in Ireland, d'Avaux was already able to effectively measure the attitude of Irish society by the beginning of April: 'Le peuple et la noblesse d'Irlande sont également persuadez que c'est icy la seule occasion qu'ils pouvoient avoir de recouvrer leur liberté...'⁵³ He recognised that the tension between James' main objective and that of his subjects would have unpleasant ramifications for the enterprise. D'Avaux did not hesitate to express his concerns regarding the efficiency of the recruitment, organisation and management of soldiers as soon as

⁵⁰ 'The only thing, Sir, that can hurt us, is the irresolution of the King of England, who often changes his mind, and is not always determined to the best. He also stops a lot at little things where he always takes his time and spends it lightly on the most essential [things].' D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 23 March 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 23.

⁵¹ Symcox, *Louis XIV and the war in Ireland, 1689–1691: A study of his strategic thinking and decision-making*, p. 106.

⁵² '... the King of England has no correspondance in England, nor in Scotland.' D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 4 April 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 50.

⁵³ 'The people and the nobility of Ireland are also convinced that this is the only opportunity they can have to regain their freedom...' D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 4 April 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 50.

he noticed the first signs of inadequacy in the middle of April 1689. The diplomat concluded that these problems would weaken James' influence and also increase William's chances of attacking him in Ireland.⁵⁴ News about his growing popularity in Scotland bolstered James's confidence and determination to go on fighting there.⁵⁵ Negligence remained a general feature of James' policy regarding the physical condition, preparedness and armament of his Irish troops throughout the entire expedition. Altogether, the delay in army reform and increasing Protestant resistance gradually decreased the opportunities of the Franco-Jacobite forces. D'Avaux informed Louis about further issues in the army, such as the inefficient use of French military aid and the lack of adequate payment which caused indiscipline among the soldiers.⁵⁶ From late spring, d'Avaux was placed in charge of the army and made efforts to install some degree of discipline, a scheme of payment and the provision of weaponry. However, these belated attempts brought limited success and only increased his personal frustration.⁵⁷

Louis insisted on taking the lead in the Irish expedition and, through d'Avaux, on shaping the events according to his own judgement. However, James' defeat in his conflict with the Protestants at Derry made the Sun King realise that the expedition would be delayed due to the contradiction between their intentions. Both the king and Louvois started to endorse d'Avaux's observations and suggestions regarding the steps to be taken in early summer.⁵⁸ Over the course of the summer, d'Avaux showed disapproval towards James' attitude, this time towards the Irish parliament which intended to facilitate trade with France and introduce an embargo on English products.⁵⁹ D'Avaux's disillusionment with the ideals of the French-supported Irish expedition derived from James' ignoring of most of his political and military advice, as well as the increasing tension between French and Jacobite intentions. D'Avaux's warnings about the necessity of strengthening power

⁵⁴ D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 14 April 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 50–54.

⁵⁵ D'Avaux to Louvois on 16 April 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 77.

⁵⁶ D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 6 May 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 111.

⁵⁷ D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 27 May 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 183–85.

⁵⁸ Louis XIV to d'Avaux on 24 May 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 239; Louvois to d'Avaux on 13th June 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 271–72.

⁵⁹ D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 6 August 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 341–42.

in Ireland were ignored, which led to the weakening of James' authority and social support, which gradually decreased the chances of his restoration. By the end of the summer, d'Avaux's relationship with the English king had permanently deteriorated due to the lack of confidence and mutual agreement.⁶⁰ His reports about the situation spurred Louis to modify his policies and the French king often simply approved d'Avaux's evaluations. Importantly, d'Avaux took Louis' other military commitments in the continent into account when advising James.⁶¹ By November, his position as James' counselor became obsolete, and he was dismissed shortly thereafter.⁶² D'Avaux accepted this news with opposition and contempt for his successor Antoine Nompar de Caumont, comte de Lauzun: 'il n'est pas assez fort pour soustenir le poids des affaires dont il est chargé.'⁶³ D'Avaux felt fully responsible for the failure of most of his efforts to save James' campaign. We can also presume some degree of perfectionism since he was unwilling to leave before achieving his goals. From these accounts, a conscientious, experienced and attentive diplomat emerges, one unafraid to report accurately and offer his own advice, even when it contradicted his king's intended strategic direction. As d'Avaux observed the English king ignoring his strategic and tactical recommendations, his reports became increasingly disenchanted and resigned. After all, d'Avaux's accurate appraisal of the political, military, social and religious circumstances in Ireland led not to the implementation of his advice, but rather to his alienation from James II.

Despite the failed Irish expedition, d'Avaux remained an honoured member of Louis XIV's diplomatic staff. Between 1692 and 1699, d'Avaux served as France's ambassador to the Kingdom of Sweden where his chief task was to convince Charles XI of Sweden (1660-97) to act as mediator between France and the Holy Roman Empire in the peace negotiations that concluded the Nine Years' War.⁶⁴ In 1701, d'Avaux briefly deputised the ailing French ambassador Gabriel de Briord in

⁶⁰ D'Avaux to Louis XIV on 14 August 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 378–79.

⁶¹ Louis XIV to d'Avaux on 29 June 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, pp. 409–10.

⁶² Louvois to d'Avaux on 11 November 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 585.

⁶³ '... he is not strong enough to bear the weight of the matters he is in charge of.' D'Avaux to Croissy on 22 December 1689 in d'Avaux, *Négociations... en Irlande...*, p. 618.

⁶⁴ Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667-1714*, p. 253.

The Hague, before Louis' diplomatic relations broke with the United Provinces due to the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14).⁶⁵

Conclusion

Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux followed the family tradition of entering a judicial career, followed by the diplomatic profession. He met the requirements set for Louisquatorzien ambassadors by being French, Roman Catholic, noble, wealthy, middle-aged, legally trained (but not highly educated), good-looking, well-behaved, and by having an extended network of influential friends and relatives in illustrious social circles. On the other hand, he remained unmarried and did not speak many languages. Most importantly, d'Avaux was eager, inventive, dedicated and loyal to Louis XIV. The combination of these characteristics, along with the prominence of his origins, made him a perfect candidate for the highest diplomatic service.

D'Avaux was a prominent, acknowledged and a highly successful ambassador of the Louisquatorzien era. The main proof of this were the high number of places of service throughout his career; the exceptionally long period of time spent in The Hague, Europe's major diplomatic centre; and more importantly, his active involvement in Louis XIV's most significant diplomatic issues. D'Avaux's correspondence from the time of his activities in the Dutch Republic – at Nijmegen and in The Hague—attested to his incessant fidelity, dedication, enthusiasm and creativity in seeking information in favour of his prince's interests. Many of the analysed sources demonstrate that the king relied not only on the news and rumours provided by d'Avaux about the events at his residencies, but also on his personal opinion in crucial questions. It is an ongoing question as to whether Louis XIV's diplomats followed the King's diplomatic directions in a largely servile fashion, and the degree to which they were able to assert their own views and voice disagreements. We can argue that Louisquatorzien ambassadors represented Louis XIV in the first instance and that the King's values, interests and ambitions hence largely defined their manoeuvres. Nevertheless, d'Avaux gained a detailed

⁶⁵ Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667-1714*, pp. 267-70.

knowledge of home affairs at foreign courts while receiving only partial information from Louis XIV about his own large-scale international political endeavours. Therefore, d'Avaux's life and career show that an experienced ambassador, who had spent much time far away from Paris and was actively involved in influencing the direction of politics at foreign courts, could develop his own approach and attitude in diplomatic questions.

D'Avaux continued to diligently represent French interests by James II's side in Ireland with his diplomatic and martial expertise. In addition to promoting what he found best for the French crown, he also strived to help James' cause and success against William, as long as these two goals ran parallel to each other. The main issue that d'Avaux faced during this expedition was James' differing aspirations and unwillingness to compromise, or at least to listen to his advice. Thus, the Irish expedition can be called successful in terms of d'Avaux's loyal dedication to serving Louis XIV, but unsuccessful in influencing James II to the extent of fulfilling French interests and restoring his power. To conclude, Jean-Antoine de Mesmes d'Avaux was one of the most influential, prominent and reliable ambassadors of Louis XIV. He remained a faithful servant of his king during his career. At the same time, however, the evidence suggests that a sufficiently confident and successful diplomat could act with a fair degree of independence in matters of French foreign service.

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