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'Roi de guerre ou Roi de paix? Louis XV and the French monarchy, 1740-1748

Abstract: This article examines debate about the nature of the French monarchy during the early years of Louis XV's personal rule. It argues that the king, his ministers and advisers as well as the wider French public were torn between traditional models of monarchy based upon the concept of a 'roi de guerre' and the diplomatic and human consequences of military conflict that had caused many to urge a more restrained, pacific projection of French power. In 1748, Louis XV offered a peace which reflected that desire to avoid a repetition of his predecessor's errors, but France lacked the strength needed to impose a Pax Francia. The subsequent separation between the Bourbon dynasty and active military service did much to undermine the monarchy in the eyes of an increasingly patriotic public opinion.

Orphaned in infancy, Louis XV became king of France in 1715 at the age of five and reigned until his death in 1774. During his early years, government was in the hands of his uncle, Philippe duc d'Orléans, and briefly, following his death, the duc de Bourbon, before the king's mentor, cardinal de Fleury, seized the reins of power acting as first minister from 1726 to 1743.¹ It was not until the ninety-year old cardinal finally expired that Louis XV announced his intention to imitate his predecessor by ruling as his own first minister. Few monarchs have been the subject of more historical controversy. For those inspired by Pierre Gaxotte, perhaps most eloquently

¹ D. H. Leclercq, *Histoire de la Régence pendant la minorité de Louis XV* 3 vols (Paris, 1922); A. Dupilet, *La Régence absolue: Philippe d'Orléans et la polysynodie, 1715-1718 suivi d'un dictionnaire de la polysynodie* (Seysssel, 2011); and J.H. Shennan, *Philippe, duke of Orléans: regent of France, 1715-1723* (London, 1979). P. Campbell, *Power and politics in old regime France, 1720-1745* (London, 1996), is the essential introduction to the ministries of Bourbon and Fleury.

Michel Antoine, the king was a capable monarch, conscious later in his life of the need for reform, who, if he had lived just a few years longer, might have prevented the Revolution.² Others, perhaps the majority, have described his reign as an unmitigated disaster. Louis XV is presented as intelligent, but deeply psychologically flawed, with a personality marked by melancholy, morbidity and fatalism summed up by the apocryphal phrase ‘après moi le deluge’.³ Aware that the monarchy needed reform, he was allegedly too wrapped up in his own pleasures to do anything about it, leaving government to his ministers and even his mistress, the marquise de Pompadour. During his reign French prestige drained away, and after entering into an alliance with the traditional enemy, the House of Austria, in 1756, France was humiliated in Germany by Frederick II, most famously at Rossbach in November 1757, and lost its empire in North America and nascent possessions in India to the triumphant British forces.⁴

Rather than confront his enemies in battle, the king spent the war in his various palaces dotted around Paris, where he indulged his lifelong passion for the hunt, causing exasperated Parisians to complain that he preferred to make ‘War on Stags’.⁵ Perhaps even more damagingly, the public believed not only that he left government to a woman (Pompadour), but also that when not hunting the king was ensconced in the aptly named *Parc aux Cerfs*, a private house where he lodged a

² P. Gaxotte, *Le siècle de Louis XV* (Paris, 1933). M. Antoine, *Louis XV* (Paris, 1989), presents a passionate, if not always convincing, defence of the king and his actions. B. Hours, *Louis XV: un portrait* (Toulouse, 2009) and *Louis XV et sa cour. Le roi, l'étiquette et le courtisan* (Paris, 2002) offer another more positive interpretation of his reign.

³ Henri Carré, *Le règne de Louis XV, 1715-1774* (Paris, 1909), 219 for whom the king had ‘jamais gouverné’; É. Glasson, *Le parlement de Paris son rôle politique depuis le règne de Charles VII jusqu'à la révolution* 2 vols (Paris, 1901), ii. 71, and G. Peabody Gooch, *Louis XV. The monarchy in decline* (London, 1956).

⁴ D. A. Baugh, *The Global Seven Years War 1754-1763: Britain and France in a Great Power Contest* (Harlow, 2011), and F. A. Szabo, *The Seven Years War in Europe, 1756-1763* (Harlow, 2008); also R. Waddington, *La Guerre de sept ans: Histoire diplomatique et militaire* 5 vols (Paris, 1899-1914).

⁵ Antoine, *Louis XV*, 600. The king's obsession with hunting had attracted disapproval as early as 1728, T. E. Kaiser, ‘Louis le Bien-Aimé and the rhetoric of the royal body’, in Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg eds, *From the royal to the republican body: Incorporating the political in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France* (London, 1998), 142.

string of teenage mistresses. The *Parc aux Cerfs* seemed to offer tangible proof that the court was corrupt and sexually deviant and the moral failings of the king have prompted a series of distinguished scholars to write of the desecralisation of the monarchy.⁶ In a doubly adulterous relationship with Pompadour, while pursuing the inmates of the *Parc aux Cerfs*, Louis XV was unable to fulfil the religious ceremonies expected of ‘le roi très chrétien’. Although Marie-Antoinette would be the principal victim, it was Louis XV’s scandalous behaviour that had first set quills scribbling the sexually explicit libels that have inspired some to write of nothing less than the pornographic origins of the French Revolution.⁷ Taken as a whole the historiographical verdict on the king seems pretty damning, and while they might disagree about almost everything else military, diplomatic, political and cultural historians all point to the reign of Louis XV as one of the prime causes of 1789.

Without seeking to whitewash the reputation of Louis XV, it is clear that there is more than a hint of teleology lurking beneath these various interpretations and that his reign is ripe for re-evaluation. What follows is no more than a tentative first step in that process, and it will concentrate upon the neglected early years of his rule, from the late 1730s to the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, looking in particular at the relationship between the king and the concepts of war and peace. By shifting our perspective away from more familiar ground we are confronted by a very different

⁶ R. Chartier, *The cultural origins of the French revolution* (London, 1991), 92-135; J. W. Merrick, *The desecralisation of the French monarchy in the eighteenth century* (Baton Rouge, 1990); and D. K. Van Kley, *The Damiens affair and the unravelling of the ancien régime, 1750-1770* (Princeton, 1984), 226-65, and ‘The religious origins of the French Revolution’, in T. E. Kaiser and D. K. Van Kley eds, *From deficit to deluge. The origins of the French revolution* (Stanford, 2011), 104-38. For an important recent addition to the debate, see R. G. Asch, *Sacral kingship. Between disenchantment and re-enchancement: the French and English monarchies, 1587-1688* (Oxford, 2014).

⁷ R. Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (London, 1996); L. Hunt, *The invention of pornography: obscenity and the invention of modernity* (New York, 1993); and S. Maza, ‘The diamond Necklace affair revisited (1785-1786): the case of the missing queen’, in L. Hunt ed., *Eroticism and the body politic* (London, 1991), 63-89. S. Burrows, *Blackmail, scandal and Revolution: London’s French libellistes, 1758-1792* (Manchester, 2006) offers a compelling critique of these works.

political and cultural context, one that was defined by the legacy of Louis XIV, who left a daunting combination of financial and religious problems as well as a very powerful model of personal monarchy.⁸ On his deathbed, he had famously confessed ‘to having loved war too much’, although we should not forget that nearly all early modern (and many later) rulers were subject to intense pressure to fulfil a martial role that was intrinsic to both the aura of monarchy and notions of masculinity in aristocratic society. That military theme provides the focus for an investigation of the personality of Louis XV as well as a broader discussion of attempts to refashion the monarchy in the first half of the eighteenth century.

As Louis XIV prepared to meet his maker, it was understandable that he should question his own actions that had provoked prolonged and bloody conflicts. While his personality undoubtedly contributed to events, he was, in many ways, doing no more than fulfil the expectations of his subjects and those of the nobility in particular. As Joël Cornette has so ably demonstrated, monarchs were under pressure to conform to the ideal of a ‘roi de guerre’.⁹ Henri IV had established the Bourbon dynasty at sword point, and both Louis XIII and Louis XIV had spent years campaigning with the royal armies. Exercising personal military command was a defining feature of royal sovereignty, and Henri IV, or foreign rulers such as Gustavus Adolphus, provided heroic models to which others sought to aspire. In a society with fresh memories of the horrors of civil war, the prospect of a monarch wielding a monopoly of legitimate force to protect his subjects from internal or external threats was an alluring one that struck a patriotic chord with broad swathes of the population.

⁸ G. Rowlands, *The dynastic state and the army under Louis XIV. Royal service and private interest, 1661-1701* (Cambridge, 2002) and *The financial decline of a Great Power. War, influence, and money in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 2012); J. C. Rule and B. S. Trotter, *A world of paper, Louis XIV, Colbert de Torcy, and the rise of the information state* (Montreal, 2014); and T. Sarmant and M. Stoll, *Régner et gouverner. Louis XIV et ses ministres* (Paris, 2010).

⁹ J. Cornette, *Le roi de guerre. Essai sur la souveraineté dans la France du Grand Siècle* (Paris, 1993).

For Cornette, ‘the image of a warrior king formed part of a series of stereotypes underpinning the collective belief in a monarchy with four duties: paternal, righter of wrongs, protector and victor. On this matter, all the witnesses agree: every appearance of the king during a military campaign thrilled the crowds massed along his route’.¹⁰

Yet such was the cost of Louis XIV’s later conflicts that some came to question the ideological underpinnings of a ‘roi de guerre’. The persecution of the Huguenots, the policy of *réunions* and atrocities such as ‘the rape’ of the Palatinate,¹¹ combined with the ‘years of sorrow’ after 1689,¹² had led to intense criticism of the king and his style of government from polemicists writing both inside and outside of the kingdom. Central to their critique was the belief that the king had pursued a bellicose and unethical policy that had ruined his people and so shocked his neighbours that they had formed powerful coalitions to oppose him. Rather than appearing as just and triumphant, the king was increasingly depicted as a tyrant, while war itself was denounced as a cruel plague destroying lives and ruining livelihoods. In the damning words of the anonymous author of the celebrated pamphlet, *Les soupirs de la France esclave*, the king’s pursuit of *gloire* had led him to ‘wage unjust wars that have made the French name odious throughout Europe, convincing [all] that France aspires to universal monarchy, and that she does so through lies, treachery and violence’.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 336.

¹¹ Notably Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, *Mars Christianissimus, Autore Germano Gallo-Graeco, ou Apologie des armes du roy très-chrestien contre les chrestiens* (Cologne, 1684). For these attacks, P. Burke, *The fabrication of Louis XIV* (London, 1992), 135-49; L. Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV. The political and social origins of the French Enlightenment* (1965); and D. Tricoire, ‘Attacking the monarchy’s sacrality in late seventeenth-century France: the underground literature against Louis XIV, Jansenism and the dauphin’s court faction’, *Fr Hist*, 31 (2017), 152-73.

¹² M. Lachiver, *Les années de misère: la famine au temps du Grand Roi: 1680-1720* (Paris, 1991), and W.G Monahan, *Year of sorrows. The great famine of 1709 in Lyon* (Colombus, 1993).

¹³ *Les soupirs de la France esclave qui aspire après la liberté* (Amsterdam, 1689), 22. Long attributed to Pierre Jurieu, it is now accepted that his authorship is unlikely. A. McKenna, ‘*Les Soupirs de la France esclave: le problème de l’attribution*’, in P. Bonnet ed., *Littérature de contestation: Pamphlets et polémiques du règne de Louis XIV aux lumières* (Paris, 2011), 229-44, and Tricoire, ‘Attacking the

Cornette notes the emergence of an Enlightened critique of war more generally, but he does not pursue the later development of the concept of a ‘roi de guerre’ or consider the possibility of an alternative ideal of a ‘roi de paix’ in any detail.¹⁴ As his work is primarily a study of the seventeenth century that is perfectly understandable. However, his focus on Louis XIV in particular leads him to conclude that the reign marked a watershed. After 1693, the king no longer engaged in active campaigning while the size of the competing armies expanded massively, which leads Cornette to assume that the model of a ‘roi de guerre’ lost its allure. With Louis XIV ensconced in Versailles, ‘the “brain” of war was increasingly associated with the king hidden in his cabinet, deciding strategies and actions’, while ‘aristocratic heroism, the logic of gift and reciprocation... so many models of the knightly order serving their monarch and their own *gloire* was no longer completely in season’.¹⁵

If some contemporaries were genuinely surprised by the king’s decision to retreat from active military life, his relatively advanced age and periodic bouts of ill-health provided a respectable excuse for his decision. More importantly, 1693 did not, as Cornette assumes, mark a radical break in the association between the Bourbon dynasty and the battlefield, as that would only become apparent during the Seven Years War.¹⁶ After 1693, the Bourbon princes of both the legitimate and the illegitimate lines were constantly at the front. Louis XV’s father, the duc de Bourgogne, for example, together with the duc de Vendôme, fought against the armies of Marlborough and Eugène at the battle of Oudenarde in July 1708,

monarchy’s sacralty’, 154-5, 162-73, suggest that it emerged within the French court, from either the circles around Fénelon or Monseigneur (the dauphin) respectively.

¹⁴ Cornette, *Roi de guerre*, 377-96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹⁶ Members of the extended royal family, including the prince de Condé and the comte de Clermont, continued to lead armies in the field.

contributing through their squabbling to a memorable French defeat.¹⁷ The junior Orléans branch followed a similar pattern with the future regent matching his father's feats at Cassel by winning his laurels at the battles of Steinkerque, Turin and Almanza.¹⁸

It is true that the accession of the child king Louis XV coincided with a comparatively peaceful interlude on the European diplomatic scene, resulting from the exhaustion of the major states and the willingness of both British and French statesmen to seek an entente. However as Louis XV entered adulthood in the 1730s, the old expectations that he would follow his forefathers by leading French armies weighed heavily. The decades of the 1730s and 1740s saw two major conflicts, the Wars of the Polish and the Austrian Successions. Louis XV's response to both war and peace tells us much about his attitude to kingship and sheds light on his personality in ways that help us to go beyond some of the standard tropes that are fixated on his alleged later shortcomings and the origins of the Revolution. It also offers an opportunity to reflect upon both elite and popular attitudes to monarchy and the problems it faced when seeking to refashion its image in a less military guise.

II

When the War of the Polish Succession (1733-38) broke out in 1733, the twenty-three year old king showed no enthusiasm to lead the French forces that were sent to assist the dynastic claims of his father-in-law, Stanislas Leszcinska.¹⁹ That was a relatively

¹⁷ Duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, ed. A. Boislisle, 43 vols (Paris, 1879-1928), x. 185-89, 205-33, 236-7, 333-5.

¹⁸ Shennan, *Orléans*, 12-13.

¹⁹ B.H. Blackwell, *The War of the Polish Succession* (Oxford, 1901); Pierre Muret, *La prépondérance anglaise, 1715-1763* (Paris, 1937); A. M. Wilson, *French foreign policy during the administration of cardinal Fleury, 1726-1743: A study in diplomacy and commercial development* (Harvard, 1936), 240-64; and J. Lukowski, *Liberty's folly: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century, 1697-1795* (London, 1991), 157-64.

short and distant conflict, fought primarily in Central Europe and Italy, and the king's absence from the battlefield did not surprise his subjects unduly. The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) was of a totally different order as it offered a priceless opportunity to attack France's traditional rivals at a moment of critical weakness. As its name implies, the war was focused, in part, upon the series of conflicts provoked by the death in October 1740 of the Habsburg emperor, Charles VI.²⁰ With no male heir, the emperor had long sought to ensure that his daughter, Maria Theresa, would inherit his possessions on the basis of the so-called Pragmatic Sanction. Most of the major European powers, including France, had been coerced or cajoled into pledging their support, but with the emperor dead his daughter's hopes appeared to hang by a thread. Frederick II of Prussia was the first European ruler to break ranks, invading the Habsburg province of Silesia in December 1740 beginning a conflict that was to dominate central European politics until 1763. France too sought to take advantage of Austrian weakness, backing the candidature of the ultimately successful Bavarian candidate, Charles VII, for the Imperial throne. From July 1741, fighting first by proxy and ultimately in a declared war, the French sought to uphold the emperor's authority, and, after his death in 1745, to press Spanish Bourbon claims in Italy. In a further dimension to a global conflict, France and Great Britain clashed both in Europe and in their colonial theatres of South-East Asia, the Caribbean and North America.

Yet, as the war clouds gathered, Louis XV showed no immediate personal desire to imitate the martial exploits of Frederick II, who had led Prussian troops into battle. Instead, he adopted a posture of detached insouciance, declaring 'that he did

²⁰ M. Anderson, *The War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-1748* (London, 1995); R. Browning, *The War of the Austrian Succession* (New York, 1993); and, more recently, F. El Hage, *La Guerre de Succession d'Autriche (1741-1748): Louis XV et le déclin de la France* (Paris, 2017).

not wish to meddle in anything, that he would keep his hands in his pockets (they were his own words), unless they elect a protestant [as Holy Roman Emperor]’.²¹ Even once French forces had been sent in support of his Bavarian ally, the king remained personally aloof. Part of the explanation for his reluctance to join his armies was the result of convention. War had not been officially declared against either Great Britain or Austria.²² Such diplomatic niceties were, however, a convenient fig leaf because these events coincided with a tumultuous period in Louis XV’s private life. In the course of 1739, the king had switched his affections from his mistress, comtesse Louise Julie de Mailly-Nesle, to her sister, Pauline-Félicité de Mailly-Nesle, marquise de Vintimille. As the diplomatic and military crisis in the Empire unfolded, he engaged in a hectic round of pleasurable activities that included his regular hunting trips, supper parties with his inner circle and excursions to his favourite château at Choisy as well as the fulfilment of formal court and governmental duties.²³ That new passion was brought to a tragic end in September 1741 when Vintimille died shortly after giving birth to a child, who, while never officially recognised, was almost certainly the king’s son.²⁴ The grieving monarch briefly sought solace with Mailly, although her return to favour proved short-lived and she was rapidly supplanted in the royal affections by yet another ambitious sibling, Marie-Anne de Mailly-Nesle, marquise de La Tournelle, the future duchesse de Châteauroux.

Such an emotionally intense period in Louis XV’s personal life, combined with his morally dubious devotion to the Mailly-Nesle, stood in stark contrast to the expectations of his subjects. Events in the Empire and the clash of Prussian and

²¹ Charles-Philippe d’Albert, duc de Luynes, *Mémoires du duc de Luynes sur la cour de Louis XV, (1735-1758)*, 17 vols (Paris, 1860-65), iii. 266.

²² France declared war on Great Britain and Austria on 15 March and 26 April 1744 respectively.

²³ E.J.F. Barbier, *Chronique de la régence et du règne de Louis XV, 1718-1763*, 8 vols (Paris, 1857-8), iii. 264-326, and Luynes, *Mémoires*, iii. 265-82.

²⁴ Charles de Vintimille, marquis du Luc, known as the ‘demi-Louis’ due to his resemblance to the king.

Habsburg forces were the topic of heated discussion in the streets and cafés.²⁵ As Tabetha Ewing describes matters, Parisians had ‘an overwhelming, seemingly atavistic, interest in the pursuit of glory’.²⁶ By failing to assuage that thirst for a ‘roi de guerre’, Louis XV left himself increasingly vulnerable and he was mercilessly lampooned for his infidelities with the Nesle sisters and criticised for his inactivity. Popular grumbling was detectable in the songs and placards recorded by police spies and references to the king’s dissipation included the complaint ‘that he doesn’t take to heart his own *gloire* or that of his subjects’.²⁷ In a fine example of the genre, one anonymous wag had written:

Throughout history
 We read that our kings
 Searched for glory
 By many exploits.
 Louis, full of valour,
 Conquered three sisters
 And will, through his triumph
 Be placed amongst the victorious
 In history.²⁸

Mockery of a king who made his conquests in the boudoir, was rumoured to have a weakness for the bottle and who was only interested in fighting stags was indicative of a public perception that he was not fulfilling his expected role. A Bourbon was nothing if not a warrior, and the exploits of Frederick II or George II of Great Britain

²⁵ T. Ewing, *Rumor, diplomacy and war in Enlightenment Paris* (Oxford, 2014), 1-67.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁷ ‘Chronique du règne de Louis XV, 1742-3, suite’, *Revue Rétrospective*, 4-5 (1834-5), 265-6.

²⁸ É. Raunié, *Chansonnier historique du XVIIIe siècle*, 10 vols (Paris, 1879-84), vii. 16-17.

meant that his subjects could not understand why Louis XV should seek to dodge his own baptism of fire.

That sense of frustration was evident within the royal family. As the campaign of 1742 in Bohemia and the Empire took shape, the princes of the blood were forbidden from joining the French armies.²⁹ In a gesture reminiscent of his grandfather, who had defied Louis XIV in order to fight the Ottoman forces besieging Vienna, the prince de Conti ignored his sovereign and slipped away from court to join the army in Bavaria. Faced with public insubordination, the king was obliged to order his arrest, prompting the prince's family to stage a series of carefully choreographed appeals on his behalf, which culminated in his seven year old son imploring his sovereign to 'forgive my papa'.³⁰ For Conti, his brief disgrace was anything but dishonourable, while for the king it could only reflect unfavourably upon his own inaction. Once Conti had been pardoned, it was impossible to restrain the other princes of the blood who were all quick to follow his lead by flocking to join the royal armies. The atmosphere of the time was captured succinctly in a comic scene involving the king's young daughter, Adélaïde. As courtiers discussed the gallantry of Conti, the duc de Chartres and their peers, the ten-year old girl sought to follow in their wake and was caught out of bounds. When questioned she announced 'that she wanted to put herself at the head of papa king's army', adding that her father had pardoned the prince de Conti and would surely not deny her the same grace.³¹ Most were no doubt content to smile at the antics of the latter-day Jeanne d'Arc, but it is not difficult to imagine how the war affected life at court or impacted upon attitudes towards Louis XV.

²⁹ Luynes, *Mémoires*, iv. 120.

³⁰ Ibid, 227-8, 230-1, 239, and Barbier, *Chronique*, iii. 388. The disgrace of the princes fits a broader pattern discussed in J. Swann, *Exile, imprisonment, or death. The politics of disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610-1789* (Oxford, 2017), 53-6.

³¹ Luynes, *Mémoires*, v. 98-100.

Throughout the early years of the conflict, the king remained a spectator of the events that held his court and the wider French public transfixed, leaving command of his armies to others, while shunning the opportunity to project himself as a ‘roi du cabinet’ by directing affairs from behind the council table. Instead he had appeared preoccupied with his personal life centred around his intimate inner circle, enjoying the pleasures and subsequent anguish of his relationship with Vintimille and her sisters. The exercise of power was left to Fleury, to whom Louis XV displayed almost filial devotion, and his perceived subordination was another common trope for the authors of the satire circulating in the capital who mocked him as ‘un mineur de trente ans’.³² That period of tutelage finally ended on 29 January 1743 with the cardinal’s death, and it was swiftly followed by the king’s announcement that he would henceforth rule without a first minister.

There is no doubt that his decision was heavily influenced by the model of Louis XIV, although interestingly contemporaries had been speculating for months about whether Fleury would be replaced by a new ‘first minister’ with candidates including cardinal Tencin, maréchal de Noailles and maréchal de Belle-Isle as well as the former *garde des sceaux*, Germain-Louis Chauvelin, who was currently languishing in exile.³³ By rejecting that option, the king assumed the mantle of personal rule at a critical juncture in the war as he had been ‘betrayed’ by his Prussian ally in July 1742 and had recently seen French forces forced to abandon Prague. By the following spring Franco-Bavarian armies in the Empire were in danger of disintegrating. Increasingly concerned about the threat of invasion, Louis XV once again drew upon the inspiration of his ancestors. In a letter of 24 July 1743, he informed his trusted confidant, the maréchal de Noailles, that ‘I have a burning desire

³² Barbier, *Chronique*, iii. 367, and Raunié, *Chansonnier*, vi. 1-22.

³³ ‘Chronique du règne de Louis XV, 1742-3, suite’, 444-5, 446, 449; Barbier, *Chronique*, iii. 376-7, 414, 418-19.

to know myself a *métier* that my forefathers practiced so skilfully'.³⁴ The *maréchal* replied in effusive terms:

Your resolution, Sire, to go to war had become indispensable on every level. It is the only way to save your state which is in danger, one cannot hide it from you. Your Majesty's personal honour is in play; a king is never grander than at the head of his armies; that is where his subjects love to see him... above all when it is for the defence of his state and its frontiers.³⁵

To drive home his point, he added a dose of peer group pressure, noting that: 'European sovereigns have all gone to war; Your Majesty would be the first and only of his line to have never appeared at the head of his armies'. Having recently been defeated at Dettingen by an army commanded by George II, Noailles knew what he was talking about and his long letter sought to stiffen his sovereign's martial resolve.

III

When the king finally declared his intention to go on campaign in 1744 the public sense of relief was almost palpable.³⁶ Once he reached the front in May, he revealed a popular touch that produced an immediate positive response. He abandoned his habitually chaotic lifestyle, showing discipline, rising at 4 am to accompany his army on horseback as it marched; he appeared at ease with the officers, taking time to reconnoitre the dispositions of his forces, to visit the wounded and even to test the

³⁴ Louis XV to Noailles, 24 July 1743, in *Correspondance de Louis XV et du maréchal de Noailles, publié par ordre de son excellence le maréchal comte Randon, ministre de la guerre, d'après les manuscrits du dépôt de la guerre*, ed. C. Rousset, 2 vols (Paris, 1865), i. 172-4. The king informed another of his confidants, maréchal de Broglie, 'all that I could wish for is to be at the head of my brave soldiers', Antoine, *Louis XV*, 364.

³⁵ Noailles to Louis XV, 6 August 1743, in Rousset, *Correspondance*, i. 181-2.

³⁶ A. Farge, *Subversive words. Public opinion in eighteenth-century France* (University Park, PA, 1994), 102-5 notes the volatility of the public mood and a sense of both excitement and anxiety.

bread rations of the ordinary soldiers.³⁷ When quick successes at Ypres and Menin followed, it sent official and unofficial bards into overdrive. The authors of the many panegyrics that celebrated these feats were quick to highlight the martial traditions of the ruling House, invoking the shades of Henri IV, Louis XIII and Louis XIV and delivering lines such as ‘the Bourbons, are they all born heroes’ or ‘Bourbon blood only boils at war, in combat’.³⁸

While Louis XV was naturally the focus of these texts, they provided an opportunity for praise of the extended royal family and the exploits of, among others, the comte de Clermont and the prince de Conti, who were both serving with distinction.³⁹ Even the king’s well known obsession with hunting was put to good effect, and, in *Louis XV: un poeme*, the author conjured up the goddess Diana to allay any fears that it was a sign of dissipation, declaring:

Hunting is worthy of great kings,
it toughens their bodies and steels their courage,
of war it is a faithful image.

The bard seasoned these rhymes with lines such as:

I have seen the successor, the Bourbon heir
Who for the happiness of France
The formidable Mars has sworn
To forge for Louis, the mind and the heart.⁴⁰

³⁷ Barbier, *Chronique*, iii. 513, and M. Fogel, *Les cérémonies de l’information dans la France du XVIe au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1989), 351.

³⁸ *Chanson nouvelle sur la convalescence de sa majesté Louis XV* (1745), 1, and *Campagne de Louis XV* (1745), 4.

³⁹ *Louis le Bien-Aÿme, poëme* (1744).

⁴⁰ Claude Godard d’Aucourt, *Louis XV. Poëme* (Lyon, 1744), 3-4.

These formal paeans were accompanied by ditties such as the *Chanson d'un joyeux Grivois* which improvised upon the air of a popular drinking song, 'verse, verse du vin', to offer the refrain:

Menin then has surrendered,
 More than one in its turn will fall,
 See how Louis goes forward,
 He will take anything he wishes;
 Fill, fill, come on, you drunkard, fill me up;
 Let us toast our brave king.⁴¹

Others such as the *Chanson nouvelle sur les conquêtes de Sa Majesté Louis XV* made much of the royal presence that meant 'one soldier was worth twenty', but whatever the style or quality of these printed ephemera they all rejoiced in the exploits of the new *roi de guerre*. Indeed, it was while he was on this first full campaign, that Louis XV was stricken by a sudden illness at Metz where for a few days he hovered between life and death.⁴² France experienced a collective crisis which demonstrated the centrality of the sovereign within a profoundly personal, absolute monarchy as the military and political system was temporarily paralysed.⁴³ News of the king's recovery triggered national rejoicing, earning the grateful king the title of Louis le Bien-Aimé.

Admittedly the drama of Metz had involved his excruciatingly embarrassing separation from the duchesse de Châteauroux in order to be permitted access to what were expected to be the last rites of the church. Once recovered, the king took his

⁴¹ *Chanson d'un joyeux Grivois, à l'endroit de la prise de Menin, par notre Bon Général le Roy Louis XV* (1744), 1.

⁴² Hours, *Louis XV un portrait*, 37-70.

⁴³ Notably, the failure of the maréchal de Noailles to strike against the vulnerable Austrian forces as they made the hazardous crossing back over the Rhine, El Hage, *Guerre de Succession*, 117-18, and Anderson, *Austrian Succession*, 134.

revenge, banishing those he held responsible, including his grand almoner, archbishop Fitz-James, and recalling his mistress only days before she was stricken by what proved to be a fatal illness. Public opinion, fickle as ever, was quick to condemn the monarch for succumbing to the charms of ‘his whore’, giving a foretaste of the opprobrium later directed at the marquise de Pompadour.⁴⁴ Louis XV was well aware that he was the target of such abuse, but, whatever his inner feelings, he refused to be swayed by it and simply regretted that those he loved should be shown such disrespect.⁴⁵ Much ink has been spilt charting the allegedly deleterious effects of these criticisms as evidence for the desacralisation of the monarchy. Such conclusions are misleading as they are almost invariably written from the standpoint of 1789, with historians attributing grave consequences to public perceptions of royal sexuality.⁴⁶ Yet there was nothing new or even particularly outrageous about Louis XV’s conduct compared to that monarchical paragon and notorious sexual predator, Henri IV. Louis XIV had regularly taken his mistresses on campaign and he had suffered similar ribald abuse in his heyday without the monarchy suffering permanent damage.⁴⁷ Throughout the 1740s and beyond, attitudes to Louis XV waxed and waned and those Parisian market women who deplored the brief resurrection of Châteauroux in December 1744 were no doubt whistling another tune six months later when their sovereign achieved one of his greatest triumphs.

⁴⁴ Cited in Ewing, *Rumor*, 153-5.

⁴⁵ The king was consistent in his attitude relative to the Nesle sisters as well as the marquise de Pompadour and the comtesse du Barry.

⁴⁶ For a compelling critique, W. Doyle, ‘Desacralising Desacralisation’, in his *France and the age of Revolution. Regimes old and new from Louis XIV to Napoleon Bonaparte* (London, 2013), 103-11.

⁴⁷ C. Adams, ‘*Belle comme le jour*: beauty, power and the king’s mistress’, *Fr Hist*, 29 (2015), 161-81, at 169-70.

In May 1745, Louis XV stood, together with his son, within range of enemy fire at the great French victory over the English at the battle of Fontenoy.⁴⁸ Displaying genuine *sang-froid* and much good sense, the king helped through his presence to shore up morale in a fluctuating struggle. More importantly perhaps, he gave unwavering support to his general, the maréchal de Saxe, the victor of Fontenoy, whose Saxon origins and great abilities attracted fierce criticism from his many envious rivals.⁴⁹ It would be difficult to exaggerate the popularity of Louis XV in the late spring of 1745, and Voltaire famously composed a poem about the battle which went through several editions and contains the lines:

And you, when your king in field with crimson dyed,
Sees death fly round on every side...
His son, his worthy son, walks by his side
You, great through his valour, happy through his care
Can you, my countrymen, to praise forbear?
Behold your monarch deathless glory gain,
Where Fontenoy extends her spacious plain.⁵⁰

Piling flattery on in spades, Voltaire declared his epic to be ‘a faithful portrait of the most glorious day since the battle of Bouvines’, and in his later panegyric of Louis XV, published in 1748, he made much of the fact that Louis XV was the first French king present at a victory over the English since Saint Louis.⁵¹

⁴⁸ J.-P. Bois, *Fontenoy 1745, Louis XV, l'arbitre de l'Europe* (Paris, 2012), and E. de Saint-Denis, ‘Fontenoy: une bataille, un homme, un dialogue (XVIIIe siècle)’, *Histoire, Économie et Société*, 4 (1985), 479-95.

⁴⁹ His firm support of Saxe contrasts with his failure to show the same consistency during the Seven Years War.

⁵⁰ Voltaire, *La Bataille de Fontenoy, poëme* (Paris, 1745), 3.

⁵¹ Voltaire, *La Bataille de Fontenoy, neuvième édition, avec le plan de la bataille, l'épître dédicatoire au Roy, le discours préliminaire, des notes et autres pièces* (Lyon, 1745), and Voltaire, *Panegyrique de Louis XV* (Paris, 1748), 16.

Voltaire, as historiographer royal, could be forgiven his hyperbole, but it should not disguise the fact that he had captured a public mood. In the mid-1740s, Louis XV had more than exceeded the expectations of a warrior king; he was a martial hero, seemingly epitomising the much-vaunted valour of the Bourbon race. Personally, I would suggest that it was these qualities that took precedence when defining the masculinity of a French king. He had to be seen as taking the lead, and through his own valour encouraging that of his nobility by living up to what were perceived to be the charismatic, heroic traditions of his Bourbon forebears. In a private letter to a favoured courtier, the comte de Coigny, written only days after Fontenoy, the king revealed his own sensitivity to these issues. He wrote: ‘I can only have praise for those who fought before my eyes, I hope they have not been disappointed by me, or more so, who did not appear to be afraid’.⁵² A few months later, as the campaign developed, he returned to the theme, confiding in Coigny that he hoped that ‘everyone will be pleased with what we have done’.⁵³

He had no need to worry. In September 1745, the king was welcomed back to Paris where he received an ecstatic reception, providing further proof of the popular affection that had so touched him after his recovery at Metz.⁵⁴ For several days both the elites and ordinary citizens of the capital were provided with an opportunity to fete the king and the royal family. On the evening of 9 September, for example, Louis XV, the queen, the dauphin and the dauphine and mesdames de France strolled in the Tuileries, prompting the lawyer Barbier to note that ‘all day long the courtyards and garden were overflowing with people of every condition, it would be impossible to

⁵² Broglie, duc de, ‘Lettres de Louis XV au comte de Coigny’, *Revue d’Histoire Diplomatique*, 1 (1887), 512-24, at 520, Louis XV to Coigny, 19 May 1745.

⁵³ Broglie, ‘Lettres de Louis XV’, 522, Louis XV to Coigny, 17 August 1745.

⁵⁴ The king made clear his pleasure in a letter to Coigny, Broglie, ‘Lettres de Louis XV’, 519, Louis XV to Coigny, 4 October 1744.

show greater joy or eagerness to see the king and the court'.⁵⁵ He shared that enthusiasm, claiming that Notre Dame was short of space to hold the captured enemy standards, adding 'everyone agrees that the king's campaign was the most remarkable of any king of France'.⁵⁶

In addition, while camped in Lille, the king received official deputations from the great corps of the realm, whose spokesmen spared no superlative in a bid to lavish praise on their sovereign.⁵⁷ The first president of the Grand Conseil captured the spirit of these occasions in his peroration: 'Cherished monarch, happy father, victorious hero! Rejoice, Sire, in these titles which make the happiness of people and the grandeur of kings'.⁵⁸ The celebratory mood was infectious, and Louis XV ordered numerous *Te Deums* to be held throughout the kingdom which gave a national dimension to the festivities that marked his victories. As Michèle Fogel has demonstrated news of the war spread across France through a range of official media. Following his victory at Fribourg in November 1744, Louis XV sent a circular letter to the episcopate ordering *Te Deums* in their respective dioceses, declaring that it had pleased God to bless his cause and to permit 'me to triumph at the head of my armies; he has deigned to reward my love for my subjects... and my desire to uphold their security and glory'.⁵⁹ These words encapsulate Cornette's definition of a *roi de guerre* who was 'paternal, protective and victorious', and they were reinforced by the bishops who, in preparing the resulting *Te Deums*, published both their sovereign's letters and their own interpretations of his actions.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Barbier, *Chronique*, IV, 82.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 83, 131.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43, 47-9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁹ Fogel, *Cérémonies*, 332. The excerpt is from a letter addressed to the archbishop of Besançon. Ewing, *Rumor*, 157-60, at 157, writes 'news of his triumph becomes one of the century's most powerful changes in public communications.'

⁶⁰ Cornette, *Roi de guerre*, 336.

In the aftermath of Fontenoy these were particularly glowing, offering a stock account of a battle that had for several hours been evenly poised, before invoking the role of the king as the decisive factor in the victory. That composed by the bishop of Limoges can serve as an exemplar, when he wrote:

Louis appears and his presence will be decisive. With the sangfroid of great commanders, with the confidence worthy of the most Christian king, he declares that his bodyguard will join the fray: he announces, sword in hand, that he will lead that faithful troop; his valorous example sweeps through every quarter; everywhere we rally, attack, push forward and overturn, nothing can resist, the [enemy] melts away, abandoning in haste, [their] cannons, dead and wounded on the battlefield.⁶¹

For the eighteenth-century population, the masculine image of the king, ‘sword in hand’, conjured up folk memories of Henri IV as well as more recent monarchical heroes such as Charles XII of Sweden and Frederick II of Prussia.⁶² These tales of Fontenoy included copious references to the impetuous dauphin (also brandishing his sword), imploring his father to be allowed to charge at the head of the guards. At the other extreme it is possible to cite a genre of comic rhymes published in the weeks following the battle with titles such as the *Requête du curé de Fontenoy au roy*, *Le Barbier de Fontenoy* or *Regrets des filles de Fontenoy sur les conquêtes du roy*.⁶³ It is not the content of these mediocre publications that is significant, but the wave of popular support that the monarchy enjoyed on the back of the king’s presence and good fortune on the battlefield. Whatever their style or veracity, these accounts of the great battle were a source of pride and no doubt provoked a frisson of fear for a

⁶¹ Fogel, *Cérémonies*, 404.

⁶² A. Storring, “The age of Louis XIV”: Frederick the Great and French ways of war’, *German Hist* (2019), 1-23.

⁶³ Charles de Broches, *Correspondance du président de Broches et de l’abbé marquis Niccolini*, eds J. Rogister and M. Gille (Oxford, 2016), 92-8, at 96, de Broches to Niccolini, 28 March 1745.

patriotic French public conscious that one ill-directed enemy salvo could plunge the kingdom into darkness.

The War of the Austrian Succession had seen the king seeking with genuine success to fulfil the role of a warrior prince, a model which continued to exercise a real emotional hold over popular and elite conceptions of monarchy. Historians have tended to dismiss the outpouring of love and enthusiasm for Louis XV as no more than fleeting. Instead they have preferred to highlight popular grumbling about the presence of his mistresses or to concentrate on the king's later unpopularity resulting, in part, from the impact of the poisoned quills of angry Jansenists or Jacobites.⁶⁴ Louis XV's reputation certainly suffered some unpleasant blows between 1748 and 1756, but their significance has been exaggerated in the enthusiastic pursuit of evidence to sustain the tenuous thesis of desacralisation.⁶⁵ What the experience of the 1740s suggests is a very different pattern of constant fluctuations in the public mood, and had the king continued to lead his armies after 1756 (or allowed his son to do so) there was a deep patriotic well of support for him to draw upon.⁶⁶

IV

After Fontenoy the military tide in the various European and colonial theatres ebbed and flowed, but in the Low Countries French armies, led by the maréchal de Saxe, won a series of stunning victories. Following the capture of Brussels in February 1746, the rest of the Austrian Netherlands was soon in French hands, and, by 1748,

⁶⁴ T. E. Kaiser, 'The drama of Charles Edward Stuart, Jacobite propaganda, and French political protest, 1745-1750', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 30 (1997), 365-81, and R. Darnton, *Poetry and the police: communication networks in eighteenth-century Paris* (London, 2010), 45-65, 118-28, demonstrate the damaging impact of Jacobite invective. On Jansenism, Van Kley, *Damiens*, and his 'Religious origins'.

⁶⁵ Doyle, 'Desacralising Desacralisation'.

⁶⁶ As E. Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750-1770. La France face à la puissance anglaise à l'époque de la guerre de sept ans* (Oxford, 1998), demonstrates.

after the fall of Maestricht, the Dutch Republic was threatened.⁶⁷ As the French advanced, there was briefly hope of an even more dramatic upheaval when Charles Edward, the Bonny Prince, launched his audacious, if ultimately doomed, Jacobite uprising to press Stuart claims to the British throne. The disaster of Culloden put paid to such ambitions, and when the prince returned to Paris he posed a serious diplomatic problem for the French king.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, in 1748, Louis XV, like Frederick II in Silesia, seemed poised to make territorial gains that would more than match anything achieved by his predecessor. However, success in the Low Countries was, to some extent, offset by losses in North America, most notably the fortress of Louisbourg in June 1745, which was crucial to the future defence of Canada.⁶⁹ Fighting had also been intense in the Carnatic between the British and the French and their local allies, with Madras falling to Louis XV's forces in 1746. The War of the Austrian Succession was therefore part of the broader global struggle for colonial ascendancy that would continue in one form or another until the nineteenth century.

For the French public, however, the victories in the Low Countries were the most striking tangible return on the blood and money invested in the war. Understandably after nearly a decade of fighting, initial reactions to the news of peace in October 1748 were favourable, but any euphoria soon turned to dismay when the actual terms of Aix-la-Chapelle were published. Put simply, the French king agreed to return all of his conquests in the Low Countries, receiving in return the restitution of Louisbourg and the acquisition of Parma, Piacenza and Guastalla for his son-in-law, Don Philip, in Italy. These remarkably generous terms were accompanied by an

⁶⁷ Browning, *Austrian Succession*, 341-4, 352-4.

⁶⁸ Kaiser, 'Charles Edward Stuart', and Darnton, *Poetry*, 45-65, 118-28.

⁶⁹ Anderson, *Austrian Succession*, 180-4, and Browning, *Austrian Succession*, 221-4.

agreement to expel the popular Stuart pretender from Paris.⁷⁰ The resulting public uproar was immortalised by the phrase ‘bête comme la paix’, an insult attributed to Parisian fishwives, which captured a mood of anger and frustration that the financial and human sacrifices of the war had been thrown away at the peace table.⁷¹ Gently mocked in the private bourgeois salon of Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, who drew a caricature of a ‘prince who was too handsome not to be a fool’, the king was also subject to a public campaign of vicious character assassination orchestrated by frustrated Jacobites, who mocked attempts to portray him as the ‘arbiter’ of Europe.⁷² Not surprisingly many scholars have, therefore, seen Aix-la-Chapelle as a dividing line, ending the era of Louis le Bien-Aimé and pointing towards the long years of religious, financial and *parlementaire* crises as well as the diplomatic and military setbacks of the Seven Years War. Disenchantment with the peace was not confined to the streets of Paris. The chief architect of victory in the Low Countries, maréchal de Saxe, wrote that his conquests were secure, adding ‘it troubles me to give it back, for in truth it is a tasty morsel, and we will regret it’.⁷³ He added: the king of Prussia has taken Silesia and he has kept it, and I would have liked us to do the same’. He was not alone, and the comparison with the acquisitive Prussian king is instructive. By 1748, like his contemporary, Frederick II, Louis XV had achieved substantial territorial gains which many believed were his to hold. The Habsburgs were in no fit state to recover their lost possessions in Belgium, and they were, in any case, far more exercised by the loss of Silesia. The Dutch Republic was fearful of invasion and the

⁷⁰ Anderson, *Austrian Succession*, 189-90, 199-14; Browning, *Austrian Succession*, 358-64; and H. M. Scott, *The birth of a great power system, 1740-1815* (London, 2006), 62-71.

⁷¹ Luynes, *Mémoires*, X, 97, noted that ‘the king returned all of his conquests; one began to regret the men and the money they had cost’.

⁷² <https://waddesdon.org.uk/the-collection/item/?id=17016> (Accessed 20 June 2018). This important collection is analyzed in C. Jones, J. Carey, and E. Richardson, eds., *The Saint-Aubin Livre de caricatures: Drawing satire in eighteenth-century Paris* (Oxford, 2012). On the wider public campaign, Kaiser, ‘Charles Edward Stuart’, and his ‘Louis le *Bien-Aimé* and the rhetoric of the royal body’, 131-61, and Darnton, *Poetry*, 122-3.

⁷³ Petitfils, *Louis XV*, 444.

British, as Saxe was well aware, had no hope of challenging the firmly entrenched French occupation. It is true that in the spring of 1748 an army of 37,000 auxiliary Russian troops was marching west to assist the allies, although their glacial progress does raise doubts about their likely effectiveness had they ever reached their destination.⁷⁴ Had Louis XV so wished, the coveted Austrian Netherlands were his.

Clearly the historical reputations of Louis XIV, Frederick II and Napoleon, to name just a few, suggest that he would have been wise to cling to his conquests. When he chose not to contemporaries were astounded. Frederick II wrote cuttingly that 'France is governed by idiots... since they know so badly how to take advantage of their strong position', while Pitt, Bedford and other British politicians could hardly believe their country's good fortune.⁷⁵ George Lytelton spoke for many on hearing of the signing of the preliminaries when he wrote 'it has drawn us out of greater distresses and difficulties than can be conceived by those who do not know the interior of our affairs... *it is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes*'.⁷⁶

In order to understand why Louis XV refused to imitate the rapacity of his fellow sovereigns it is necessary to consider a range of issues. French naval weakness was one crucial factor highlighted by those sympathetic to the ministry, and it is clear that there had been a dramatic shift in the military balance at sea in favour of the British.⁷⁷ More astute use of numerical, tactical and strategic advantages had led to a decisive victory at the battle of Cap Finisterre (Cap Ortégal) in May 1747, and that had been accompanied by costly seizures of French mercantile vessels and their

⁷⁴ Browning, *Austrian Succession*, 334-5, and Scott, *Great power system*, 70-1.

⁷⁵ Anderson, *Austrian Succession*, 205-6.

⁷⁶ In a letter to his father written in April 1748 and quoted by Wilson, *French foreign policy*, 89.

⁷⁷ Luynes, *Mémoires*, IX, 215.

crews.⁷⁸ These setbacks were intimately connected to the need to recoup Louisbourg, deemed essential to the future of Canada. As Britain was unlikely to accept French possession of Belgium it could be seen as a pragmatic, if generous gesture. The Habsburgs thus fortuitously recovered lost territory which may have made them more amenable to ceding ground to France's ally, Spain, in Italy, agreeing a settlement that ended a long cycle of wars for more than a generation.

That diplomatic, naval and financial pressures helped to shape French government policy is clear, but the personality of the king was arguably even more important. Much has been made of Louis XV's shortcomings as a ruler, largely because after 1743 he all too often appeared to preserve Louis XIV's model of personal rule without giving it substance. Yet the sun king's rule was considerably less personal than is sometimes assumed in the sense that Louis XIV, like both his successors, tended to follow the majority in council rather than act independently, and he also consulted widely amongst favoured courtiers and the royal family. Bourbon monarchs rarely acted in the manner of Frederick II invading Silesia in 1740 or Saxony in 1756, but they did need to give the royal council direction, and, ultimately, if the king wished to make war or peace, he had the right to do so. Louis XV periodically demonstrated his ability to impose his own preferences against ministerial opposition, most strikingly through his enthusiastic support for the Austrian alliance after 1756 or in opposing war over the Falklands in 1770.⁸⁰

The peace of 1748 was an early example of the king shaping policy in his own image. Yet such apparent decisiveness sat uneasily alongside his simultaneous pursuit of a clandestine diplomatic system, the 'Secret du roi', which first took shape

⁷⁸ Browning, *Austrian Succession*, 307-9, and Scott, *Great power system*, 64-7.

⁸⁰ The king described the conclusion of the Austrian alliance as 'his fondest wish', *Mémoires et lettres de François-Joachim de Pierre, cardinal de Bernis, 1715-1758* ed. F. Masson, 2 vols (Paris, 1878), I, 272. His determination to avoid war in 1770 over the Falklands was no less decisive, J. Flammermont, *Le chancelier Maupeou et les parlements* (Paris, 1883), 155-96.

following the death of Fleury and was initially intended to secure the election of the prince de Conti to the Polish throne.⁸¹ The secret has been described as a ‘vain fantasy’ and a ‘royal sottise’, and it is true that at times it ran almost completely in the opposite direction to official policy.⁸² Yet it also contained within it two of the principal and most enduring diplomatic passions of Louis XV, namely a desire to defend the independence and integrity of Poland and to prevent the westward expansion of Russia. Long after his relationship with Conti had soured, the king could still inform the baron de Breteuil that ‘the aim of my diplomacy with Russia is to remove it as far as possible from the affairs of Europe’, and he referred repeatedly to his desire to uphold ‘Polish liberty’.⁸³ It was indicative of an almost Quixotic element to his character that can be detected in other aspects of his diplomacy. In 1743, for example, Louis XV had given his blessing to the Treaty of Fontainebleau, signed with his uncle, Philip V of Spain, in which French interests took second place to those of his Bourbon relatives.⁸⁴ When the Gallispan forces later suffered a severe reverse in Northern Italy, largely due to the diplomatic blunders of the French secretary of state for foreign affairs, the marquis d’Argenson, the king again sought to smooth ruffled

⁸¹ Duc de Broglie, *Le secret du roi: correspondance secrète de Louis XV avec ses agents diplomatiques, 1752-1774*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Paris, 1878), and D. Ozanam and M. Antoine, eds., *Correspondance Secrète du Comte de Broglie avec Louis XV (1756-1774)*, 2 vols (Paris, 1956-61).

⁸² The views of H. M. Scott, ‘France and Polish throne, 1763-1764’, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 53 (1975), 370-88, at 381, and F. Monnier, ‘Le Secret du roi ou l’histoire d’une sottise’, *La Revue Administrative* 333 (2003), 235-40, respectively. For the broader diplomatic picture, see H. M. Scott, *The emergence of the Eastern powers, 1756-1775* (Cambridge, 2001), and Lukowski, *Liberty’s folly*, 157-80.

⁸³ Louis XV to Breteuil, 10 Sept. 1762, and to Tercier, 17 Mar. 1763, in E. Boutaric, *Correspondance secrète inédite de Louis XV, sur la politique étrangère, avec le Cte de Broglie, Tercier, etc., et autres documents relatifs au ministère secret, publiés d’après les originaux conservés aux archives de l’empire et précédés d’une étude sur le caractère et la politique personnelle de Louis XV*, 2 vols (Paris, 1866), i. 283 and 290.

⁸⁴ A. Baudrillart, *Philip V et la cour de France d’après des documents inédits tirés des archives espagnoles de Simancaset d’Acala de Hénarès et des archives du ministère des affaires étrangères de Paris*, 5 vols (Paris, 1890-1901), v., 155-73, and Browning, *Austrian Succession*, 149-50.

feathers in Madrid by subordinating command of his own army to that of Spain.⁸⁵ His earlier willingness to honour his obligations to Charles VII, particularly once the military tide had turned in the Empire, also contrasts sharply with the ruthless realpolitik of Frederick II and even that of Maria Theresa.

While perhaps naïve in such a diplomatic climate, Louis XV sought to pose as a magnanimous, honourable ruler and he gave a revealing insight into his own thinking in 1748 when he informed Alphonse-Marie-Louis, comte de Saint-Séverin, one of his principal envoys at Aix-la-Chapelle, that ‘he wished to make peace as a king, not a merchant’.⁸⁶ In a letter to his ally and cousin, Ferdinand VI of Spain, the king explained his position in greater detail declaring that ‘the restitutions I have made and the few advantages I have gained by this peace will make it clear to Your Majesty that pity for my people and religion have weighed more heavily on this occasion than the desire of aggrandisement’.⁸⁷ Whatever one might think of the king’s geo-political sense, peace on the terms afforded at Aix-la-Chapelle was his own decision. When he looked for gain it was for the wider House of Bourbon, thinking in dynastic rather than national terms, and he was unusually sensitive to the interests of his allies. Perhaps one of the most notable, if often overlooked, aspects to his personality was his sense of chivalry. He consciously sought to act as a model monarch, demonstrating generosity to allies and enemies alike, and it was a trait that reasserted itself on numerous occasions in his later dealings with Maria-Theresa during the Seven Years War. His actions in 1748 can, therefore, be seen as an expression of his own conception of kingship.

⁸⁵ D’Argenson was a notorious hispanophobe, E. Zevort, *Le marquis d’Argenson et le ministère des affaires étrangères* (Paris, 1880), 19-65, and Baudrillart, *Philip V et la cour de France*, v. 257-67, 337-92.

⁸⁶ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire: avec des notes et une notice historique sur la vie de Voltaire* (Paris, 1846), iv. 389-90.

⁸⁷ Petitfils, *Louis XV*, 443. The analysis of Antoine, *Louis XV*, 400-3, is also highly pertinent.

V

In 1748, Louis XV been influenced by a broad range of military, financial and economic factors when making peace and they in turn had been moulded by his own personality and his understanding of his role. Throughout the conflict he had sought to balance the image of a conquering *roi de guerre* with the beneficent profile of a just ruler who would act as the arbiter of Europe. To understand that apparent contradiction we need to remember that the first half of the reign was shaped by memories of Louis XIV's belligerence and his alleged pursuit of hegemony. Although Louis XV had performed his military duties with a certain aplomb and genuine physical courage, he was not driven by a desire for personal *gloire* in the manner of his predecessor or rulers such as Charles XII of Sweden or Frederick II. While he should not be described as a pacifist, war in Louis XV's eyes was, at best, a necessary evil and his acquisition of both Lorraine and later Corsica involved careful diplomacy and not just brute force.⁸⁸ His stance reflected his own equable temperament as well as a deeper set of beliefs derived from his upbringing and education. The king cherished the memory of his father, the duc de Bourgogne, and he was familiar with Fénelon's teachings whose ideas circulated extensively amongst French elites in the first half of the eighteenth-century.

Archbishop Fénelon was the tutor to Bourgogne, and he had sought almost literally to indoctrinate him. It was as part of the young prince's education that Fénelon wrote his masterpiece, *Télémaque*, which, somewhat paradoxically given its

⁸⁸ O. Ranum, 'Louis XV and the price of pacific inclination', *Int. Hist R*, 13 (1991), 331-8. The reversion of Lorraine was seen as compensation for Stanislas Leszcynski's loss of the Polish throne, whereas the acquisition of Corsica did involve conquest but also very delicate diplomacy with Great Britain in order to avoid war, H. M. Scott, 'Religion and Realpolitik: the duc de Choiseul, the Bourbon family compact, and the attack on the Society of Jesus, 1758-1775', *The International History Review* xxv (2003), 37-62, and G. W. Rice, 'Deceit and distraction: Britain, France, and the Corsican crisis of 1768', *Int. Hist R*, xxviii (2006), 287-315.

content, was the bestselling French work of the eighteenth century.⁸⁹ In it, Fénelon delivered a damning critique of wars of conquest:

Thus one man, given to the world by the angry gods, barbarously sacrifices so many others to his vanity. Everything must perish, be bathed in blood, devoured by the flames, those who escape fire and sword cannot escape from an even crueller famine, in order that one man, who treats the human race as his plaything, finds in this destruction his pleasure and glory! What monstrous glory! Can men who have forgotten all humanity be sufficiently despised and detested? No, no.⁹⁰

These themes had been hammered into Bourgoigne, and they were also fed without much success to Louis XIV via the marquise de Maintenon. In 1693, Fénelon had addressed a letter to the king in which he had thrown caution and courtly obsequiousness aside, declaring:

Your name and that of the whole French nation has been rendered odious to our neighbours. We have kept none of our old allies because we wanted only slaves. For more than twenty years we have caused bloody wars... It is true, Sire, that the subsequent peace treaties appear to hide or repair this injustice, for they have brought you conquests: but an unjust war is no less unjust for being successful.⁹¹

Fénelon's hopes of seeing Bourgoigne reign not as a conqueror, but as a model Christian prince were dashed by the dauphin's premature death. However, in the

⁸⁹ First published in 1699, it has been republished repeatedly ever since. Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe, *Les Aventures de Télémaque, édition présentée, établie et annotée par Jacques le Brun* (Paris, 1995).

⁹⁰ Fénelon, *Télémaque*, 293.

⁹¹ Fénelon to Louis XIV, Dec. 1693, in J. Orcibal ed., *Correspondance de Fénelon, Lettres antérieures à l'épiscopat, 1670-1695* (Paris, 1972), ii. 274-80, at 275.

aftermath of Louis XIV's wars, the archbishop's message struck a powerful chord, and inspired some to think of an alternative to monarchical militarism.

In addition to the well-known Utopianism of Fénelon or the abbé Charles Irénée Castel de de Saint-Pierre, it is possible to point to a more general spirit of reflection on the dying words of Louis XIV that were explored by both lay and clerical thinkers.⁹² That movement was actively encouraged by the Regency government itself, and one of its first acts was to publish an officially sanctioned version of the final exchange between Louis XIV and his heir.⁹³ A few years later, in 1718, for example, the young king had listened intently to the powerful oratory of Jean-Baptiste Massillon, bishop of Clermont, who had thundered from the pulpit: 'Sire, always see war as the greatest scourge with which God can afflict an empire'.⁹⁴ Warming to his theme he had recalled Louis XIV's dying words, imploring his young sovereign to:

never erase from your memory the wise words that this great prince left you in his final moments as a legacy more precious than his crown! He exhorted you to relieve your people... he inspired you with a horror of war and encouraged you not to follow his example; be a pacific prince; the most glorious conquests are those which capture hearts.⁹⁵

According to some accounts, the young monarch was so struck by Massillon's sermon that he asked to be given a copy.⁹⁶ Whatever the truth of the matter, we know that his

⁹² Saint-Pierre, abbé Charles Irénée Castel de, *Project pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe* (Utrecht, 1713).

⁹³ T. Kaiser, 'Louis le *Bien-Aimé*', 133-8, has also noted the emergence of a pastoral critique of the bellicose model of a *roi de guerre*.

⁹⁴ Petitfils, *Louis XV*, 51.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Antoine, *Louis XV*, 78.

calligrapher carefully copied out the text, framed it and had placed above the king's prie-Dieu.⁹⁷

If panegyrists of Louis XIV invoked a disciple of Mars, the early propagandists of his successor sought to present their young charge as a new Solomon.⁹⁸ In an address to the *Académie Française* in 1721 one august rhetorician declared 'the pacific Solomon has succeeded the bellicose David', and echoes of those words can be detected throughout the 1720s and 1730s. During the war of the Polish Succession, for example, Étienne Lauréault de Foncemagne returned to these themes in his inaugural address to the *Académie*.⁹⁹ He informed his fellow immortals that 'the last words of Louis XIV on his deathbed are the fundamental laws of the happy government under which we live'. His words anticipated the signing of the peace treaty ending the war, and while platitudinous in themselves were typical of a more general mood. The orphaned Louis XV was raised in a society that had been scarred by the final years of Louis XIV, and he was educated by men who had known his father or Fénelon. Amongst his tutors were the abbé de Fleury, who had once been *sous-précepteur* to the duc de Bourgogne, and the young king was also provided with the historical works composed under the orders of Fénelon for the instruction of the dauphin and his brothers.¹⁰⁰ Throughout his life Louis XV was a self-confessed bibliophile, and his own collection had been founded upon that of his father, preserved by Louis XIV under the care of abbé Perot.¹⁰¹ Furthermore we know that when Louis XV reached adulthood he was given some of his father's papers as well as copies of the correspondence between Louis XIV and the young Philip V of

⁹⁷ Petitfils, *Louis XV*, 51.

⁹⁸ Kaiser, 'Louis le *Bien-Aimé*', 138.

⁹⁹ *Discours prononcez dans l'Académie Française, le Jeudy 10 Janvier MDCCXXXVII à la réception de M. de Foncemagne* (Paris, 1737), 9.

¹⁰⁰ Antoine, *Louis XV*, 68, 73.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 412-13.

Spain.¹⁰² Occasional poignant references in the king's adult correspondence give a hint of the loss he felt at having never known his parents, whose memory he venerated.¹⁰³ Nor was the continuity between father and son confined to the schoolroom or the library. When the regent began the military instruction of the king, he called upon the services of the marquis de Puységur who had performed the same role for Bourgogne.¹⁰⁴

These continuities in personnel help to illustrate how Louis XV was raised in a complex intellectual environment where reverence for the model of the Sun King coexisted alongside the vestiges of the ideas of his fiercest critics. In addition to these relatively distant factors it is necessary to add the more tangible influence of the many formative years he had spent under the tutelage of his own mentor, Fleury. Although the cardinal was friendly with Fénelon, he shared neither his political idealism nor his theological mysticism.¹⁰⁵ Instead, his diplomacy was shaped by an acute awareness of how close the kingdom had come to collapse at the end of Louis XIV's reign and a realisation that it needed time to recover.¹⁰⁶ While prepared to risk, or even fight, wars, the cardinal always did so with modest objectives designed to prevent the renaissance of the great coalitions that had almost brought France to its knees. For much of his long ministry he succeeded admirably. The Peace of Vienna, signed in November 1738, which ended the War of the Polish Succession, secured the long-coveted province of Lorraine for Louis XV, and marked the crowning glory of his ministry. By 1740, many believed that France had never been more powerful, and in

¹⁰² Noailles to Louis XV, Jan. 1743, in Rousset, *Correspondance*, i. 11-33.

¹⁰³ Louis XV to Noailles, July 1748, in *ibid.*, ii. 283-4. On the death of the *maréchal's* mother, the king wrote: 'I was unlucky enough never to have known what it is to lose a mother, but having felt the loss of friends, I share very truly your sad loss'.

¹⁰⁴ Antoine, *Louis XV*, 121.

¹⁰⁵ Fénelon was condemned for his Quietist beliefs, whereas Fleury was never anything but orthodox, Campbell, *Power and politics*, 42-44, 277-8.

¹⁰⁶ Studies of Fleury's diplomatic policies show a general consensus that he was measured in his actions, see: Wilson, *French foreign policy*, *passim*; J. Black, 'French foreign policy in the age of Fleury reassessed', *Eng Hist R*, 103 (1988), esp. 378-84.

the immediate aftermath of Charles VI's death some even thought that Louis XV could be elected Holy Roman Emperor or Fleury Pope.¹⁰⁷ If such flights of fancy were unrealistic, France nevertheless appeared militarily powerful, and the king and his ministers could dream of dominating the continent more effectively through the projection of power than Louis XIV had achieved by force.

Frederick II's unexpected invasion of Silesia transformed the situation. Fleury, whose powers were ebbing with age, was circumvented by the war party at the French court headed by the charismatic Charles Louis Auguste Fouquet, duc de Belle-Isle.¹⁰⁸ Yet if Louis XV was prepared to back the mercurial Belle-Isle and his grand strategy designed to destroy Habsburg influence in the Empire, his subsequent actions show the imprint of Fleury and the deeper cultural and emotional legacy of his formative years. Ultimately the king was fighting for what he believed were legitimate and limited objectives, principally those of his Spanish and Bavarian allies, rather than to satisfy any personal ambitions for *gloire* or conquest.

Humane by nature, the king famously toured the battlefield after the carnage of Fontenoy in the company of the teenage dauphin. According to several witnesses, the king was said to have declared: 'See what such a victory costs. The blood of our enemies is always the blood of men. The true *gloire* is to spare it.'¹⁰⁹ Contemporaries were struck by his words and by his practical response after Fontenoy of ordering his military intendants to take the same care of the English wounded as they did of the French. He also surprised his diplomats by trying to use his triumph as a platform to

¹⁰⁷ El Hage, *Guerre de Succession*, 32-3, and Marquis d'Argenson, *Journal et mémoires du marquis d'Argenson*, ed. E. J. B. Rathéry, 9 vols (Paris, 1857-67), iii. 4, 82, 124.

¹⁰⁸ E. Cruikshanks, 'The factions at the court of Louis XV and the succession to Cardinal Fleury, 1737-1745: with a critical catalogue of eighteenth century memoirs' (PhD, University of London, 1956); M. Sautai, *Les préliminaires de la guerre de la succession d'Autriche* (Paris, 1907), 131-267; and Wilson, *French foreign policy*, 329-39.

¹⁰⁹ Antoine, *Louis XV*, 387. There are many references to these scenes, and while the precise words vary the sentiments expressed are consistent. Even after the king's death, his critics still felt compelled to recognise his humanity, B.-F.-Joseph M. d'Angerville, *Vie privée de Louis XV ou principaux événements, particularités et anecdotes de son règne* (London, 1785).

sue for peace. It was typical of the king, and after standing alongside Saxe at another French victory at Lawfeldt the captured British general, Sir John Ligonier, incidentally a Huguenot, was brought before him. Louis XV characteristically treated the prisoner with great courtesy, enquiring ‘would it not be better... to think seriously of peace rather than to sacrifice so many brave men?’.¹¹⁰

His pursuit of peace was not as idiosyncratic as it might at first appear because there is much to be said for the argument that had he held on to his conquests in 1748 he risked provoking the kind of backlash experienced by Louis XIV after 1688.¹¹¹ Had Belgium followed the recent acquisition of Lorraine, which, de facto at least, was French from 1739, fears of French aggrandisement were almost certain to resurface and rekindle fresh conflict. The king was frequently reminded of the dangers of repeating past errors, not least by his eccentric secretary of state for foreign affairs, René Louis de Voyer de Paulmy, marquis d’Argenson. Appointed in November 1744, he was known to his contemporaries as ‘d’Argenson la bête’, less on account of his formidable intellect than his genuinely idealistic vision of international relations.¹¹² D’Argenson’s projects included establishing an independent, federal Italy, and, like his old friend from the *Club de L’Entresol*, the abbé de Saint Pierre, he thought seriously about projects for universal peace.¹¹³ While in office, he wrote confidently that: ‘the king’s reputation for honour, good faith and justice is recognised throughout Europe. This opinion of the good intentions and moderation of His Majesty will be so

¹¹⁰ Barbier, *Chronique*, iv. 251, n. 1. The quote is attributed to Voltaire.

¹¹¹ C. J. Ekberg, *The failure of Louis XIV’s Dutch war* (Chapel Hill, 1979); John B. Wolf, *Louis XIV*, 213-65, 426-63; A. Lossky, *Louis XIV and the French monarchy*, 169-81, 228-46; and G. Symcox, ‘Louis XIV and the outbreak of the Nine Years War’, in Hatton, *Louis XIV and Europe*, 179-212.

¹¹² D’Argenson’s publications are a key source for the reign of Louis XV, but studies of his life are limited and dated, see: Albert de Broglie, *Maurice de Saxe et le marquis d’Argenson* 2 vols (Paris, 1893); Zevort, *Le marquis d’Argenson*; and Adrienne Hytier, ‘An eighteenth-century experiment in historical realism: the marquis d’Argenson and Bonnie Prince Charlie’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1969), 200-41.

¹¹³ J.-P. Bois, *L’Abbé de Saint-Pierre, entre classicisme et Lumières* (Ceyzérieu, 2017), and N. Childs, *A political academy in Paris, 1723-1731: the Entresol and its members* (Oxford, 2000).

firmly established that the other powers will look to him to settle their own affairs and those of all'.¹¹⁴ More significantly perhaps, despite occasionally reflecting on the possibility of modest territorial gains in the Low Countries, the marquis was largely convinced that France was a satisfied power whose borders were now fixed and secure.¹¹⁵ In a memorandum composed after his disgrace, he had concluded that 'reputation alone is worth armies: it can vanquish without combat, it is acquired by virtuous actions and constancy'.¹¹⁶ His language was worthy of Fénelon, although it was unlikely to cut much ice in the cabinets of Europe. D'Argenson proved to be a political *ingénue*, and he was disgraced in January 1747. Yet before his fall, he had been well placed to expound his views and to reinforce Louis XV's own preference for France to act as the arbiter of conflict rather than as a conquering power.

Nor was d'Argenson an isolated voice. One of his most vociferous critics and bitter rivals was the maréchal de Noailles, who in December 1746 denounced him to the king as 'a minister who has made himself the laughing stock of your kingdom and the whole of Europe'.¹¹⁷ Yet despite the personal venom that passed between them, they shared the view that France was a satisfied power. The elderly Noailles, who had first-hand experience of the dark days of the War of the Spanish Succession, had been to the fore in pressing for a campaign in the Low Countries, but not with a view to conquest. In February 1744, he had presented Louis XV with a strategic plan warning of the dangers of 'the spirit of conquest', which would:

Raise all of Europe against the ambition of France. One would see the resurrection of all the heinous reproaches so often made [against her] of

¹¹⁴ Zevort, *Le marquis d'Argenson*, 406. He was writing in February 1745.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 405.

¹¹⁷ 'Mémoire présenté au Roi par le maréchal de Noailles, le 15 décembre 1746', in Rousset, *Correspondance*, ii. 252-78, at 271. D'Argenson was no less contemptuous of Noailles and caricatured him mercilessly in a play, *La prison du Prince Charles Edouard Stuart*, written after his fall from the ministry, Hytier, 'The marquis d'Argenson and Bonnie Prince Charlie', 220-1.

wishing to sacrifice everything to her aggrandisement, and it would make it easy for our enemies to acquire new allies and to unite all of Europe against us.¹¹⁸

Such arguments fell on fertile ground, and throughout the war Louis XV repeatedly referred to his ambition to use military strength not for aggrandisement, but to secure a just and honourable peace. When, for example, he ordered a *Te Deum* to celebrate the capture of Tournai shortly after Fontenoy, he declared that the siege was ‘the most effective means of obliging the Queen of Hungary and her allies to accept the just and pacific views that have always been my only object’.¹¹⁹

During the final years of the war, Louis XV had been pursuing what might be described as a policy of conquest in the Low Countries, ‘malgré lui’. In other words, gradually tightening his hold on the Austrian Netherlands and knocking at the frontiers of the Dutch republic, but always with the intention of forcing his enemies to come to the peace table. More remarkably, despite substantial and defensible territorial gains, he consistently offered generous terms. After the triumph of Fontenoy, the almost immediate French proposal of a peace conference can be attributed to the idealism of d’Argenson, but that should not be allowed to disguise the fact that very similar terms were agreed in 1748.¹²⁰ The explanation for that continuity lies with the king, who for reasons of character, temperament and personal conviction shied away from repeating what he believed were the errors of his great-grandfather and his actions were in tune with a wider intellectual current amongst a significant section of the French military and governing elites.

¹¹⁸ ‘Mémoire présenté au Roi par le maréchal de Noailles, le 10 Février 1744’, in Rousset, *Correspondance*, ii. 75-123, at 90.

¹¹⁹ The phrase is from a letter written to the duc de Boufflers quoted by Bois, *Fontenoy*, 119, and is echoed by D’Argenson, *Journal*, iv. 137.

¹²⁰ After 1745, French war aims were confused with no clear objective beyond advancing the interests of the House of Bourbon in Italy.

IV

Tensions between the representation of Louis XV as a conquering hero, epitomising the masculine virtues of a ‘roi de guerre’ or as a just and beneficent ‘roi de paix’ were to surface regularly in the works of official and unofficial propagandists as well as in public discourse throughout the war. In an Ode entitled *La France Consolée* of 1744, inspired by the ‘miracle’ of Metz, abbé Simon-Joseph Pellegrin offered a madrigal, which, after alluding to the recent triumphs in Flanders, proclaimed:

Take Louis the Great for model;
 By thunder... where will too much zeal take me?
 Is there not a new road,
 Which leads to immortal *gloire*?
 If I dare read it in your heart
 Your choice to my eyes is unveiled
 You wish, what title is more flattering ?
 You wish that Europe calls you
 Louis le Pacificateur.¹²¹

These lines were published before Fontenoy and the series of victories that followed it, and they illustrate the on-going attempt to present the monarchy and actions of Louis XV in a positive light, free of the association with the bellicosity and acquisitiveness of Louis XIV. When in 1748, the king seemingly adopted a stance worthy of Télémaque, royal propagandists had to present their sovereign in very different ways to the classic warrior prince, styling him as a virtuous, benevolent and pacific monarch, or what might be termed a *roi de paix*.

¹²¹ S.-J. Pellegrin, *La France Consolée* (1744), 426.

Voltaire's panegyric of Louis XV, published in 1748, was arguably the most compelling example of the genre. He recounted the now familiar tale of the king's sangfroid during the battle of Fontenoy and his humanitarian response to his triumph, declaring confidently 'thus a prince, one man alone, can, by his example, make his subjects and even his enemies better'.¹²² Louis XV's actions were interpreted as part of a broader vision of a monarch motivated by the desire to promote peace and prosperity not only for France, but also for Europe as a whole. According to Voltaire, the war had been forced on the king because his claims were 'so modest, so equitable, so disinterested, so pure, that no one could believe it. Such virtue is too rare among men, and when it first appears, one takes it for falsehood or for weakness'.¹²³ Suspicion of the king's sincerity was attributable to the legacy of Louis XIV, and it was only when the victorious Louis XV offered terms in 1748, which were largely unaltered from those of 1745, that it became clear that 'the father of France is also the father of Europe'.¹²⁴ As for critics of the peace, who argued that Louis XV should have held on to his conquests, they failed to see that such actions would leave in the 'heart of his enemies the seeds of eternal discord and hatred'.¹²⁵ The French king had a loftier ambition, it was to heal ancient wounds and to become the arbiter of nations, and Voltaire concluded that never before had a monarch made a more generous peace:

Louis XV teaches men that the greatest diplomacy (politique) is to be virtuous. What is left for us to hope for, if not that he remains true to himself and that future kings resemble him.¹²⁶

These sentiments were echoed by a string of lesser authors, by whom the king was praised for his moderation as in the *Ode sur la paix au roy*:

¹²² Voltaire, *Panegyrique de Louis XV*, 15-23, at 21.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

Already Victory... knows only his laws
 All Europe divided entrusts him with all its rights;
 He will become its arbiter
 The Universe beholds his heart;
 And will name him with justice
 L O U I S le Pacificateur.¹²⁸

These sentiments were also given physical expression through a variety of artistic forms. At the end of the Dutch War in 1679, Louis XIV and his ministers promoted an extensive programme of propaganda, persuading the great cities of the realm to commission imposing equestrian statues of the warrior king.¹²⁹ That precedent proved compelling and somewhat prematurely the city of Bordeaux had commissioned Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne's classical equestrian statue of Louis XV in martial pose as early as 1743. The city of Paris, on the other hand, waited until the end of the conflict before commissioning Edmé Bouchardon to produce its own representation of the king, a masterpiece that would provide the centrepiece for the new Place Louis XV.¹³⁰ Significantly, the king took a close personal interest in Bouchardon's commission, which explicitly stated that he should represent the monarch as a 'pacifier rather than a conqueror' with bronze bas reliefs presenting him on one side in a triumphal chariot crowned by victory and on the other 'refusing the fruits of victory other than the benefit of procuring peace for Europe'.¹³¹ That pacific theme was apparent elsewhere and the Place Royale of Reims, commenced in 1757, featured a statue by Jean-Baptiste Pigalle of the king in Roman costume, crowned by laurels, holding out his

¹²⁸ *Ode sur la paix au Roy* (Paris, 1748), 4.

¹²⁹ Burke, *Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 91-7, 113-22.

¹³⁰ R. L. Cleary, *The Place Royal and urban design in the ancien régime* (Cambridge, 1999), 37-8, 53, 62-3, and S. Rombouts, 'Art as propaganda in eighteenth-century France: The paradox of Edmé Bouchardon's Louis XV', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1993-4), 255-82.

¹³¹ Rombouts, 'Art as propaganda', 257, and Cleary, *The Place Royal*, 33.

arm ‘to take the people under his protection’.¹³² Significantly Pigalle and his patrons had avoided the classic martial equestrian pose, and very similar statues were erected in Valenciennes, Rennes and Nancy.¹³³

While there was still much in common between sculptures of Louis XV and his predecessor that peaceful, benevolent theme did mark a break from the classic model of conquerer so evident in representations of Louis XIV. The ideal of ‘Louis le Pacificateur’, which abbé de Saint-Pierre had imagined as early as 1725, was also visible in a variety of other artistic genres.¹³⁴ There were numerous types of coins, jewellery, ceramics and other material representations of the monarch, including the king as Hercules standing between allegories of victory and peace.¹³⁵ Many more could be added to this list, and the presentation of Louis XV as a pacific, virtuous monarch – the father of Europe and the arbiter of nations was an integral part of French government propaganda as it sought to benefit from the king’s generosity at Aix-la-Chapelle. As late as 1761, it was still possible to see public representations of the theme. At the Parisian Salon of 1761, Jacques Dumont le Romain exposed a striking canvas, the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, which according to the official *Livret*, presented ‘peace descending from heaven to crown him with laurels, she [peace] holds the hand of the monarch who cherishes her. The king presents the laurels to the city of Paris, which receives it with respect, joy and gratitude’.¹³⁶ The canvas attracted sharp criticism from Diderot, among others, for attempting to fuse allegorical and contemporary themes, but what is perhaps most revealing is the date of its display. By

¹³² Cleary, *The Place Royal*, 2-3, 66, and https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/8b/Povillon_statue_place_royale_reims.JPG/G/220px-Povillon_statue_place_royale_reims.JPG (Accessed 20 June 2018).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 7, 74-84.

¹³⁴ Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, *Mémoire pour diminuer le nombre de procès* (Paris, 1725), 8.

¹³⁵ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7700161m.r=Louis%20XV%20et%20la%20paix?rk=64378;0> (accessed 20 June 2018), and https://www.saivenumismatique.fr/upload/photos/vignettes/-non-signee-preliminaires-de-la-paix-d-aix-la-chapelle-bronze-41-5mm-sup_23004a.jpg (Accessed 20 June 2018).

¹³⁶ <http://utpictural8.univ-montp3.fr/GenerateurNotice.php?numnotice=A0693>.

1761, the Seven Years War was already lost and with it any potency of the image of Louis XV as a peacemaker.¹³⁷

In 1748, as the ink dried on the peace treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, Louis XV clearly hoped to present himself as a benign ruler, who rather than exploit French military power for selfish ends offered peace and security to his neighbours, thus laying the ghost of his predecessor's supposedly hegemonic ambitions. Employing Voltaire and other talented quills, the genius of Bouchardon and artists such as Dumont, the monarchy sought to gain maximum advantage from the generous peace. Unfortunately for Louis XV, the eighteenth-century state system was red in tooth and claw, and if France was content to act as a satiated power others were not. Within a few years, unresolved conflicts in North America and Central Europe would lead to the ruinous Seven Years War. As neither the king nor the dauphin took an active part in any of the campaigns, it was Frederick II not Louis XV who epitomised the *roi de guerre* and his victories secured for him the admiration of the citizens of Paris.¹³⁸ By the late 1750s, time had added a rosy tinge to memories of Louis XIV, and it was the popular image of a France that had set the tone for Europe that was contrasted with the humiliated power that sued for peace in 1763. It was with excruciatingly bad timing that the Place Louis XV and Bouchardon's masterpiece were inaugurated only a few months later.¹³⁹ More damagingly perhaps, the lamentable performance of French arms rendered any attempts to pursue the model of 'Louis le Pacificateur', the *roi de paix*, redundant. It was surely not a coincidence that the ensuing vacuum was filled by what Edmond Dziembowski has termed 'a new French patriotism', which

¹³⁷ http://www2.culture.gouv.fr/Wave/image/joconde/0421/m110400_34712-11_p.jpg (Accessed 20 June 2018).

¹³⁸ T.C.W. Blanning, *The culture of power and the power of culture. Old regime Europe, 1660-1789* (Oxford, 2002), 393-4.

¹³⁹ Monuments were frequently the target for public abuse, J. W. Merrick, 'Politics on pedestals: royal monuments in eighteenth-century France', *Fr Hist*, 5 (1991), 234-64.

contained within it the seeds of an aggressive nationalism that was no longer synonymous with the crown.¹⁴⁰

VI

Historical interpretations of the reign of Louis XV are almost inevitably written from the perspective of 1774, if not 1789, and emphasise the military failures of the Seven Years War and the domestic quarrels with the parlements as well as the king's perceived moral failings in order to present a damning assessment of his rule. Without seeking to downplay the importance of the years of defeat and disappointment after 1750, there is a danger that their legacy can distort our understanding of a long reign which started in far more auspicious circumstances. As we have seen, the young king had spent many years in the shadow of Fleury, whose final years coincided with the outbreak of the War of the Austrian Succession. The king had quickly come under intense pressure to emulate his forefathers by leading his armies in person, revealing the weight of traditional expectations imposed upon eighteenth-century French rulers whose masculinity and authority were defined, in part, by their ability to display aristocratic virtues of physical courage and leadership. When Louis XV had performed what most perceived to be his martial duty his victories had caught the public imagination. Bellicose, and in most senses disastrous, rulers such as Louis XIV, Frederick II and Napoleon all continue to bask in a certain adulation both amongst professional scholars and the public partly on account of their conquests. By declining to hold fast to Belgium Louis XV spurned an opportunity to join their ranks.

His action reflected his own personality and concept of kingship as well as a keen understanding of France's international position in 1748. Given the suspicions of

¹⁴⁰ Dziembowski, *Nouveau patriotisme*. See also Blanning, *Culture of power*, and D. A. Bell, *The cult of the nation in France: inventing nationalism, 1680-1800* (London, 2001).

French hegemonic ambitions bequeathed by Louis XIV, French acquisition of the strategically vital Austrian Netherlands so soon after that of Lorraine would have been almost certain to conjure up a coalition against it. Yet, as we have seen, Louis XV's diplomatic policy had a deeper cultural, even ideological underpinning. Louis XIV's wars and their terrible human costs had scarred a generation, and men like Fleury, Noailles, d'Argenson, Voltaire and others who had lived through them or been raised in their shadow sought to construct alternative models to war and conquest. If France was a satisfied power, confident in its own strength and borders, it could use that authority to act as Europe's arbiter. Government propaganda tried hard to promote this positive image of both the French monarch and the peace, and, while Voltaire was hardly likely to admit it, his efforts to present Louis XV as 'un roi de paix' were inspired, in part, by Fénelon, and these Fénelonian ideals open a window into the complex personality of Louis XV and eighteenth-century French culture more generally.¹⁴¹

Louis XV was a pragmatic ruler, who thought in traditional dynastic terms. In a personal monarchy, he could shape diplomatic policy as he saw fit, but his generosity was neither understood nor appreciated by his subjects.¹⁴² For the king to act as Europe's peacemaker, crafting a *Pax Francia*, required more than moral authority, he needed a near monopoly of force. By 1748, French military strength was in relative decline and he was confronted by a rapidly changing international diplomatic constellation as the burgeoning power of Great Britain, Prussia and Russia upset old calculations. Faced by new challenges from mid-century, the Bourbons

¹⁴¹ Voltaire was critical of Fénelon's alleged stylistic shortcomings, K. Pagani, 'And if Voltaire ceased to be Voltaire? The influence of Quietism on Voltaire's later works', in C. Schmitt-Maass, S. Stockhorst, D. Ahn, eds, *Fénelon in the Enlightenment: Traditions, Adaptations, and Variations: with a preface by Jacques le Brun* (Amsterdam, 2014), 25-46, at, 36-7.

¹⁴² The majority of historians have seen the peace as flawed, Anderson, *Austrian Succession*, 210-12; R. Waddington, *Louis XV et le renversement des alliances. Préliminaires de la Guerre de Sept Ans, 1754-1756* (Paris, 1896), 1-55; and Scott, *Great power system*, 62-71.

turned their backs upon their military traditions. Louis XV was absent from the battlefield during the Seven Years War, and, despite repeated appeals to his father, so too was the dauphin.¹⁴³ Their absence was the result of geography rather than pusillanimity. As the war was waged deep in the Holy Roman Empire, there were almost insuperable obstacles to a royal campaign comparable to those of the 1740s. Such complications were lost on a fiercely patriotic French public steeped in a culture that set such store by personal monarchy and invested the Bourbons with an almost providential role as military leaders. That abandonment of the symbiotic relationship between the dynasty and military service did far more damage to the monarchy than the supposed ‘desacralisation’ resulting from Louis XV’s promiscuity.

Louis XVI, on the other hand, was a model of domestic propriety, but peace in Europe meant that he was the only Bourbon monarch without first-hand experience of war. More damagingly, perhaps, he showed no aptitude for military service or understanding of its customs, even agreeing to disband fiercely loyal musketeer regiments in the interests of economy.¹⁴⁴ Until at least 1918, European monarchy continued to be highly militarised, and, on the eve of Revolution, the Bourbons had become dangerously detached from their ancient military calling. In July 1789, it was noble officers refusing to obey orders, not libellous pamphlets, that permitted the storming of the Bastille.¹⁴⁵ It is true that throughout the period there was a constant tension between the idea of the monarchy, or later the nation, as a pacific or an aggressive entity. On 22 May 1790, for example, the revolutionary National Assembly issued its Declaration of Peace to the World, which provided a belated

¹⁴³ Antoine, *Louis XV*, 838. As the dauphin had four young sons by 1757, the king’s decision is harder to explain.

¹⁴⁴ G. Rowlands, ‘The *Maison militaire du roi* and the disintegration of the old regime’, in J. Swann and J. Félix, eds., *The crisis of the absolute monarchy. France from old regime to revolution* (Oxford, 2013), 258-60.

¹⁴⁵ As S. F. Scott, *The response of the royal army to the French Revolution: the role and development of the line army, 1787-1793* (Oxford, 1978), demonstrated.

manifestation of the Fénelonian tradition, albeit one that was soon swept away by the bellicose and xenophobic rhetoric of Brissot and the Girondin warmongers of the spring of 1792.¹⁴⁶ Their day in the sun proved fleeting, and with Louis XVI in his grave it was left to Napoleon to demonstrate the continuing potency of the ideology of the ‘roi de guerre’.

¹⁴⁶ A point developed by H. M. Scott, ‘A model of conduct from the age of chivalry? Honour, international decline and the end of the Bourbon monarchy’, in Swann and Félix eds, *Crisis of the absolute monarchy*, 181-204.