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## Pierre Des Noyers, a Scholar and a Courtier

Pierre des Noyers was a major personality at the court of Queen Louise-Marie. Officially her secretary and personal treasurer, des Noyers was also an important middle-man for French and Polish relations. Thanks to his knowledge of Poland, the Polish political system and the nobility, as well as having a dense network of correspondents around Europe, he was an invaluable asset and unofficial advisor for France. Through him it was possible, for instance, to bring to fruition the French attempt to place the Prince of Condé onto the Polish throne.

Pierre des Noyers was also a man of science. He was known for his interest in astrology, but also astronomy, the weather, and medicine. His curiosity had no observable boundaries. His letters are full of observations, prodigies and even include one of the earliest mentions of the Vampire. He used his network of contacts to spread scientific discoveries, observations and discussions.

**Keywords:** Louise Marie de Gonzague, Pierre des Noyers, Science, Diplomacy, French-Polish relations

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ludwika Maria Gonzaga, Pierre des Noyers, nauka, dyplomacja, stosunki francusko-polskie

### Introduction

Pierre le Retondeur, sieur des Noyers, was born in Festigny, Champagne (nowadays Marne) on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1607. Notarial acts retrieved from archives at Châlons-en-Champagne reveal he was the son of a local noble and merchant, Claude le Retondeur, whose name might betray a Norman origin.<sup>1</sup> As of yet, I have not been able to find any source giving us the exact nature of this family's links with the Gonzaga family, but Pierre des Noyers entered their service quite early, at first at the court of Charles Ferdi-

1 Letondeur, a very plausible deformation of Le Retondeur, is a rare name in France, except in modern Normandy.

mand de Gonzague, son of Charles I of Mantua, then as a secretary of both princesses, Marie-Louise and Anne, and finally as the sole secretary and treasurer of Marie-Louise who became Queen of Poland in 1646. He is remembered as the queen's secretary and an astrologist, but my work reveals he was much more than that. For France, he quickly became an asset as an alternative source of information, whereas for Queen Louise-Marie<sup>2</sup> he was a true man of power behind the throne and a stern defender of her political projects. He was also not only interested in astrology, but delved into medicine, prodigies and the weather.

### Queen Louise-Marie's Éminence grise

The earliest trace of Pierre des Noyers' service for the Gonzaga family can be found in a very obscure poem from a no less obscure artist, Adam Billaut. A self-proclaimed carpenter-poet, he wrote "Pegs", dedicated to des Noyers himself, "after the death of Lord du Maine his Master."<sup>3</sup> One can read the following verses: "All you can do / Is to console yourself, seeing that the sister does / to acknowledge your merit, as much as the brother did."<sup>4</sup> "Lord du Maine" is no one else than Ferdinand de Mayenne, Marie-Louise's and Anne's elder brother, who reigned over Mantua for a short period of time and died in 1632.<sup>5</sup> By all accounts, des Noyers lived there too, before going back to France.

Back in France, he was, for what we know, a *habitué* of the *Hôtel de Nevers*, the Gonzagas' main residence and a well-known salon in Paris. There, as well as at the *Hôtel de Rambouillet*, he met several influential persons, including a very young Louis II de Bourbon-Condé, before his deeds on the battlefield made him the *Grand Condé*. Des Noyers acted there as a secretary, recorded some of the poems which were read and, as it seems, also as a moneylender for both princesses. The Gonzagas were, like most families of the time, rich in land and goods but more often than not short on liquidities. To pay back what seemed to be a loan of some sort, Marie-Louise and Anne gave Pierre des Noyers "for his loyal service" what remained of the construction materials used to renovate the Hôtel de Nevers in 1642.<sup>6</sup> The only sensible use he could make of all this wood and stone was to sell them. According to this document, he was at the time secretary of both Marie-Louise and Anne.

2 Her name had to be inverted, as in Poland no queen could bear the name of Mary, mother of God.

3 A. Billaut, *Etrennes à M. des Noyers, secrétaire de Madame la Princesse Marie, que maître Adam lui fit après la mort de Monsieur du Maine son maître, Epigramme*, [in:] *Les Chevilles de Maître Adam, menuisier de Nevers*, Paris 1644, p. 94.

4 "Pour te faire un présent digne de ton envie / Il faudrait que le ciel, d'un effet glorieux / Nous fit ressusciter ce Prince, dont la vie / Passa comme un éclair pour faire mal aux yeux ; / Le cruel déplaisir dont ton âme se glace, / Irait dans le cercueil se loger à sa place / Ton âme en ce rencontre aurait un bien parfait. / Cela ne se pouvant, tout ce que tu peux faire, / C'est de te consoler, voyant que la sœur fait, / Pour payer ton mérite, autant qu'eût fait le frère."

5 This date is also confirmed in one of Des Noyer's letters. In 1667, right after Louise-Marie's death, he wrote that he had served her for 35 years.

6 The gift is about "des matériaux tant de pierre que de bois et autre de quelque nature qu'ils soient [...] qui resteront après que ladite dame princesse Marie en aura choisi et fait emploi de ce que bon lui semblera", Centre d'accueil et de recherche des Archives nationales, cote MC/ET/LXXIII, 363 le 4 novembre 1641 et 364 le 3 mai 1642.

This would change in 1645. In Poland, Queen Cecilia Renata von Habsbourg had died a year before, and King Ladislas IV was looking for a suitable queen. Cardinal Mazarin saw an opportunity there. Marie-Louise came from a prestigious family and possessed an acute political instinct which would make her an interesting asset in Poland, but also a dangerous enemy in France. At her Hôtel she met people of dubious loyalty towards the cardinal, including many *Importants* and *Frondeurs*, and in her early years she had a relationship with the Marquis of Cinq-Mars, a *favori* of Louis XIII whose bid for power against Richelieu led to his execution in 1642. Some rumors had it that his love for the princess and their difference in status inspired his coup, others that she played an active role in it. By sending her to Poland, in what looked like exile, Mazarin got rid of a political adversary, closed the Hôtel, but also acquired several of the family's estates for himself. From November 1645 onwards, Pierre des Noyers became secretary of the Queen of Poland, Louise-Marie, and, thanks to his massive correspondence and some of his writings, we have a rather precise picture of her reign.

In Warsaw, he became accustomed to Polish political life and, through his letters, regularly informed his friends and contacts in France about everything, from political events to military affairs in times of war. He was the main contributor to a vast propaganda effort towards France during the Polish Deluge, Sweden's invasion of Poland in 1655-1659. From 1661 to 1669, he became, after the ambassadors Antoine de Lumbres and Pierre de Bonsi, France's second most important source of information in Poland, sometimes even superseding them. Des Noyers developed a correspondence network which spanned from England to Turkey and Spain and gathered news from around Europe each week. He knew Poland like no other Frenchman and often advised the court of France through his contacts. At this time, and under Louise-Marie's influence, France's policy towards Poland shifted from one of influence, through the queen, to a bid for the throne where either Louis II de Bourbon-Condé, now *Grand Condé* but also former traitor and *Frondeur*, or his son Henri-Jules, duc d'Enghien, would be a candidate. For around six years, Condé and des Noyers were in direct contact, communicating through a complex network of agents, using ciphers and deception, bypassing official instructions and ambassadors. Their correspondence worked like any other diplomatic or spy network at the time. Des Noyers had the trust of the king of France and Prince de Condé. In Poland, most of the queen's partisans and supporters also trusted him.

After Louise-Marie's death in 1667, he contemplated retirement from official affairs, but both the king of Poland and Prince de Condé asked him to continue in his post, and so he did for two more years. He defended the "election project" as it was called, petitions for quick and decisive French action: to send Condé to Poland for the queen's funeral and, from there, gain support from undecided nobles before triggering an early election as a result of King John Casimir's long planned abdication. France's diplomatic situation decided otherwise. An impending war with Spain, the War of Devolution, forced Louis XIV to seek allies on the Rhine to deny passage to Austrian troops which could have helped Spanish troops in the Low Countries. Among these German leaders, was the Duke of Neubourg, who had married the sister of two kings of Poland and, despite the elective nature of the Polish throne, clearly had his own royal ambitions. To secure an alliance with him, France retired Condé from the game and brought in Neubourg. Des Noyers openly opposed this project and became the spokesperson of the French party in Poland, which

refused to communicate through the ambassador, given his new orders and France's disposition. Despite an ultimate shift in late 1668, in which France would covertly support Condé, a proposition which emanated from the Chancellor of Lithuania, Krzysztof Pac, and was vigorously relayed by des Noyers, the French bid for power in the 1669 Royal Election failed. Des Noyers retired from political affairs, this time for good. There are traces of his correspondence with his friend Ismaël Boulliau until 1692. Their letters were still full of news from around Europe, discussions about astronomy and science in general, this being the second aspect of Pierre des Noyers, a scholar driven by an insatiable curiosity.

### An insatiable scholar

Pierre des Noyers spent the first half of life under the patronage of the House of Gonzaga. In France or in Poland, his service to the family granted him protection, whereas his financial skills helped him lead a reasonably comfortable life: he seems to have been able to live in Warsaw with a modest revenue. In her testament, the Queen of Poland granted him a hefty pension of 20 000 pounds as well as the starosty of Tuchola in Prussia, which was rich and prosperous crown land. It is unlikely that he got his money quickly, and it is not known whether he got this sum at all, but it shows that he was under good care. The Prince of Condé himself made sure des Noyers did get his share before the debts owed to the Duke of Enghien, his own son, were repaid. Through his correspondence, I learnt about a few instruments he owned: a pascaline, a quarter of a circle, a half-circle, a planisphere or planisphere, several lenses... He possessed instruments in at least four out of the five categories defined by Anthony Turner.<sup>7</sup> This is a sign of either a large personal fortune, strong protection, or a mixture of both, which is the most likely case here. A side effect of such protection is that des Noyers spent the little free time he had studying about everything he could study. From astrology to medicine, from climatology to supernatural myths like the vampire, Pierre des Noyers showed insatiable curiosity for the world around him. He did not, however, leave any major work, nor was he, as far as we know, considered as an authority in any specific domain in his lifetime. He was eager, though, to share his discoveries and discuss those of his contacts and friends. As early as in 1646 he made contact with Johannes Hevelius whose work he defended vigorously in France. Indeed, as a secretary of the Queen of Poland and a man with many friends at the Prince of Condé's own court,<sup>8</sup> des Noyers' contacts were many, and were an excellent way to share and promote works and discoveries. He of course used the European correspondence network he set up not only for political affairs, but also to dispatch scientific and non-scientific news.

His only known scientific manuscript is *La Nativité d'Amarille*,<sup>9</sup> an astrological portrait of the Princess of Gonzaga and future Queen of Poland Louise-Marie. This portrait

7 The only category seemingly missing in des Noyers' collection., are instruments that help with calculus, measurements, observations, instruments for pedagogy and experimentation. (cf.Ch. Grell, *Sciences, techniques, pouvoir et société en Europe*, Paris 2016, p. 121–122).

8 They include Pierre Caillet-Denonville and Antoine Chastrier, two secretaries, and also the Mignot and des Essarts families which included ladies from the queen's chamber as well as servants at the duc d'Enghien's service.

9 P. des Noyers, *Nativité d'Amarille*, Archives du musée Condé au château de Chantilly [AMCCh], ms 424.

combines a very technical approach of astrology and a more reader-friendly summary, certainly tailored for the only expected reader: Louise-Marie herself. In this book, des Noyers clearly states that what people consider a “mystical” component of astrology is in fact the result of a lack of knowledge, precise measures and thorough feedback. In the same vein as British astronomer Gadbury,<sup>10</sup> he wanted to refine his art and have both credibility and legitimacy, and did so through several means. First, the fact that the queen, born in Nevers, lived in Warsaw from 1646 to her death, allowed him each year to draw two revolutions, predictions for the year to come only, taken from the sky’s disposition at a person’s birthday. There was no proper instruction about the place the revolution should be drawn from, it could be the place of birth or the current place of residence. To solve this problem, des Noyers drew first a revolution from Nevers and then a second from Warsaw, and compared them at the end of the year to see which one was correct. He then systematically compared his predictions with events that actually occurred that year, like a *probatio* would for any scientific experience.

Pierre des Noyers showed, until 1656, a general distrust for clocks. While he was writing the second part of *La Nativité d’Amarille*, Louise-Marie gave birth to a daughter. In order to draw an astrological portrait, des Noyers needed the precise time of birth. Despite the presence of a clock in the room, he discarded it, and chose to observe the position of the Sun instead. There was one small problem though. At the time of birth, it was covered behind a thick veil of cloud. Here is his solution:

We hung a ball of tin to a string of brass, and when the child came out of her mother’s womb, we gave a great motion to the ball thus hung, and its back-and-forth were counted until the sky was clear again, when I measured height on the side of Perseus with a copper quarter circle which gives minutes and, while observing refractions, I calculated current time as precisely as possible. Then, after taking two different height of the sun and counting my tin ball’s oscillations (between these two measures) and, after calculating, I found that if 1 300 of those oscillations gave me, between my two measures of the Sun’s position, 1 hour, 5 minutes, 8 seconds, or 3 908 seconds, then 6 300 of those same oscillations [would give] 5 hours, 15 minutes and 39 seconds. The observation on the side of Perseus was made at 13h 34’ 34”, from which we subtract 5h15’39” to have the true time of birth: 8h 18’ 55”.<sup>11</sup>

In this process, he clearly applied Galileo’s discovery about the pendulum’s oscillations<sup>12</sup> and, most certainly, was aware of Mersenne and Descartes’ refinement, which stated that, when the weight moves with small amplitudes, the frequency of oscillations is only marginally affected. These discoveries, further refined by Christian Huygens, would allow the Dutch inventor to build far more precise clocks six years later. Pierre des Noy-

10 H. Drévilion, *Lire et écrire l’avenir: l’astrologie dans la France du Grand Siècle (1610–1715)*, Paris 1996, p. 26.

11 P. des Noyers, op. cit., p. 254–255.

12 This frequency is proportional to the square root of the string’s length. The weight has no influence over this value. M. Blay, *Science du mouvement: de Galilée à Lagrange*, Paris 2002, P. Spagnou, *Les mystères du temps: de Galilée à Einstein*, Paris 2017 and R. Signore, *Histoire du pendule*, Paris 2011, specifically chapter 5, *Le pendule et la mesure du temps*.

ers was aware of all the recent discoveries and had a unique way of putting these into practice, for example, when he and Louise-Marie learned about the Huygens Clock, they ordered at least two of them, one for the queen and one for des Noyers who intended to use it “to observe births.”<sup>13</sup>

Pierre des Noyers also took part in *Accademia del Cimento*'s experiments on temperature and climate.<sup>14</sup> Using the “Duke of Tuscany's thermometers”, which were all crafted and calibrated in Florence, he sent his observations to the *Accademia* and to his friend Ismaël Boulliau in France. The *Accademia* network spanned from Paris to Warsaw but was shortlived. Des Noyers nevertheless kept on measuring, observing and sending his results to Boulliau. In his letters, we can find weekly reports where temperature, a general observation of the wind and precipitation were written, at least three times per day. These reports are sadly omitted from the 1859 edition of *Lettres de Pierre des Noyers* but are present in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's archives.<sup>15</sup> In the 1680s, he found another use for these thermometers. He measured body, blood and urine temperatures while experimenting on the effect of physical exercise on the human body.<sup>16</sup> This interest for medicine was not new. As early as the 1650s, des Noyers compared disease from which people suffered or died with their astrological portrait and revolutions. For instance, after the death of Emperor Ferdinand III,<sup>17</sup> he provided both an astrological and a medical explanation for his death according to the results of his autopsy. He never pretended to be able to cure a person, but did write about his astrological and medical observations, often reporting what treatment the doctors unsuccessfully used and what symptoms the deceased showed.

Two other things that aroused des Noyers' curiosity were prodigies and miracles. As a true astrologist, he was interested in all these signs which could have well been messages sent by God or Nature, or natural facts that were so exceptional and rare that they deserved to be observed and studied.<sup>18</sup> In some instances, des Noyers really looked like a collector of local stories, miracles or prodigies. Many of his letters tell us tales of conjoined-twin children, mouthless fishes, eggs whose shell represented a comet currently visible in the sky, fields which brought rain if you cut some of its grass, or vampires. In all of these instances, des Noyers looked for an explanation, a sign, or to experience the phenomenon himself. The mouthless fish ate through its gills and was a warning telling Poles they should be quieter in those times of war, because the Swedish enemy was listening. Those egg shells were a scam, quickly revealed by des Noyers because engraving eggs with wax was a common practice in Poland. He did not have the time to cut some

13 Des Noyers to Boulliau, 17 November 1657, from Poznań, *Lettres de Pierre des Noyers, secrétaire de la reine de Pologne Marie-Louise de Gonzague, princesse de Mantoue et de Nevers, pour servir à l'histoire de la Pologne et de la Suède de 1655 à 1659*, Berlin 1859, p. 35; Bibliothèque Nationale de France [BNF], ms 13019, f. 305v.

14 M. Collart, *Prendre la mesure du temps: le réseau météorologique international de James Jurin (1723–1735)*, [in:] P.-Y. Beaurepaire, *La communication en Europe de l'âge classique au siècle des Lumières*, Paris 2014.

15 BNF, Département des manuscrits, Français, ms 13019–13023, *Correspondance et papiers politiques et astronomiques d'Ismaël Boulliau (1605–1694). I-V Lettres de Desnoyers, secrétaire des commandements de la reine de Pologne, Marie de Gonzague, écrites la plupart de Varsovie à Boulliau (1655–1692)*.

16 Des Noyers to Boulliau, 5 May 1683, BNF, ms 13020, f. 269

17 Des Noyers to Boulliau, 12 April 1657, *Lettres de Pierre des Noyers*, p. 317; BNF, ms 13019, fol. 264v. He wrote something similar about Lubomirski's death in 1667: des Noyers to Condé, 5 February 1667, from Warsaw, AMCCh, série R, tome XI, f. 206.

18 J. Céard, *La nature et les prodiges*, Genève 1996.

grass in that magic field, so the mystery remains, etc. His article on Vampires,<sup>19</sup> published in *Mercure Galant*,<sup>20</sup> introduced that myth in France and would still be quoted half a century later. He sparked a discussion where scholars tried to find metaphysical causes to this phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the lack of a major work, des Noyers almost represented the perfect gentleman and scholar of the time who tried to understand the world around him and used every tool and theory at his disposal in the name of science and progress.

## Conclusion

This is only a quick and simplified portrait of Pierre des Noyers. Most of his life in France is still shrouded in mystery and some of his letters are still to be properly studied. His life, from that of a French nobleman of Champagne to one of the most trusted advisors of Louise Marie, the Prince of Condé and even Louis XIV on Polish affairs, is a unique journey. As a scholar, he used his large network of friends and acquaintances, which included Johannes Hevelius,<sup>22</sup> Ismaël Boulliau.<sup>23</sup> but also Mersenne, Roberval or Gassendi and, even though he was probably not considered a major scholar of his time, his contribution to the circulation of news, discoveries and knowledge as a whole is undeniable, even more so because he worked in a country, Poland, that seemed to be isolated from the rest of Europe. He also offers us the possibility to study science outside academic circles and to observe the practice of science by a man for whom science was a hobby and not a way to make a living.

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20 P. des Noyers, *Prodiges*, "Le Mercure Galant" mai 1693, p. 62–72

21 Marigner, *Sur les créatures des Elemens*, "Le Mercure Galant" janvier 1694, p. 57–161; idem, *Sur les Stryges de Russie*, "Le Mercure Galant" février 1694, p. 11–119; A. Calmet, *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires ou les revenants de Hongrie, de Moravie, etc*, tome 2, Paris 1751.

22 Among Hevelius' letters, Pierre des Noyers is the most frequent correspondent, with 256 letters exchanged between both of them.

23 More than 600 letters.

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