“I felt compelled to respond, as I did, very dryly”: Laughter, Status, and Subjectionhood in Mazarin’s Letters from the Pyrenees

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Jules Mazarin has seldom been called a funny man, and the Treaty of the Pyrenees between France and Spain is an unlikely source of comedy. Yet Cardinal-Minister Mazarin took care to portray himself as witty in letters to the French court during the summer and autumn of 1659, and his reports emphasized the role of laughter in hashing out the Treaty. Mazarin recounts several modes of humor in his correspondence: pithy rejoinders to the Spanish minister, Dom Luis de Haro; jovial chuckles exchanged between the plenipotentiaries; and when provoked, derisive barbs at Spain’s allegedly ridiculous propositions. Mazarin’s focus on these moments of levity amid weighty geopolitical haggling stand out strikingly, not only for their incongruity, but for their intent. The French Minister tells his audience that he joked at key moments, and he reported his laughter to the royal court for strategic purposes. Thus, I argue that Mazarin effectively weaponized comedy, in two ways: first and most immediately, he aimed to demonstrate his superior perspective, insight, and wisdom for his readers at the royal court in Paris. But more broadly and more enduringly, I will show that Mazarin used his own wit, and reported laughter at the negotiations in order to emphasize moments, ideas, or exchanges that together built a new model of French subjectionhood. In his letters from the Pyrenees, Jules Mazarin made comedy a potent tool to reaffirm his status at court, and at the same time to enshrine his preferred model of subjectionhood. In these pursuits, humor became the most serious strategy available to the seasoned statesman.

The Treaty of the Pyrenees was itself a massive project. It would prove the capstone to years of halting efforts to end nearly a quarter-century of war between
France and Spain, which had sapped both nations' energies and treasuries.\(^1\) The task was complicated, moreover, by the legacy of the Fronde and the specter of the Grand Condé. The civil wars that ravaged France for five years, from 1648 through 1653, had only just ended, and difficulties within France festered. The monarchy’s need to project strength at home and abroad compelled Mazarin to pursue advantageous terms with Spain; an equitable or ambivalent peace would not do. Most visibly, the fallen hero Louis II de Bourbon, the “Grand” Prince of Condé, had been a primary figure in the rebellion, and carried on his fight against the Crown from abroad. In support of his Fronde, he had signed the Treaty of Madrid with Philip IV in late 1651, which precluded any individual peace for either party. Both sides honored the agreement to the letter. The Prince’s ongoing treason (as France officially considered his leadership of Spanish forces), and Spain’s insistence on his “honorable” return raised major questions about the nature of subject-sovereign relations. And in the immediate aftermath of Westphalia, France’s arrangements with Spain perhaps implicated national sovereignty itself. Could a Frenchman - the First Prince of the Blood, no less - serve a foreign power with impunity? How could France’s view that Condé was a traitor, condemned to a commoner’s death,\(^2\) square with Spain’s stance that he was a worthy servant who had earned rich rewards? Above all, how could the two parties find common ground on these and other vexing questions - the Sun King’s marriage to the Infanta, territorial concessions, or the status of Portugal, to name just the marquee items - in order to arrive at a workable peace? In view of such troubling, seemingly intractable issues, Condé’s treatment at the Pyrenees cast a long, dark shadow over the negotiations. Certainly, the diplomatic circumstances facing the Cardinal-Minister did not lend themselves to joking.

Nor did Mazarin’s personal or political situation in 1659 provide cause for joy. At age 57, Mazarin had lately felt the acute effects of gout and a bevy of other maladies, and many (including the Grand Condé) expected his death sooner rather than later.\(^3\) The rough trip from Paris to the Isle of Pheasants, situated in the middle of the Bidassoa river that divided France and Spain, had taken a toll, and the task he faced upon his arrival proceeded no more smoothly. The outline of a treaty

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\(^1\) The best and most recent study of the Treaty of the Pyrenees and its broader implications is Bély, Haan, and Jettot, eds. *La Paix des Pyrénées (1659) ou le triomphe de la raison politique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015).

\(^2\) The record of Condé’s *lèse-majesté* trial is in Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal [BA], MS 2842-3; the sentence of March 8, 1654 stripped him of all titles and honors, including the name Bourbon, and condemned him to an unspecified death, where others received the “noble” execution of beheading: ff. 264v-265.

had been agreed in secret negotiations at Paris the year before, and Mazarin hoped the final details would be agreed easily. However, it became immediately clear that Haro’s obdurate insistence on generous terms for Condé would prove a major difficulty, in Mazarin’s words “an invincible obstacle” to peace.4 The bitter personal rivalry between the Prince and Minister only added to this headache. All the while, the Cardinal’s standing in France’s royal council was insecure, in the face of political pressure from Parlementaires who continued resistance after the Fronde, and grandees like Brienne and Gaston d’Orléans who seemingly never ceased intriguing against the still-broadly-loathed Italian. He badly needed success in the Pyrenees negotiations to maintain Queen Anne’s favor, and consequently his position. But his bond with the Queen was especially shaky in the wake of his failed, covert efforts to arrange the young Sun King’s marriage with a princess of Savoy, rather than to the Spanish Infanta as Anne openly preferred.5 In myriad ways, Jules Mazarin’s physical, political, and personal conditions tended more toward the tragic than comedic.

Given the stakes and circumstances of his mission, we may safely assume that the Cardinal’s self-reported laughter did not spring from any genuine mirth. Indeed, we must question if he laughed at all: these letters are purely his retrospective creation, and he was free to embark on whatever self-fashioning he wished in relating his actions and reactions. His letters are both a self-serving account of his performances at the negotiating table, and a performance unto themselves for the royal court. But regardless of the truth in his reports, he included humor in his letters for carefully calculated reasons rooted in contemporary ideas of comedy and epistolary convention.

Mazarin’s Jesuit education would have exposed him to classical conceptions of laughter, still accepted in the mid-seventeenth century, as both a physiological instinct and a moral issue. Aristotle had described laughter medically as originating in the torso, and largely as an involuntary response to stimuli like tickling or being stabbed in the chest,6 while his Poetics made laughter an

instinctive response to deformity or ugliness short of injury. Cicero largely agreed with Aristotle on these causes, and extended the theory of laughter in a lengthy passage of his much-read *De oratore*, to the permissible uses of humor in winning over an audience. Renaissance commentators like Castiglione and Joubert built on these two ancient pillars to elaborate a conception of humor that focused on burnishing a speaker or writer’s image with clever turns of phrase, or by gently mocking appropriate subjects. By the seventeenth century, when comedy had become a more well-defined genre of literature and theater, critics and dramatists quarreled over whether humor might simply entertain, or if it must instruct and improve the audience. In any case, both sides of such debates presumed that laughter played on the audience’s inner self, and could influence morals and behavior, for good or ill. Conceptions of laughter in Mazarin’s age, then, recognized it as a potent and important feature of human life — indeed, it was “proper to man,” and distinguished humanity as rational against the beasts, in Aristotle’s foundational model.

As a practical matter of rhetoric, however, laughter occupied an ambivalent place, for it was simultaneously natural and artificial, an involuntary response and a calculated manipulation. Such polyvalence made humor a potent tool in some cases, or a dangerous risk in others. Particularly for the well-regulated field of formal correspondence, the uncertainty surrounding humor demanded clarification. The legion of early-modern European epistolary manuals skirted questions of the nature or effects of humor, and their treatment broadly relegated it to the less-codified field of intimate letters between social peers. More serious missives demanded precision and propriety (*bienséance*) that a joke’s fuzzy edges and potential for misinterpretation undermined. For the most part, then, authorities on letter-writing etiquette like the wildly popular Puget de la Serre simply marginalized joking as unseemly or unhelpful. Mazarin’s choice to include it in his own letters therefore stands out all the more.

Many authors, Mazarin among them, played on the ambiguity inherent in wit and comedy to powerful effect. Antonia Szabari reads Rabelais’ depiction of laughing Parisians in *Gargantua*, for instance, as a subtle means of making a

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7 Gregory de Rocher, *Rabelais’s laughers and Joubert’s Traité du ris* (University of Alabama Press, 1979), 14.
political attack, without appearing directly political. Humor in this case “enables the reader to enjoy political satire while remaining detached from political passions... [It] draws them into the nondiscursive space of laughter that grants them distance from their own passions as well as from those of others.” Though Mazarin’s negotiation tactics and letters hardly qualify as satire, he nonetheless capitalized on laughter’s capacity to denature a contentious statement, to draw his readers and opponents toward his perspective by circumventing the impassioned responses that might otherwise arise. If he were so correct about policy as to crack jokes, so comfortably in control of the discussion as to chide his interlocutor, then what disagreement could there be?

Read through this lens, the Cardinal’s reports used his own laughter as a show of power on the Isle of Pheasants, and employed laughter rhetorically to advance his agenda back in Paris. His descriptions of responses to Haro’s risible proposals on Condé suggest that Spanish overtures were, in Aristotelian terms, deformed or incongruous, and further that he instantly perceived and instinctively reacted to their defects. His actions could appear unaffected and organic, which for readers would convey a higher degree of truth or authenticity behind the laughter. Meanwhile, Mazarin’s wit showed his sharp mind and commanding position. Belittling one’s interlocutor with a cutting joke showed dominance in the moment, to be sure. But more generally, humor could be a formidable tool for proving one’s superiority in the perpetual contest for precedence and influence at court. Thus, if Aristotle made laughter “proper to man,” in the sense of humanity’s elevation above animals, so too was laughter proper to manliness, in the battles of “soft” masculinities that Lewis Seifert sees in later seventeenth century civility. Mazarin’s jests at Haro’s expense showed France’s ascendancy at the negotiating table, while the wit that the Cardinal displayed in his letters simultaneously affirmed his intelligence and efficacy, for an audience that included political competitors. Finally, Mazarin’s persistent mockery on the subject of Condé’s repatriation suggested that the correct resolution was so obvious that any contrary

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11 Rhetorical ornament appears as “artificial” and less desirable than “natural” language, for example, in the account of a Parisian bourgeois’ audience with Louis XIV in Relation véritable de ce qui s’est passé à Pontoise, en la réception des six Corps des Marchands; ensemble leurs Harangues, et ce qui leur a esté respondu le Roy et la Reyne (Paris, 1652). Though much work on language, especially Kristen Neuschel, Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), emphasizes the real value of even hyperbolic rhetoric in cementing elite affinities, nevertheless a premium was placed on language that could appear as unmediated by self-interest.

idea deserved scorn. Mazarin’s laughter thus helped to advance France’s goals in foreign affairs, and promoted the value of his own policies and perceptions at home, by using carefully crafted rhetoric to portray his responses as spontaneous and unadorned. With this background in mind, we turn to Mazarin’s account of the negotiations.

There was apparently little comedy in the initial meetings - early discussions proceeded smoothly, on issues from marriage arrangements between the Sun King and Infanta, the quality of persons who would escort her from Madrid to Paris, and the wording of the Treaty’s preamble. But the issue of Condé’s treatment, especially the “gratifications” that Spain wished to provide him, proved more troublesome. In these early meetings, Mazarin tells his readers that he responded, at various points, “strongly [fortement],” “heatedly [avec chaleur]” or “flatly [sans m’esmouvoir].” At one point, he informs le Tellier that “I added many things that, I can say without vanity, left [Haro] with no room to respond.”

Though Mazarin’s instincts to affirm his dominance, and to head off unacceptable terms for Condé are present in these early reports (along with requisite faux humility), his letters frame them as straightforward expressions of passion rather than humor. The Cardinal was not yet angry enough to laugh.

But by late August, as Haro persisted in requesting unthinkable terms for Condé, Mazarin’s patience wore thin and his responses began to snap back. To Haro’s insistence that a Prince like Condé could not countenance a return without his honors and charges, Mazarin responded “very brusquely” that there were in fact fifty Princes of the Blood in France who possessed very little. And when Haro immediately returned with the even-less-agreeable demand for a sovereign Condéen territory, the French Cardinal reported, “I thought he was joking.” Further, he tells the audience that he responded with sarcasm of his own: “If the Prince wants to receive a Kingdom of his own from Spain, renounce France forever, and become in a word a completely naturalized Spaniard, I think the King [of France] could find a way to agree.” One almost hears the cold, sarcastic chuckle between these lines, which contrasts with the “anger that carried [Haro] away” upon hearing the Cardinal’s categorical rejection. Finally, Mazarin ends his dismissive riposte with an ironclad ultimatum: “In the end, he [Condé] must resolve to be either totally French, or totally Spanish.”

This first instance of dry wit reveals the dynamics governing laughter that would persist throughout the negotiation (as Mazarin tells it). First, tone is paramount: Mazarin’s cool demeanor in his reply shows him as self-possessed, while Haro betrays his emotional, implicitly effeminate bearing with his reaction. The Cardinal has command of himself and the situation at large, and reassures his

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13 BA MFr 7156, ff.65v-66, Mazarin to Le Tellier, 19 August, 1659.
14 BA MFr 7156, ff.79v-81, Mazarin to Le Tellier, 21 August, 1659.
audience that, whatever difficulties might lie ahead, he can guide them to France's benefit.

Beyond personality or style, though, the substance at hand would continue to bring out Mazarin's wry wit in the coming months. Because Condé's treatment would help to define standards of national allegiance and royal authority in the early days of the post-Westphalian world, both Mazarin and Haro took care to address the Treaty's provisions for the Prince. Mazarin categorically rejected any gratifications that the Grand Condé might receive from Philip IV or Spain, for rewards followed service, and often carried expectations of continued service. If Condé's rebellion had been treasonous and illegitimate in the first place, he could not be rewarded; if he accepted gifts from any sovereign other than France's, he could not be French. While Haro approached this question from the position of Philip's royal honor, Mazarin understood it as an issue of loyalty and belonging within the French community. Each minister came armed with examples of unruly subjects and the consequences that befell them to justify their positions, for both saw Condé's treatment as a momentous issue. Haro's obstinacy therefore frustrated Mazarin, and elicited sarcastic barbs. Thus, the punch line (such as it was) of Mazarin's first real joke was the point he wished to emphasize: Condé must be "either totally French, or totally Spanish." That is, he must commit to serve, and be rewarded by exactly one King.

Mazarin managed to maintain a grave demeanor for just over a week, and when he next invoked humor, it was in fact to accuse Haro of making a joke in poor taste. On 2 September, the Spanish minister again asked that Condé receive a territory to rule, but Mazarin dismissed it out of hand: "If I didn't believe that you were making these propositions to have a laugh, I'd be scandalized that you thought me capable of hearing such absurd things." Incredibly, in Mazarin's account, Haro himself responds with laughter, admits that the French minister is correct, and goes on to share that Spain knows how well-informed Mazarin is. This leads to Haro's thinly-veiled threat that, because the Infanta admired Condé (as Mazarin surely knew), she would act generously toward the Prince, and mischievously toward the Cardinal as soon as she was able. But even Haro's menacing intimations strike Mazarin as humorous. Upon hearing Haro's warning, he "responded with a face full of laughter [un visage riant] for the goodwill and friendship that he [Haro] showed" - all, clearly facetious - "but that he should have

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16 BA MFr 7156, f.195, Mazarin to Le Tellier, 2 September, 1659.
no worries” for Mazarin’s wellbeing. In another instance centered on Condé’s attachment to France and status as a subject, Mazarin not only uses humor to his advantage, but turns the Spaniard’s laughter into an admission of the Cardinal’s superior knowledge, and even finesses Spanish threats into an easy, chuckling confidence.

As Mazarin’s frustrations mounted, and as his gout worsened over the month of September, his jokes became more cutting, and at moments he openly mocked Haro. “It’s a novel method of negotiation,” he asserted at the next meeting, “to not conclude this issue, saying that Monsieur the Prince does not stand in the way, all while he is standing in the way as you continually return to the question of his interests.” And when Haro insisted that advantageous terms for Condé should have been easy to agree, because “rebellions are common in France, and those who commit them have always been reestablished,” Mazarin sharpened his barbs. “I felt compelled to reply, as I did, very dryly on this,” he commented, maintaining the air of self-control he always claimed for himself. He told Haro that he knew Condé’s secretary was furnishing these arguments, weak as they were, and that he respected Haro enough to believe that they both knew how feeble the points were. It would all go better, he concluded, if we could just come to an agreement without the intervention of this distracting third party.17 In this instance, he used humor to speed the talks along, first by making fun of Haro, and ultimately by ribbing the Spanish delegation for being in the thrall of Condé’s agents. Though he focused more on process than substance in this case, he once again enshrined his own knowledge as superior, his own perspective as authoritative. All the while, his narration of the exchanges reinforced that he was more capable than anyone of bringing Condé home and concluding the larger peace on grounds that would prove palatable.

Mazarin’s nudges to hurry the matter along were merely a prelude to the most serious use of wit in the negotiations. Immediately after admonishing Haro for his over-reliance on the Prince’s suggestions, he pivoted to discredit the substance of the arguments themselves. By September, the Spanish minister had begun to move away from arrangements for a sovereign Condéen territory, but the proposed pensions, honors, or a “place of surety” he substituted made Mazarin no happier. And when Haro argued that French rebels had always been rehabilitated, and even rewarded, Mazarin’s “dry” response cleverly turned those claims back on themselves. Haro had raised the point that other noble rebels in the Fronde had improved their standing in the civil wars’ wake - Condé’s own brother and leader of the Parisian Fronde, the Prince of Conti, had even married one of Mazarin’s nieces! True enough, Mazarin retorted, but those who had been accepted and advanced had repented of their faults, and shown good faith in serving the King. Finding this first sortie blocked, Haro (or more likely, Princely agents) dug deeper

17 BA MFr 7156, f.211-212v, Mazarin to Le Tellier, 4 September, 1659.
into French history: what of Henri IV’s payments to Catholic towns and grandees in the wake of the Wars of Religion? Or, going back still further, what of the fifteenth-century Constable of Saint-Pol, the recidivist plotter who had climbed the ranks of the nobility, and even married Louis XI’s daughter, through constant intrigues?

We almost hear Mazarin’s deep intake of breath before launching a lengthy rebuttal: his letter begins a new paragraph, laments to the reader that he must endure “hearing so many times the same things,” and recounts telling Haro that “we must once and for all agree” on the terms of Condé’s treatment. So, Mazarin concedes that Haro makes a superficially valid point - Henri IV had indeed bought the allegiance of certain entities, just as a handful of Frondeurs had come out ahead after the civil wars. But, “if he would take the trouble to examine the way France chastises rebels when it has the power to do so, he would see clearly the rigor that all French Kings have used.” That is, if Henri IV had bought some loyalties in order to pacify the kingdom, at other moments he and other rulers had been less generous. Henri himself had executed the Duc de Biron, while Louis XIII likewise dealt harshly with Montmorency-Boutteville, Cinq-Mars, and de Thou. And going back a little further, one finds the Prince of Condé’s namesake, the first Louis de Bourbon, who escaped with his head only by Francois I’s sudden death. Finally, Mazarin told his readers that he tried to help Haro with a weak point in his argument: “I finished by begging [Haro] to warn Monsieur the Prince’s friends not to be so quick with the example of Saint-Pol. For, if he often returned and if, for reasons that so frequently forced monarchs to cede to momentary necessity he [St. Pol] did profit, in the end, he lost his head.”

The reader can easily imagine a cheshire grin spread across the Cardinal’s visage, knowing he had decisively outwitted Haro, and in such a way that he could facetiously offer a helping hand for future engagements. Knowing that the point on Saint-Pol was particularly cutting, he even returns in a later paragraph, asking Haro if he would wish to provide Condé with the Constable’s generous settlement now, if it would also lead to an identical final outcome? No, he answers for the Spaniard: “I believe you value him [Condé] too much to wish a similar fate upon him.” Mazarin had clearly gotten the better of this pivotal exchange, and he ensures that his readers will not miss how thoroughly he felt he had triumphed.

Though the Cardinal had trounced Haro rhetorically, in this case the power dynamic between the two negotiators was secondary to the larger question of royal power over French subjects. Mazarin had responded vehemently, for Haro’s intimation of the loose bonds between the French Crown and its subjects - especially powerful noblemen - could have undone Mazarin’s stance on one of the major questions facing the negotiators. The incessant back-and-forth on Condé

\[18\] BA MFr 7156, f.212-214, Mazarin to Le Tellier, 4 September, 1659.
upset Mazarin to the point of jokes because dealing too softly with him would “be a pernicious example for those of his condition.” 19 It would effectively undo decades of work stretching back to Richelieu - arguably, to the Constable of Saint-Pol himself - by royal agents, to centralize and strengthen the King’s authority over the Second Estate. Though he had to admit that pragmatism required leniency at times, the étatiste objective of a strong (or at least efficacious) monarchy governed each instance, rather than a uniform policy on rebels. Accordingly, if the Sun King were to project and possess authority in the wake of the Fronde, Condé could not return to France without an acceptable degree of humility, let alone rule a sovereign territory or maintain a connection with Philip.

Crucially, Mazarin made jokes, accused Haro of joking, or took a lighter tone in composing his letters almost exclusively in situations where it seemed Condé might get off too lightly. While these tactics might have been missed by readers consuming each letter as it arrived, reading the archive of his correspondence in series shows unmistakably the persistent return to comedy regarding Condé, illuminating these passages like a spotlight. Mazarin wanted his firm stance on the Prince to stand out, for it demonstrated his own dominance, and underscored his commitment to reinforcing royal power.

As he told it, his humor accomplished its aim. His stinging retort on the Constable of Saint-Pol immediately preceded the first concessions Haro made on the path to the Treaty’s resolution. Spain offered several fortresses and towns, in exchange for Condé and his son gaining governorships of non-threatening provinces. Crucially, these appointments came from Louis, not Philip, and left no doubt whether the Prince was “totally French.” Though Mazarin suffered a few more rounds of hashing out the details of Condé’s return and territorial concessions, the heavy lifting and most of the laughing was over. In the end, Condé did return, humbled himself before his King, and eventually won glory on the battlefield leading French armies.

The Treaty of the Pyrenees was a success for France in the moment, and in hindsight. It achieved the diplomatic goal of normalizing relations with Spain, and the dynastic aim of marrying the Infanta to the young Louis XIV. Moreover, Spain ceded several important territories, in return for France’s willingness to repatriate a man who would again serve as a capable administrator, victorious general, and celebrated courtier. As the Mazarin himself reported, those positive outcomes proceeded from his effective use of laughter at the negotiating table. The Cardinal’s wit, in his telling, helped to establish a position of strength for himself and France at the Isle of Pheasants. Meanwhile, the superiority that his letters communicated in reporting his mocking laughter helped to ensure that he would continue to possess the Queen’s confidence, and that his policy preferences, especially regarding Condé’s subjecthood and submission, would prevail.

19 BA MFr 7156, f.94v, Mazarin to Le Tellier, 23 August, 1659.
Laughter was uniquely suited to these purposes. As a rhetorical tool that could appear unaffected, as well as a statement of dominance that could appear lighthearted, humor did crucial work to achieve Mazarin's diplomatic goals and personal status. At this pivotal moment, Mazarin's performance on the Isle of Pheasants and his self-fashioning in letters to the royal court helped to secure a desirable outcome for France, and for himself. He laughed to signal superiority over Haro, as well as Gaston, Brienne, and their cabals at court; at the same time, he claims that his jokes spurred Spain to retreat from their initial demands on Condé, thereby providing a high-profile victory for royal sovereignty. The Treaty of the Pyrenees helped to solidify a model of subjecthood and national attachment that would prove highly advantageous to Louis XIV's absolutist authority, which Mazarin had assiduously assembled across two chaotic decades. And - it seems appropriate to close with a terrible pun - that was no laughing matter.