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Jean-Pierre Bardet, Elisabeth Arnoul and François-Joseph Ruggiu, eds. *Les Écrits du For Privé en Europe du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine: Enquêtes, Analyses, Publications*. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2010. 658pp. €32 (pb). Tables, figures, notes. ISBN 978-2-86781-560-7.

Review by Katharine J. Lualdi, University of Southern Maine.

This book stems from a conference convened in Paris in 2006, one of several organized under the direction of a French research group (G.D.R. du CNRS no. 2649) dedicated to the study of *les écrits du for privé*.^[1] Although the group's original focus was limited to France, from the onset its broader ambition was to expand scholarly interest and approaches to autobiographical texts and egodocuments, a closely allied term. As the editors are well aware, the study of such documents has deep roots coinciding with the invention of the word "autobiography" itself around 1800. In the 1970s and 1980s, egodocuments enjoyed a surge in popularity among historians thanks to the work of Alan MacFarlane, Daniel Roche, Robert Darnton and others. Their use of private writings as windows onto the history of mentalities and cultural practices gave scholars new respect for the genre.^[2]

Yet with this respect comes distinctive challenges. First among them are questions of definition and method. Does the fact that a text is written in the first person and contains personal information automatically qualify it as a work of autobiography? How reliable are such accounts when compared to more official, "objective" sources? Should they be examined individually and/or serially across time and place? Do sources falling outside predetermined categories of genre warrant consideration?

The book under review tackles these questions head on while addressing two current issues in the field: the need to break down barriers among scholars based on language, genre, discipline, and period; and, concomitantly, to expand the inventory of egodocuments from the past in both print and manuscript. The collection's forty-two contributors hail from across Europe (Colette Winn from Washington University in St. Louis and France Martineau from the University of Ottawa excepted) and represent a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and topical foci. To provide coherence to this hefty line-up, the editors divide the thirty-eight chapters that follow the introduction into eight parts, each with its own organizing theme (see the list of essays below). In the opening essay François-Joseph Ruggiu highlights how the themes intentionally build upon the 2006 conference while opening up new directions of research (pp. 9-17). Given the limited scope of this review, it is not possible to address each contribution individually. Rather, I will focus on specific examples that reflect the collection's overall goals and, concurrently, its value as a scholarly resource.

The book begins by casting the study of *les écrits du for privé* in a European-wide light in order to build connections among scholars with similar interests and preoccupations (Part I). Such connections are both qualitative and quantitative. As Antonio Castillo Gómez discusses in his essay, "Les écrits du for privé en Espagne de la fin du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine: Bilan et perspectives" (pp. 31-47), private writings in Spain reveal how people shaped their individual memories and sense of place against the backdrop of broader events unfolding around them. At the same time, Gómez asserts, scholars must abandon well-entrenched assumptions about what qualifies as private writing. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, for instance, keeping account books was a common practice

among peasant landowners in Spain. At first glance, these sources appear to offer nothing more than straightforward financial information; upon closer inspection, however, they represent “l’écriture de l’instant” of daily life (p. 42).

Establishing criteria for defining “private writing” has quantitative implications as well. From the onset, the goal of the French research group was to initiate a systematic process of inventorying egodocuments in French libraries and archives. Their inspiration came from similar efforts already underway elsewhere in Europe. Such efforts are particularly advanced in Italy, as Raul Mordenti describes in his chapter in Part I (pp. 49-64). In 1983 he helped to launch the *Biblioteca Informatizzata di Famiglia (BILF)*, which over time progressed from semiannual publications to a free, on-line database with more than 100 entries.[3] As Mordenti argues, “livres de famille” are a subset of private writings with specific characteristics and qualities (see especially pp. 54-54). Both are key to identifying such writings and, equally important, for assessing and interpreting their content. Thus, he asserts, neither the cataloguer nor the researcher can approach *les écrits du for privé* as a homogenous body of sources; they must distinguish among them for, as Mordenti succinctly proclaims, “une définition et une reconnaissance” (p. 60).

The benefits of counting and classifying texts are evident in many of the chapters in this collection. At the most basic level, a quantitative approach illuminates meaningful patterns. For example, most authors of surviving egodocuments are men, and among these, clerical authors are especially numerous. This basic fact is the starting point for Stéphane Gomis’ chapter in Part VI on private writings composed by Catholic priests in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (pp. 431-442). Based on the inventorying efforts of the G.D.R., Gomis had 119 texts at his disposal, which defied neat classification. Even so, collectively the texts reveal the ways in which priests built and cultivated ties to their families and communities in a variety of roles—confident, social mediator, economic agent. And, surprisingly, given the authors’ clerical status, religious concerns often do not predominate.

In Part III, Emmanuelle Berthiaud’s chapter reveals that exceptions to the rule do exist, yielding rich results for scholars (pp. 283-300). She focuses specifically on the topic of pregnancy in private writings, particularly letters to and from bourgeois and noble French women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As she discusses, during their pregnancy, women used letters to reach out to close friends and family members who responded in kind with advice and comfort. The very act of writing about their condition forged bonds of solidarity with other women who had already experienced this important rite of passage. In examining writings of this type over time, Berthiaud illuminates important facets of female group identity building and how they reflect the broader historical context. By the 1880s, the entourage of pregnant women had become more restrictive, centered principally on their immediate family and, increasingly, on medical personnel. Berthiaud attributes these shifts to a range of changes in certain ranks of French society, including an increased emphasis on the nuclear family and the medicalization of pregnancy (pp. 299-300).

Berthiaud’s focus on women points to the importance of bringing new categories of analysis to bear on the study of private writings. Indeed, many of the themes in this collection reflect an express desire to incorporate recent trends in scholarship. The four chapters in Section IV, for example, are devoted exclusively to the theme of the body, which in recent years has become a fertile vein of study.[4] They also reveal that alongside the statistical analysis of a large number of texts, a detailed look at a single text remains a valuable approach. In his essay on the journal of French author Rétif de la Bretonne, Pierre Testud examines not simply the content of the text but its physical characteristics as well (pp. 331-344). Rétif wrote in an abbreviated script to keep the journal inaccessible to prying eyes. Penned in haste each morning, his notes are free of the type of self-censure evident in his published works. Rétif interweaves references to his body throughout, from his illnesses to his incestuous relationship with his daughters. In this way, Testud suggests, Rétif’s journal constituted “un mode d’être, le moyen de ressentir de façon plus aigu le sentiment de l’existence” (p. 344).

To conclude, I would like to echo Jean-Pierre Bardet's remarks in the final essay on the strengths of this collection. When viewed as a whole, the essays' thematic variety attests to the vitality and dynamism of private writings as a field of study. Bardet does not gloss over the work that remains to be done, including what he sees as a need for a more intentional and transparent discussion of the methodologies used to analyze texts (p. 649). Yet he also recognizes the contributors' common goal to expand existing inventories of *les écrits du for privé* and our understanding of their contents. Several of the essays, including Mordenti's discussed above, have the added benefit of pointing readers directly to such inventories, which are especially helpful as finding aids and for comparing the range of sources available in different European countries.[5] (I write this with a caveat, however. I was unable to access one of the websites and two others were listed with minor errors; see n. 3 and n. 5 below.) It would have been more useful still if the collection had included a bibliography listing all inventories on-line and in print cited in the essays themselves. Without a list of this type, the only way for readers to find the information is to cull through the notes, which not surprisingly in a collection of this length, number in the hundreds.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Introduction

F.-J. Ruggiu, "Les écrits du for privé : une perspective européenne. »

P. Even, "Un partenariat scientifique fructueux : l'enquête nationale sur les écrits du for privé."

Part I Les écrits personnels: un thème de recherches européen

A. Castillo Gómez, "Les écrits du for privé en Espagne de la fin du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine. Bilan et perspectives."

R. Mordenti, "La contribution de la critique littéraire aux recherches sur les 'Livres de famille' italiens et BILF, la Bibliothèque Informatisée des Livres de Famille."

A. Baggerman, "Travellers in time. Nineteenth-century autobiographers and their fight against forgetting."

C. Ulbrich, "Les écritures de soi dans une perspective transculturelle. Pistes de recherche en Allemagne."

S. Roszak, "Les écrits du for privé en Pologne. Les recherches sur les livres *silva rerum*

Y. Zaretsky, "Questioning old Russian autobiographical writings (12th-17th cent)."

Part II Écrire le secret de famille

J. Tricard, "Des secrets politiques et religieux aux secrets intimes : les expressions de l'aveu dans les livres de raison (XIVe-XVIIe siècles)."

S. Mouysset, "J'ay deschiré les pages cy dessus pour raizons à moy regardant' : le secret de famille dans les écrits du for privé français (XVe-XIXe siècle)."

M. Wrede, "Entre honte et honneur. Ruptures de la mémoire et devoir de continuité dans les Maisons nobles à l'époque moderne."

J. Amelang, "A Room of one's own: Keeping writings private."

V. Sierra Blas et L. Martínez Martín, "Le voyage des mots. Lettres d'émigrés et secrets de famille. Espagne et Amérique, XIXe et XXe siècles."

Part III Solitudes et solidarités

E. Arnoul, "La vie sans elle. Veuvage et solitude des hommes dans la France moderne."

M. Trévisi, "Solitudes et solidarités dans une famille noble du XVIIIe siècle, les d'Estourmel."

D. Taurisson-Mouret, "Solitude et espaces relationnels du chevalier de Corberon Paris-Saint-Pétersbourg-Paris (1775-1781)."

S. Beauvalet, "Les couples séparés à Paris au XVIIIe siècle."

E. Berthiaud, "Les solidarités autour des femmes enceintes dans les écrits du for privé aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles."

Part IV Au plus près du secret des corps

Ph. Lejeune, "Célestin Guittard, diariste malade ."

Ph. Rieder, "Soi et santé : écrire ses maux au siècle des Lumières."

P. Testud, "Présence du corps dans le *Journal* de Rétif de la Bretonne."

M. Himmesoëte, "Écrire son corps. Parcours dans les journaux personnels français d'adolescents du XIXe siècle."

Part V Ordres et désordres de soi dans les écrits du for privé

I. Luciani, "Estant ce que je suis... Du recueil savant au récit de soi : l'écriture quotidienne de François Rebatu (1588-1662)."

A. Béroujon, "Ecriture, lecture et folie : le cas du conseiller Pierre Bouscalt au XVIIe siècle."

V. Piétri, "Les 'barbouillages' du comte de Thorenc : écriture et frustrations sociales d'un moraliste de province."

A. Iuso, "Dé-chiffrer l'intimité. Les ressources inattendues d'un livre de raison contemporain."

Part VI La religion dans les livres de raison

S. Gomis, "Le 'sacré' et le 'profane' dans les écrits de clercs français des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles."

C. H. Winn, "La Généalogie de Messieurs du Laurens écrite par moy. Jeanne du Laurens (1631) et l'économie du salut."

Ph. Martin, "Lire-écrire en dévotion."

F. Meyer, "Des livres de raison en Savoie : l'indifférence religieuse?"

R. Beck, "Témoigner de sa foi. La place de la religion dans le livre de raison d'un maître passementier bavarois au XIXe siècle."

Part VII L'événement dans les écrits du for privé

V. Garrigues, "Les troubles avengutz a Gaillac (1559-1574) : les 'Mémoires' du chanoine Blouin."

M. Cassan, "La mort d'Henri IV au miroir des écrits du for privé."

F.-J. Ruggiu, "L'événement de la Fronde? La mort de Charles Ier d'Angleterre dans les écrits du for privé français."

L. Pimenova, "L'événement dans un journal de voyages. La France à la veille et au début de la Révolution, vue et décrite par la princesse Golitzine."

G. Pichard, "Perception et objectivation des faits d'environnement dans les livres de raison du Sud-Est méditerranéen français."

H. Billard, "La procession de la châsse de sainte Geneviève, un indicateur social en temps de risques naturels (XVIIIe siècle)."

Part VIII Éditer les écritures du for privé

C. Nougaret, "Éditer les livres de raison et les journaux ordinaires : l'ecdotique au service de l'historien."

F. Martineau, "Les écrits privés : du manuscrit à la contextualisation."

C. Dauphin et D. Pouban, "Édition électronique d'une correspondance familiale du XIXe siècle."

Conclusion

J.-P. Bardet, "Pour dire quelque chose sur nos conduites érudites."

NOTES

[1] www.ecritsforduprive.fr

[2] Rudolf Dekker, ed., *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in Its Social Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002). In his introduction to this collection of essays, Dekker provides a useful overview of the coining of the word "egodocument" by the Dutch historian Jacques Presser in the early 1950s and its gradual assimilation into scholarly discourse.

[3] Mordenti cites the web address to the on-line database (www.bilf.uniroma2.it) as does Ruggiu in his introduction (<http://www.bilf.uniroma2.it/exist/bilf/defaultFR.htm>). I was unable to access either at the time of writing this review due to repeated server error messages.

[4] To cite but a few important examples in my own field of research, see the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, notably *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Christianity* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), and *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). See also the recent article by Lyndal Roper, "Martin Luther's Body: The 'Stout Doctor' and His Biographers," *American Historical Review* 115 (April 2010): 352-384.

[5] In addition to the on-line databases cited in n. 1 and n. 3 above, see also <http://selbstzeugnisse.histsem.unibas.ch/>, <http://www.egodocument.net/>, and <http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/Egodocumenten>. The last two web addresses appear in Arianne Baggerman's essay, p. 66, n. 6, although they include small errors, which I have corrected here.

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