

---

H-France Review Vol. 5 (September 2005), No. 91

Catherine Emerson, *Olivier de La Marche and the Rhetoric of Fifteenth-Century Historiography*. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2004. viii + 247 pp. Figure, table, notes, bibliography and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-84383-052-3.

Review by Cynthia J. Brown, University of California, Santa Barbara.

---

Catherine Emerson's volume on Olivier de la Marche contributes to the current surge of interest in fifteenth-century French historiographers that includes Graeme Small's *George Chastellain and the Shaping of Valois Burgundy* (Boydell, 1997), Jean Devaux' *Jean Molinet, Indiciaire bourguignon* (Champion, 1998), Joël Blanchard's editions of the *Lettres* and *Mémoires* of Philippe de Commynes (Droz, 2001) and Estelle Doudet's *Poétique de George Chastellain (1415-1475): "Un cristal mucié en un coffre"* (Champion, 2005). Emerson's La Marche, associated in succession with the Burgundian and Hapsbourg courts, is more of an independent and elusive figure than his contemporaries, at once imitating and resisting official historiographic trends.

Just as the thematic and rhetorical issues that defined the opening episode of La Marche's *Mémoires*—the entry of Jacques de Bourbon into Pontarlier in 1435—repeatedly resurfaced throughout his work, so too La Marche's supposedly first childhood memory serves as Emerson's repeated focus in her *Olivier de La Marche and the Rhetoric of Fifteenth-Century Historiography*. In this informative and carefully researched investigation of La Marche's place in late medieval Burgundian historiography, the author aims to uncover "the subtle interplay between authorial intent, unintended textual effect and interpretation" (p. 3) as she investigates not only what La Marche conveyed in his account, but also and especially how and why he wrote his narrative in the manner he did.

Chapter one, "Putting a Date to the *Mémoires*," addresses the "chronological confusion" (p. 6) of the *Mémoires* by admirably disentangling the interwoven threads of the work's redaction over the long period dating from around 1472 to the author's death in 1502, its reproduction in at least six complete extant versions and one partial version, and its afterlife in various posthumous editions. Marked by numerous interruptions and a redefined purpose when the original private enterprise became a more public, educational work for La Marche's pupil, Philippe le Beau, during the last fourteen years of his life, the *Mémoires* ultimately resulted in an unfinished and unrevised project. Attempts to understand this important fifteenth-century "unofficial" history in the state in which it was left by La Marche have been frustrated by subsequent interventions by editors, who reordered or eliminated material, made misleading claims about their policies, or added interpretive layers to the work, compromising its transmission to later generations. Despite recent attempts to redefine the *Mémoires* as a Hapsbourg perspective on La Marche's earlier Burgundian associations, Emerson convincingly shows that this collection of pieces, designed for different audiences over time, was not the product of just one political period.

The reception of La Marche's *Mémoires*, which Emerson examines in chapter two, "L'Autobiographie moyenâgeuse: Genre in the *Mémoires*," has been complicated as well. Drawing on post-modern theories of autobiography and reader-response and examining the changing perceptions of biography over time, while anchoring discussion of this history in the late medieval period itself, Emerson investigates the parameters of the genre of *mémoires*. An unusual generic consistency about the work—it has always been identified by the same title—may well be related to La Marche's initial disavowal of his *Mémoires* as a *chronique* or *histoire*. This conscious distinction of his enterprise from an officially commissioned

*chronique* thus enabled the author to define his work in relationship to his authorial experience. And yet, as Emerson ably and convincingly demonstrates through examples that are astutely analyzed within the context of the *Mémoires* and helpfully replaced in their original historical contexts, La Marche manipulated chronology so as to reinforce thematic unity and orchestrated his involvement in his narrative according to his desired rhetorical effect. At times he stressed his personal identity to authorize certain episodes (such as his early associations with Burgundy before entering the court), while in other cases he minimized it so as to refocus on other political points (for example, during the Rubempré Affair or Duke Charles' defeat at Nancy). Obscuring his authorial involvement was thus at times a deliberate creation of uncertainty on the part of La Marche.

Chapter three, "L'Histoire [...] bourguignonne," examines the *Mémoires* as Burgundian historiography, offering especially useful comparisons between La Marche's style and strategies and those of his contemporaries such as Georges Chastellain, Jean Molinet, and Philippes de Commines. Although not an official *indiciaire*, La Marche echoed some tactics of these chroniclers, such as basing his narrative on original documents, thereby "collaborating" with official tendencies. And yet at the same time, he consciously distanced himself from them to claim a new status for his *Mémoires*. Indeed, where his contemporaries used dating correctly, evidence uncovered by Emerson substantiates La Marche's adoption of dates erroneously, a more arbitrary use of historical fact that seems to have served as a "patina of authority" (p. 100). Emerson's perceptive analysis of La Marche's interactions with the Dutch offers a convincing argument against traditional interpretations that the author was hostile to the Dutch culture.

Chapter four, "Exemplaire, miroir et doctrine: The Didactic Import of the *Mémoires*," examines didacticism in La Marche's *Mémoires* by focusing on the 1488 Book One. Through a discussion of critical terms, ideas, and genres (such as *conseil*, "body politic," and the *Miroir aux princes* tradition, which La Marche adopted as models of ideal behavior), Emerson shows how the author attempted to dissuade his dedicatee, Philippe le Beau, from involvement in dangerous military ventures. Making use of a variety of literary tools toward this end, La Marche was the first to promote the Trojan myth in the service of Hapsbourg political goals, raising issues of legitimate descent and discussing subjects such as tyrannicide and the role of bastards in political succession.

Having earlier treated moralistic perspectives and strategies, Emerson chooses to examine religious issues separately in chapter five, "La 'corde nouhée': La Marche and Religion." Here La Marche's seemingly incidental references to the Friars Minor of the Observance, absent from other contemporary accounts, are located in key passages within and outside of the *Mémoires*, suggesting a long-term interest in the reformed Franciscan movement. However, Emerson does not consider religious lessons to be as important in shaping the work as was didacticism. For rather than embracing the uncompromising ideology of an Observant Franciscan such as Olivier Maillart, La Marche advocates instead a coexistence of spiritual and worldly concerns. As a result, the fact that this relatively minor subject constitutes its own independent chapter tends to undermine the book's overall strength. The same holds true for the final chapter, whose discussion might have been better placed in with chapter five's discussion of didacticism.

Again emerging from La Marche's "primal" memory of Jacques de Bourbon's entry, the subject of combat and its particular embodiment in the form of court combat, or *pas d'arme*, as a model of conduct, constitutes the focus of chapter six, "Ordre and ordonnance: The Presentation of Combat in the *Mémoires*." More highly valued than judicial combat and warfare by La Marche, court combat possessed its own rhetoric, which is shown to overflow into discussions of the other two less admirable forms of combat. As in earlier chapters, the juxtaposition of episodes occurring years apart is shown to be a

rhetorical strategy employed by La Marche to emphasize one of the main themes of the *Mémoires*, namely the gradual degradation of the noble ideology of warfare.

While Emerson returns in the end to the essential elusiveness of Olivier de La Marche as an author, she has nevertheless made a significant contribution to late medieval literary history by clearly articulating the complexities, contradictions and uncertainties associated with the rhetorical strategies adopted by La Marche in his *Mémoires*.

---

Cynthia J. Brown  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
cjbrown@frit.ucsb.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172