
H-France Review Vol. 11 (September 2011), No. 209

Olivier Ferret, Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas, *Dictionnaire des Vies Privées (1722-1842)*. Preface by Robert Darnton. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011 (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 2011:2). Pp. xviii + 450. Notes, figures, index. \$115.00 U.S. (paper). ISBN 978-07294-10090.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

The *Dictionnaire des vies privées* edited by the French scholars Olivier Ferret, Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas, is both a reference work and an argument for the distinctiveness and importance of a particular genre of publication, the *Vie privée* or exposé of the private life of a prominent individual that flourished in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The bulk of the volume consists of detailed descriptions of 142 texts whose titles promised readers accounts of the private lives of their subjects, compiled by the three co-authors and other members of the research teams associated with the Groupe d'études du dix-huitième siècle, based in Lyon. A lengthy introductory essay co-authored by the three editors analyzes the common characteristics of these texts and argues for their significance as an early form of secularized biography, a form of creative literature, and a means of influencing public opinion.

In its guise as a reference work, the *Dictionnaire des vies privées* takes its place alongside Jean Sgard's monumental *Dictionnaire des journaux* and François Moureau's *Répertoire des nouvelles à la main* in mapping a previously uncharted domain of eighteenth-century ephemeral literature.[1] Each of the entries in the *Dictionnaire des vies privées*, arranged alphabetically by subject, provides a precise bibliographic description of the work in question, identifies the author (if known), and summarizes the text's main themes. Illustrations and epigraphs are cited, and references are given to (primarily French) collections where the text can be found. If multiple editions were published, their identifying features are mentioned. The *Dictionnaire* will thus be useful for scholars interested in the ways in which important political figures were depicted, usually, although not always, by their enemies. Although the scandalous *vie privée* is usually associated with the last decades of the Old Regime, a perusal of the *Dictionnaire's* entries shows that the form persisted through the revolutionary period and beyond. The fourteen texts devoted to Napoleon Bonaparte, all but one of them published in 1814 or afterward, outnumber those about any other figure. The subjects were overwhelmingly male, with women closely associated with the monarch—Madame de Pompadour, Madame Du Barry, Marie-Antoinette—being the principal exceptions. Although the majority of the subjects were political figures—Louis XV, the maréchal de Richelieu, Robespierre—there was also a tradition of *vies privées* about famous criminals, and a certain number of texts were devoted to writers and intellectuals such as Buffon and Bonnet.

It is fitting that Robert Darnton has provided a short preface to this volume, since eighteenth-century French *vies privées* loom large in his work on clandestine literature, and especially in his recent publication *The Devil in the Holy Water*. [2] Whereas Darnton has stressed the rhetorical violence and the stress on sexual corruption that characterizes many of these texts, particularly those devoted to Louis XV and his ministers and mistresses, Ferret, Mercier-Faivre and Thomas see them as having a broader significance. The *vie privée* genre, they argue, was a major development in the tradition of biography. [3] For the first time, readers were offered a full, if generally exaggerated, portrait of

prominent individuals' private activities. The idea that public figures' intimate lives hold the key to their public actions seems self-evident today, but in the eighteenth century it was a radical innovation (pp. 1, 11). In subjecting kings and ministers to the same scrutiny as master criminals and individuals who had achieved fame through their talents, the authors of *vies privées* practiced "an opening to democracy" (p. 12): anyone's life could, in principle, merit this form of narration.

Usually dismissed as a form of gutter literature, eighteenth-century *vies privées* in fact often shared the characteristics of the period's more prestigious literary genres and contributed to the development of effective ways of depicting individual characters' thoughts and behavior. Even as they appropriated strategies from the realm of fiction, *vie privée* authors insisted on the factualness of their accounts, claiming to be historians and reliable witnesses to what they recounted, although in reality little of what they wrote could be verified. Authors of *vies privées* called on their readers to play an active role, putting them "successively in the position of a jury member, a participant in the collection of evidence, and, finally, in that of a judge" (p. 59). They thus insisted on the public's right to criticize or condemn those in power. To be sure, the authors of *vies privées* were anything but neutral observers. "*Vies privées* of famous men were partly novels, moral tales or theatrical dramas and purported autobiographies," the authors write, "but their real purpose was elsewhere. All this machinery and these confidences are there to hide the true aim of most of these works: the manipulation of public opinion" (p. 67).

The first two-thirds of the introductory essay to this volume thus makes a stimulating and suggestive contribution to the understanding of the *vie privée* genre that takes it out of the narrow context of scandal mongering to which the Darntonian approach has tended to confine it. The last third of the introduction is less coherent, featuring short essays on *vies privées* published in series or multiple texts about the same subject, the image of childhood in these texts, the illustrations included in many of them, usually dignified portraits that contrasted sharply with the moral defects ascribed to the subjects in the texts, and the English translations made of some of them. The rather scattered nature of this material weakens the effect of the argument advanced in the main part of the essay. It is also regrettable that, whereas the authors do briefly consider the predecessors of the eighteenth-century *vie privée*, they give the impression that the genre died off in the first half of the nineteenth century. In their view, the *Vie politique, civile, militaire et privée de M. Majeux*, a satire of the genre devoted to an entirely fictitious individual that was published in 1831, marks the end of the tradition. Pamphlets entitled "Vie privée" may have died out, but the tactic of discrediting public figures by spreading stories about their private lives migrated to the sensationalist press and other forms of journalism and biography. Skeptics have only to do an internet search for "Dominique Strauss-Kahn."

NOTES

[1] Jean Sgard, ed., *Dictionnaire des journaux*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Universitas and Voltaire Foundation, 1991); François Moureau, *Répertoire des nouvelles à la main* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991).

[2] Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water, or The Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[3] For a stimulating overview of the development of modern biography and its relationship to the writing of history, see Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172