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Myriam Tsimbidy, *La Mémoire des lettres: la Lettre dans les Mémoires du XVIIème siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013. 348 pp. Notes, annexes, bibliography, and index. €39.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-0902-8.

Review by Denis Lagae-Devoldere, Université Paris-Sorbonne.

Scholars specializing in memoirs as a genre have so far paid short shrift to the presence, function and importance of correspondence in seventeenth-century memoirs, especially of embedded letters. In her fascinating book, Myriam Tsimbidy proposes to shed light on just such comparatively unexplored epistolary territory. She focuses on seventeenth-century memoirs, in particular those written during the period of Louis XIV's minority from 1643 to 1661. With that chronological framework in mind, the first two chapters are devoted to assembling a workable corpus of memoirs in which letters were inserted and establishing a typology of such letters with a view to isolating and differentiating the numerous ways they were embedded within the narrative web (55-79).

Placing her work firmly in the context of specialists such as Fritz Nies, Bernard Bray and Damien Zanone, Myriam Tsimbidy compellingly looks into the memoirs of Bussy Rabutin, Abbé de Choisy, Madame de Caylus, Saint Simon, la Grande Mademoiselle and Cardinal de Retz—on whom Tsimbidy is an eminent specialist.<sup>[1]</sup> With an impressive command of archival sources, she also probes lesser known works such as the memoirs of Omer Talon, Henri de Campion, Mathieu Molé, Madame de Motteville and Claude de Forbin, to name but a few. Minutely examining the subtle nuances with which letters were used, Tsimbidy considers how the letter was seen as material to be reworked and reshaped, as an item in a narrative strategy or in a self-staging, self-(re)fashioning strategy on the part of the memoirist (p. 226). It was either completely inserted and copied *verbatim*—or purported to be so (Bussy Rabutin's "monumentalizing" letters [p. 123])—or only partially quoted and even summed up. In other instances, letters were fully introduced or presented as such, together with the whole gamut of "civilités," but they could also be *posing* as just factual, ostentatiously invented or semi fictive, thinly fictionalized.

The issue was often made even more complex, as Tsimbidy shows, because of editorial choices over the centuries. Some editors of memoirs chose to insert letters when the original memoirist did not, and others found it necessary to "edit out" the originally inserted letters, partially or fully, as the case may be, which makes for some of Tsimbidy's most interesting remarks. This wide array of "arrangements" with letters enabled memoirists—Narcissus-like historians characterized by their "egotropism," in Frédéric Bigot's felicitous phrase quoted by Tsimbidy (273)—to allow for multigeneric discourse, broader perspectives and subtle variations of viewpoints, as though the "I" were surrounded by a variety of "secondary" first-person narrative instances.

The apparently innocuous letter became part and parcel of the poetics of the memoir.

As a consequence, as far as the reader is concerned, probing into the importance of letters in seventeenth-century memoirs amounts to launching on a hermeneutic journey implying several layers of discursive authority and temporality in keeping with the endlessly tractable, flexible genre of the memoirs. Tsimbidy deftly raises and works her way through thorny issues such as authenticity, sincerity and the disruptive power of historical memory, all notions which were to be reconsidered throughout the seventeenth-century. In the process, she shows that in most memoirs, thanks to the use of letters, the line is very thin indeed between information and (self) justification, between documentation of a scientific nature and narrativization of past events, between first-hand

unaltered testimony anchored in verified referentiality, and sheer aesthetic “montage” with a view for dramatic effects. With a wealth of potent examples, Tsimbidy convincingly connects the use of the letter with the rhetorical and dramatic use of hypotyposis, whose primary aim was to bring a scene before the eyes of the reader. Because of those competing senses of time, the supposedly historically-rooted memoirs reached a sort of highly paradoxical “non-time.” This is only one of Tsimbidy’s numerous illuminating insights.

Because it gives prominence to a presumably marginal item and enhances its centrality, Tsimbidy’s book is a significant contribution to the exploration of memoirs in general and in particular of seventeenth-century memoirs at the crossroads of several genres. With its wide-ranging use of secondary and primary sources and useful tables, annexes and index, this book will be very useful to scholars and advanced students as well as the general reader. My only regret is that the book was written in French, which will limit its audience. Such superb scholarship deserves to be translated into English very soon.

#### NOTE

[1] Fritz Niez, *Les "Lettres" de Madame de Sévigné: conventions du genre et sociologie des publics*, trans., Michèle Creff (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001); Bernard Bray, *Épistoliers de l'âge classique, l'art de la correspondance chez Mme de Sévigné et quelques prédécesseurs, contemporains et héritiers* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 2007); Damien Zanone, *Écrire son temps, Les Mémoires en France de 1815 à 1848* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2006); Myriam Tsimbidy, *Le Cardinal de Retz polémiste*, (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2005).

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