

H-France Review Vol. 1 (November 2001), No. 34

Vincent J. Pitts, *La Grande Mademoiselle at the Court of France, 1627-1693*. Baltimore, Md. and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xiv+367 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$42.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-8018-6466-6.

Review by Carolyn Lougee Chappell, Stanford University.

If a more intriguing personage than La Grande Mademoiselle lived in seventeenth-century France, no autobiographical memoir has survived to inform (or mislead) us. Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans, duchess de Montpensier (1627-1693) was the richest woman in France (only Condé among the royal princes had a larger fortune), granddaughter of Henri IV, and elder first cousin of Louis XIV. Her wealth was coveted by her father Gaston d'Orléans, by the king for the benefit of his brother Philippe (whose fortune was perhaps half of hers until he inherited much of her estate), by Condé, and by the upstart Lauzun. Not coincidentally, her hand was sought--if not by Louis XIV--by Philippe and Condé, by the kings of England, Spain, and Portugal as well as the Emperor and the Duke of Savoy, and by the upstart Lauzun. Most famously, she carved a role for herself in the adventures of the Fronde; her firing of the Bastille cannons to rescue Condé's rebel army at the Porte Saint-Antoine immortalized her at the age of 25. But she never thereafter succeeded in finding herself a niche in the royal family, in the court, or in the history being made by those she consorted with daily.

Mademoiselle's story has been told and retold, beginning with the memoirs she herself wrote in three spurts: before 1660, in 1677, and in 1689-90. She had a great deal to tell: published editions run to more than 2000 pages. Among seventeenth-century memoirs they are unusual in being written by a woman, in encompassing private matters as well as political, and in beginning the life story with childhood. But most of all, they are unusual and invaluable for opening to view the court at which she spent her entire life, except for a few years of exile on her estates. She experienced, observed, and recorded court life and royal politics from an insider's vantage point to which none of the court's other chroniclers ever had access.

Mademoiselle has remained considerably less known in the Anglophone world than in France. Now, *La Grande Mademoiselle at the Court of France* rectifies that imbalance, offering the English reader a remarkably sympathetic and supremely engaging recreation of Mademoiselle's life from the memoirs she left behind. Vincent Pitts retells her life from her own script, from "Mademoiselle's perceptions of the world as evidenced by her *Mémoires* and other writings. To that degree, this work will not be 'objective.' It attempts to see matters as Mademoiselle saw them, giving people and events the importance Mademoiselle assigned them, and to 'intervene' to offer appropriate background, suggest a modern insight, or correct any glaring errors of chronology in Mademoiselle's recollections. The

emphasis at all times will be on the *Mémoires* (pp. xi-xii). "There can be no doubt that we encounter Mademoiselle in those pages and no one else" (p. 113).

Pitts' lively retelling and his exquisite sense of appropriate context are remarkably effective in bringing out key insights Mademoiselle's narrative has to offer: the way she crafts the scene at Sedan to show the differences in temperament between Louis XIV and his brother Philippe; the vignette of her incognito visit to the Spanish court across the Bidassoa for Louis' proxy marriage in 1660; of course the famous firing of Bastille cannons in 1652; innumerable insights into royal thinking and courtier behavior as seen by one interested party (She called Richelieu "the vainest and most ambitious man in the world" (p. 18)); and testimony to the complexity of negotiating one's way through the mores of the court and its inter-personal relationships, rivalries, resentments, and attachments. Mademoiselle's memoirs should be as well-known and as routinely consulted on Louis XIV's court as the memoirs of Saint-Simon, Dangeau, Sourches, and Primi Visconti.

But hewing to the story line Mademoiselle herself sets in place and embedding her narrative in historical background make for limitations as well as strengths. Pitts is not naïve in his use of the memoirs: he understands Mademoiselle's *parti pris* and occasionally notes someone else's information on an event she does not mention. The chapter epigraphs provide a kind of running commentary from Segrais and other confidants on her character and her behavior. But Pitts still reads the memoirs more as transparent expressions of Mademoiselle's experience than as her representation, for an audience, of the way she wishes her experience to be seen. He states, for example, that "These events had a profound effect on the young Mademoiselle" (p. 26) rather than that "She represents herself as having been profoundly affected by these events" or that "She feels, in retrospect, that these events had had a profound effect on her."

Pitts, then, catches the words she records but not the additional insights into Mademoiselle's purposes that might be teased out from an overall questioning of what she includes, what she omits, and the way she shapes her story in order to justify herself before the reader. Pitts' exposition is far more than an annotation of the text but less than an interrogation of it. Other recent work with autobiographical texts has made memorialists tell more than they knew they were telling. "In every story is a story not told." [1] Pitts has left it to others to ferret out Mademoiselle's latent untold story from such embedded clues as implied genres lying beneath the surface of the autobiographical narrative, strategic silences, puzzling exaggerations, and curious placements of details.

Pitts does tease out and elaborate a few themes he sees running through Mademoiselle's life. Notably, he sets her in the crosscurrents of familial and public loyalties at a time when norms of obligation were being redefined. As a royal highness--the first legitimate niece or nephew in the male line of a sovereign since Charles VI in the fourteenth century--she constantly asserted the identity she derived from her position in the royal family, and her sense of authority (or at least entitlement) kept her from fully deferring to the authority of the king. At the time of the Fronde she claimed her duty to her own father excused her disobedience to the king. But in her early years she could not count on Gaston defending her, and later she could not be sure that Louis XIV considered her part of the royal family he was responsible to provide for. Much to her own pain, she never managed to conciliate personal inclination, family honor, and royal will.

A different question hovers over any reading of Pitts' book and yet remains to be fully addressed: What can this life tell us about the cultural construction of gender and the impact of gender on individual fates in seventeenth-century France? Mademoiselle lived largely in a world of women--Anne of Austria, her half-sisters and step-mother, her own ladies--that was dominated and controlled by a world of men: Richelieu, Gaston, Louis XIV. Her personal wealth and dynastic position were unmatched, but she never was able to parlay them into personal satisfactions or into a theatre of action akin to those enjoyed by the king's other (male) cousins. Mademoiselle's ambiguous standing was nicely demonstrated in the episode at Orleans during the Fronde, when the people of the city met her with cheers, bows, and their troops at attention, but refused to open the gates at her command. Later, once her lack of political savvy and recurring impudence (or was it her principled objection to marriage? or both?) had botched all her marriage prospects, she, as a woman, had no "place," no further "utility" to family or king. Perhaps another historian will endeavor to disentangle the personal from the structural in this unique life story. For now, Vincent Pitts has given us a page-turner, a wonderfully written, intimate acquaintance with one exceptional woman's character. To date, as Pitts laments, "Mademoiselle still lacks her Pléiade" (p. 258). *La Grande Mademoiselle at the Court of France* whets our appetite for the full original.

NOTES

[1] Kim Chernin, *In My Mother's House* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), viii. See also Liz Stanley, *The Auto-biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto-Biography* (New York and Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1992); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (New York and Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

Carolyn Lougee Chappell
Stanford University
lougee@stanford.edu

Copyright © 2001 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 redistribution/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