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Donna Kuizenga, Ed. and trans., Madame de Villedieu (Marie-Catherine Desjardins), *Memoirs of the Life of Henriette-Sylvie de Molière: A Novel*. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe, Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., Eds. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. xxxi + 194 pp. Maps, footnotes, and bibliography. \$21.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-14420-8.

Review by Stephanie O'Hara, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Marie-Catherine Desjardins, later known as Madame de Villedieu (1640?-83) was a remarkable woman. At a young age she chose to live on her own, legally and financially independent of her parents. One of the first women writers who had to rely on her writing as a key source of income, she earned great success in her time. She began her career as a poet, and later became an active playwright. In 1665, Molière's troupe performed her tragicomedy *Le Favory* for Louis XIV, a first for a French woman writer. But it is for her skill as a novelist that she would become principally known; her prose fiction played a major role in the development of the early modern French novel. Not only that, Villedieu was so popular that her work was both quickly translated into English and published in pirated versions. Three different editions of her complete works came out in the eighteenth century. However, history would later prove less kind; "as Joan DeJean has demonstrated in the final chapter of her *Tender Geographies*, the works of many women writers, including Villedieu, disappeared from view as the canon of French literature was formed after the Revolution" (p. 15).

Since the 1980s, Villedieu's work has been coming back into view in new editions and translations. Thanks to the efforts of feminist scholars there is now a body of nuanced, thoughtful scholarship on Villedieu. Donna Kuizenga, a Villedieu specialist and author of numerous articles on her work, has published the first complete, new English translation of the *Memoirs of Henriette-Sylvie de Molière (1672-1674)* to appear since 1677.[1] The *Memoirs* constitute a ground-breaking, wonderfully hybrid text: picaresque novel? Fictional autobiography? Epistolary novel? All of the above, in fact.

The novel is divided into six parts of more or less equal length. Each part consists of a long letter addressed to an anonymous woman protector of very high rank, whom Henriette-Sylvie addresses thus at the novel's beginning: "It is no small comfort to me, Madame, in the midst of all the evil stories by which my reputation is slandered everywhere, to see that Your Highness wishes me to justify myself. I feel all the gratitude that I should, and so as not to be ungrateful, I will willingly obey your command to entertain you with a faithful account of my innocent mistakes...I will not hide anything, not even the most foolish adventures in which I have had some role, so that Your Highness can laugh at them while at the same time having compassion for me in other regards" (p. 26). Henriette-Sylvie's wish to entertain her reader does not prove a vain one.

Our intrepid heroine begins life in mysterious circumstances: her mother, along with four men and two women, lands on the coast near Montpellier, where she gives birth. She and those with her leave the baby and some money in the care of a peasant woman, and are never seen again. The only other thing the mother leaves her daughter is the name Henriette-Sylvie. Five years later, the Duke of Candale, out hunting, happens to take refuge in the peasant woman's cottage during a storm. (In addition to fictional characters such as the heroine, Villedieu often features historical figures like the Duke of Candale.) The duke is so taken with the little girl, who even at the age of five seems most unpeasant-like, that he decides to have her raised in the family of Monsieur de Molière, a financier whom he knows. And so we have Henriette-Sylvie de Molière.

Villedieu's choice of last name for her heroine may or may not be significant, since Molière was a common last name in seventeenth-century Languedoc. In any event, Henriette-Sylvie's foster father later tries to rape her, whereupon she shoots him (fatally, as it turns out), escapes, and falls madly in love with the young Count of Englesac while under his family's protection. Equally smitten with Henriette-Sylvie, Englesac goes so far as to set fire to his family's château in order to be able to obtain a word with his beloved (who had been feigning indifference to him in order to placate his mother). With the château in flames and confusion reigning, Englesac reaches

Henriette-Sylvie's room. The narrator dryly remarks, "I did as he wished and listened to him while I finished dressing, having no doubt that a man who would burn a house for the purpose must have a great need of talking to me" (p. 38). Englesac is later forced to leave the country because of a duel, while his mother shuts up Henriette-Sylvie in a convent. She escapes the convent with a nun who had been forced into taking vows, and the two take refuge with an elderly relative of the nun's. This relative, hearing all sorts of rumors about Henriette-Sylvie, turns her out of the house. Henriette-Sylvie is then forced to go to the Marquis de Birague, a very close, personal friend of her foster mother; he himself finds Henriette-Sylvie quite attractive. After several other twists and turns of plot, Henriette-Sylvie is taken under the maternal wing of a new protector, the marquise de Seville. They journey together to Paris for the king's triumphal entry into that city on August 26, 1660. Thus ends the novel's first part.

Over the course of her subsequent adventures, which lead her all over France and the Low Countries, outrageous Fortune and an outraged, gossipy public send a great deal of slings and arrows in Henriette-Sylvie's way. She usually lands on her feet, although sometimes only just barely. She displays bravery, a quick wit, resourcefulness, and an abundant sense of humor. Another important quality is her great beauty, which consistently tends to attract numerous importunate suitors. Henriette-Sylvie's good looks and quick abilities also come in handy during the several episodes when she dresses as a man, with such success that women fall in love with her. While pretending to be the Prince of Salmes, she notes, "I very quickly got the reputation of being a most gallant German and quite dangerous to the beautiful sex. I will need to talk about this at some length because the rumors of my amorous talents caused me to be involved in many great and horrible affairs, and my goal is to amuse Your Highness" (p. 58). For fear of spoiling the reader's pleasure, I will not say more here. However, I do want to highlight Donna Kuizenga's observation that "the novel is innovative in its presentation of a love story that does not end with the marriage of hero and heroine" (p. 1). Indeed, Henriette-Sylvie's marriage to her beloved Count of Englesac merely turns out to be a fresh source of woes and adventures. In refusing a facile, happily-ever-after ending, Villedieu keeps the reader guessing as to what her highly unusual, engaging heroine will do next.

What are we to make of the *Memoirs of Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*? While the novel is a good read, an overlooked early modern adventure story with feminist overtones, it is also more than that. As Donna Kuizenga's clear, well-written introduction to the *Memoirs* illustrates, they deserve to be re-translated and re-read for the window they open onto seventeenth-century France, and women's lives in particular. Kuizenga does an excellent job of carefully contextualizing Villedieu and the *Memoirs*. This is especially important in Villedieu's case, since literary historians from the eighteenth century onward have indulged in the unfortunate tendency to read Villedieu's fiction as a direct reflection of her life. In this way, Villedieu became, as Joan DeJean has put it, "the original notorious woman."^[2] At another extreme, some critics have suggested that the *Memoirs* allowed Villedieu the chance for wish fulfillment, insofar as the extraordinarily beautiful heroine marries her true love. This type of reading, Kuizenga points out, does not take into account Villedieu's sense of irony, by which she uses the trope of a heroine's perfect beauty only to ultimately undercut it.

Rather, Kuizenga argues, "the central issue raised by the *Memoirs* is the question of how to read a woman writer's life...Sylvie transforms herself into a textual commodity, a product designed to compete in the marketplace against the falsified versions of her life story" (pp. 10-11). In other words, rather than seek crude parallels between Villedieu's life and that of her heroine, readers should recognize a more subtle point of intersection between the two: the act of writing. The *Memoirs* draw on history, on Villedieu's own life, and on fiction, to the extent that Villedieu "invites us to read her text and not her life...the distance between life and text that Villedieu succeeds in maintaining is the space of creation and autonomy" (p. 13). If the *Memoirs* are to be taken as any kind of guide, they suggest that in seventeenth-century France, a woman writer who sought to live life on her own terms would need talent, a sense of fun, and above all, courage.

This new version of the *Memoirs* marks a welcome addition to the University of Chicago Press's "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe" series, edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. The translation is accurate and smooth, and the meanings of key terms like "lover," "mistress," and "gallant" are explained in the introduction. The translation is complemented by a judicious use of footnotes providing additional historical information where necessary. This version of the *Memoirs* should be easily accessible to advanced undergraduates, and it would certainly be an important text to use in undergraduate or graduate seminars that discuss gender and/or the history of the novel. Ideally, the *Memoirs* would figure into an interdisciplinary course on early modern writers.

NOTES

[1] For the original French text, the most easily available editions are: *Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*, ed. Micheline Cuénin. 1722. Facsimile, Tours: Editions de l'université François Rabelais, 1977; *Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*, ed. René Démoris. Paris: Desjonquères, 2003.

[2] Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 132.

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