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Irit Ruth Kleiman, *Philippe de Commines: Memory, betrayal, text*, Toronto, Buffalo and London: Toronto University Press, 2013. viii + 296 pp. Notes and index. \$65 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-1-4426-4562-2.

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To write a book in English about Philippe de Commines, one which hoped to be accessible to undergraduate and graduate students and to make a contribution to scholarly debate, would already have been an imposing task in the mid-twentieth century. As Irit Ruth Kleiman makes clear in the opening pages of this book, Commines's *Mémoires*, the first political memoirs to describe themselves as such, have been in print and the subject of vigorous debate since their initial publication in 1524. Not only was this debate vast, but it mostly took place in French (or, in some stages, in Latin), and it was unlikely that an English-speaking audience would get nearly as exercised as a French or Belgian one over Commines's most notorious act: leaving the service of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, in 1472, to join that of Louis XI.

This situation was compounded in the 1960s with the publication of books by Jean Dufournet and Karl Bittman that took an essentially historicist approach, demonstrating through a terrifying array of narrative and archival sources when Commines was, not to put too fine a point on it, making it up.^[1] Still today, Commines is probably best known to an English-speaking public as an untrustworthy witness to the political events he recounts, appearing in the footnotes of Richard Vaughan's *Charles the Bold* as the source most likely to be cited but found unreliable.^[2] To further complicate matters, Dufournet doubled his historicist rereading of the *Mémoires* with a psychoanalytic one that fed back into the age-old debate about Commines's "treachery." His work was to be explained by the repression of this foundational act, which is alluded to in a mere line in the *Mémoires*: "Envyron ce temps, je vins au service du Roy (et fut l'an mil CCCCLXXII)."^[3] Since the early 1990s, the field of Commines studies has further expanded thanks largely to the efforts of Joël Blanchard, who produced the first genuinely scholarly edition of the *Mémoires*, published rafts of Commines's surviving letters, and wrote a readable, subtle and erudite work on Commines's *Mémoires* and on his life.^[4] What English-speaking scholars and university teachers really need is a translation of this work. Among other things, Blanchard has on a number of occasions attempted to put an end to the centuries-old obsession with whether or not Commines "betrayed" Charles the Bold. After all, there is so much else to talk about.

Nonetheless, writing a book for an audience which is familiar neither with the *Mémoires* nor with the earlier debate, it would be daring indeed to begin from this Blanchardian starting point, given how much the issue of betrayal has dominated earlier scholarship. After all, the debate is still not dead, much to Blanchard's frustration. As Kleiman points out, Charles the Bold certainly believed that Philippe de Commines had betrayed him, confiscating his lands when he went over to the French king, and even excluding him from a general amnesty in 1475. Blanchard suggested that Commines could always argue that Louis XI was his king, and so he was not strictly speaking a traitor.^[5] But this is one of two possible, mutually conflicting interpretations of the situation, and it is the tension between them that has fuelled centuries of acrimonious debate. Still, at least putting things in this way makes it possible to move on from the unending argument about whether Commines really was a traitor or not.

Indeed, although Kleiman remains concerned with the “silences” which supposedly resulted from the “trauma” of this first “betrayal,” she is on the whole more interested in a second one, discussed in detail by Blanchard. This was the betrayal of Philippe de Commynes by Louis XI when, on his deathbed, the king repented of the grants of lands he had made to his counsellor to compensate him for his losses in 1472. Still, it is worth asking if either of these events were “traumas” in the psychoanalytic sense, events so painful that they cannot be put into words. To begin with, the traumatised person in the first betrayal ought to have been Charles the Bold, not Commynes. Charles certainly did not show any inability to express himself, acting immediately against his former servant. Commynes, meanwhile, had more straightforward reasons for not talking about this first betrayal in his *Mémoires*. He would have known that this was how certain people had interpreted his actions, and talking about it would have done little to exculpate him. He was not traumatised, but simply exercising his right to remain silent. The analogy of trauma works a little better in the second case. Commynes’s persistent portrayal of his intimacy with Louis XI suggests that he was, so to speak, in denial about that king’s betrayal. But again, there were more material reasons for this. To acknowledge Louis’ betrayal was to confirm it. By not discussing it Commynes had a better chance of either reasserting his lost rights or gaining compensation. Finally, one of the most effective weapons in Commynes’s rhetorical armoury was the judiciously deployed silence.

Two examples are well presented here. There is the famous *boîte noire*, Commynes’s account of events when, still in Charles’s service, he somehow helped Louis escape from imprisonment in the duke’s castle of Péronne, but told this story in a way which left vague what he actually did, and so dodged the possible charge of treachery. There is also the account of the death of Charles himself, reported by powerless witnesses, seen from a distance falling from his horse into a murderous throng, and leaving what happened to the imagination. Given these material, legal and rhetorical reasons for silence, is it difficult to see what is added by the analogy with psychoanalytic understandings of trauma.

That said, nobody could deny that Commynes’s departure from Charles the Bold’s service and Louis XI’s death provided essential turning points both in Commynes’s life and in the construction of the *Mémoires*. The best readings in Kleiman’s book concern the first part of her subtitle—memory—moving on either side of these critical moments. Chapter two considers how marks on the body of Charles the Bold, which Commynes saw him sustain at the battle of Montlhéry in 1465, served to identify his body after his death, with a wonderful movement backwards and forwards between Commynes’ youth and old age, Charles’s glory and his death.

A slightly different tension between Commynes old and young was struck in his account of Montlhéry itself, as the memorialist’s younger self learned the folly of his chivalric illusions, or even more strikingly, in his account of his spectacularly ineffective mission as the duke’s agent in Calais, during which Lord Wenlock, the earl of Warwick’s lieutenant as captain of that town, effected to be loyal to Edward IV, while all the time secretly maintaining his allegiance to his lord, the earl, in rebellion against the English king. Commynes learned a valuable lesson from that experience—that subterfuge could be good. Kleiman presents all of these episodes with a narrative pacing designed to seize and retain the attention of a lecture hall. The same tension-building style is maintained, for example, in chapter four, which introduces the legal background to Louis XI’s grants of lands to the freshly arrived Commynes in a manner which must keep even the sleepiest student on tenterhooks.

In her treatment of memory, Kleiman introduces readings which, if they are not entirely novel, are strikingly presented, and would undoubtedly win new audiences for the *Mémoires*. Perhaps the best of these occurs in the last chapter of the book, when she considers the movement between Commynes’s memories of Paris in happier times, his view of the Seine while imprisoned during his later troubles, and Louis XI’s last illness and confinement. Nonetheless, Kleiman has announced in the introduction, with something of an implicit sigh, that “to be a useful tool for reading the *Mémoires*,” her work must be one which “deepens our understanding of Commynes’s narrative in relation to its historical context” (p. 21), and here she runs into trouble from the first. In truth, Kleiman is not very well informed either about late medieval culture and society or about contemporary politics. We learn, for example, that Louis XI succeeded in the course of his career in

retaking Calais (p. 21), that the future Charles VII stabbed Jean the Fearless with his own hand (p. 89), and that something called the “Franco-Britannic alliance” had fallen apart 150 years before the Treaty of Piquigny (1475) (p. 88). The second of these errors is troubling since it also implies a misreading of Commynes, who himself says that John the Fearless was killed by men of the duke of Orléans.^[6] The latter error might seem trivial for a work focused on France and Burgundy in the later fifteenth century, but it reveals a more general misinterpretation which, unfortunately, is presented as an explanation of the very existence of the *Mémoires*.

In the introduction, Kleiman argues that Louis XI’s reign saw the triumph of “a late antique model” imported from Roman law which insisted on the absolute sovereignty of the king, emperor in his domain (p. 24). Yet the reintroduction of Roman law into practical politics had already reached its apogee some 200 years earlier during the reign of Philip IV in a period when the French king did indeed insist on the exclusivity of the relationship between himself and all those living in the territory of the kingdom of France. This meant that a subject of the duke of Aquitaine, for example, could legitimately appeal to the king of France if he came into conflict with the duke, who also happened to be king of England. This situation had led to open war in the 1290s and the 1320s. It was in order to evade the kind of argument that might have justified Commynes in leaving Charles the Bold that Edward III gradually committed himself to assuming the title of king of France between 1337 and 1340. That being the case, how can we say that the insistence on the exclusivity of the relationship between a subject and his king has contributed to the creation of a new genre, the political memoir, two centuries later? At best, it is by providing a long context, not an immediate stimulus.

A similar problem accompanies Kleiman’s second socio-historical argument, that in Louis’s reign “reading and writing...grew ever more inextricably linked with the exercise of power” and that the “juridical tissue of individual identity and social cohesion increasingly depended on writing and on written objects” (p. 25). Chapters five and six consider a number of occasions on which letters had proved themselves important elements in politics, and how Louis’ mastery of them enabled him to undo his enemies. But again, the development of the importance of writing and its availability to literate laymen was already well established by the later thirteenth century at the latest. The failure to recognise just how well established was the authority of written record, and how this could support individual and collective rights even against the king of France, leads to a fundamental misreading of the nature of the betrayal of Commynes by Louis XI.

In fact, Louis XI had granted Commynes lands which he had obtained from Louis d’Amboise, count of Thouars, in contradiction of the rights of the La Trémoille family, favourites of Charles VII. The grant to Commynes was thus always likely to be subject to challenge, and the king had to go to some lengths to have it accepted in the first place. In 1484, moreover, Commynes had been part of a delegation sent to Thouars to discover if there was anything in the family archives which might help or hinder his case. He found letters of Charles VII which essentially proved that the La Trémoilles were in the right. Commynes tried to burn them, but those who were with him insisted on taking them to the king. This they did, and Louis then burned them himself, saying “Je ne les brusle pas, c’est le feu” (p. 120). For Kleiman this proves that Louis believed that he could annul the letters’ contents by his will: “They were his to burn or honour” (p. 122). But, in fact, Louis XI’s remark demonstrates the opposite. A formal written grant of Charles VII had such force that even his successor lacked the authority simply to burn them, and that by so doing he was guilty of wrongdoing: “I’m not burning them, it’s the fire.” Certainly, texts, letters and written grants were important in Commynes’ writing, but this was a consequence of his belonging to a culture which was already centuries old.

In the end, the rhetorical style of Kleiman’s book, calculated to grab the attention, is also one of its drawbacks. This book is packed with metaphors. Memory’s hand plucks things from the past (p. 51), the episode at Péronne brings together not only “a stew of ingredients together in one pot” but also “a hornet’s nest of opposing interests” (p. 47). The effect is disconcertingly to reactivate clichéd expressions, which is perhaps a virtue in poetry, but not in analytic writing. Commynes has a “front-row seat” at the Wars of the Roses (p. 78), but what does that mean? Catalysts and keystones start things and complete them, the dukes of Berry and Brittany are not just absent, they are “missing in

action” (p. 140), and Louis de Luxembourg performs a “dizzying, almost schizophrenic jig” (p. 157). All of this is more distracting than illuminating. The works of Michel Foucault, Hayden White and (implicitly) Mikhail Bakhtin play a similar role, invoked to provide color, but not engaged with in a useful way. An interest in signs is laudable, but it can lead the overzealous searcher to miss things, too. When Comynnes is sent back by Charles the Bold to Calais, which has now revealed its obedience to Warwick, he finds that the door of his lodgings has been scrawled with more than a hundred white crosses and with rhymes saying that “the king of France and the earl of Warwick were but one” (“le roy de France et le conte de Warvic estoit tout ung”).^[7] This provides Kleiman with the occasion to reflect how “power is marked by semiotic fecundity” (pp. 87-8), but she misses what is interesting: that somebody in Calais was still loyal to Edward IV, and that Warwick’s days were numbered. “Bien estrange” indeed.

NOTES

[1] Jean Dufournet, *La Destruction des Mythes dans les Mémoires de Philippe de Comynnes* (Geneva: Droz, 1966); Karl Bittman, *Ludwig XI und Karl de Kühne : die Memoiren des Philippe de Comynnes als historische Quelle* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964–70).

[2] Richard Vaughan, *Charles the Bold* (London: Longman, 1973).

[3] Philippe de Comynnes, *Mémoires*, ed. Joël Blanchard (Geneva: Droz, 2007), vol. i, p. 226.

[4] Joël Blanchard, *Comynnes l’Européen : l’invention du politique* (Geneva: Droz, 1996).

[5] Blanchard, *Comynnes l’Européen*, p. 30.

[6] Comynnes, *Mémoires*, vol. i, p. 288.

[7] Comynnes, *Mémoires*, vol. i, p. 197.

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