



Deborah Steinberger

Women's Stories in *Le Mercure Galant* (1672-1710)

Feminine Fictions in an Early French Periodical

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Women's Stories in *Le Mercure Galant* (1672–1710)



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Cover illustration: Anonymous (published by François-Gérard Jollain), *Dame de qualité sur un canapé lisant* Le Mercure Galant, 1688 (*Lady on a Sofa Reading* Le Mercure Galant). Etching, with burin, 28 × 19 cm. BnF (OA-77-PET FOL).

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*

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“Early Modern Fake News: The Case of *Le Mercure Galant*.” *Past and Present*, vol. 257, Issue Supplement 16, Nov. 2022, pp. 143–71 (some material in Chapters 3 and 4).

“*Le Mercure Galant* and its Student Body: Donneau de Visé’s Inclusive Pedagogy.” *Cahiers du Dix-Septième*, vol. 17, 2016, pp. 41–56 (a small section of the Introduction).

“Obstinate Women and Sleeping Beauties in the Kingdom of Miracles: Conversion Stories in the *Mercure Galant*’s Anti-Protestant Propaganda.” *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, vol. 40, no. 58, 2013, pp. 1–15 (this is an early version of Chapter 5).

Material from these essays appears with the kind permission of the editors of these journals.





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Introduction: *Galanterie* and the Art of Listening

Abstract

Donneau de Visé was an imaginative and prolific writer exceptionally attuned to the challenges women faced in their daily lives. He regularly ventured beyond the bounds of gallant entertainment in the *nouvelles* of his monthly periodical, *Le Mercure Galant*, exploiting the ostensibly anodyne genre of “women’s fiction” to publish scenes from private life, not simply to provide a pleasant pastime but also to disseminate modern ideas about women’s agency and gender relations. *Le Mercure Galant* situates itself both as an intermediary and an interlocutor, using the *nouvelle* specifically as a vehicle to amplify women’s voices. The *Mercure’s nouvelles* include depictions of characters who cross traditional gender boundaries in stories that are startlingly relevant for twenty-first-century readers.

Keywords: Donneau de Visé, *Le Mercure Galant*, women, fiction, early modern periodical press, seventeenth-century France

A noblewoman reclines on an ornate bed, her elbow propped on a tasseled pillow. She is dressed casually (“en déshabillé”) but elegantly (Illustration 1). Her attention is focused on a small book she holds in her hands. A male companion sits at her feet, in a relaxed pose; he, too, wears the latest fashions. His hand reaches beyond the small dog nestled beside him, toward the lady’s dainty outstretched foot. A female companion, of lower station than the reclining lady, but also fashionably dressed in pearls and lace, brings refreshments. Like the gentleman, she smiles: Are they amused by a passage the lady is reading aloud? Or are they smiling because she is so engrossed in her book that she is oblivious to their company?

A second engraving from the same period features another beautifully dressed noblewoman, absorbed in the very same book (Illustration 2). She sits alone on a sofa, half-reclining; her extended foot, revealing the bow of



Illustration 1. Nicolas Arnoult (1650–1722), *Femme de qualité lisant le Mercure Galant* (*Lady Reading the Mercure galant Magazine*), n.d. Etching, with burin, 29 x 34.7 cm. 5425LR. Photo: Marc Jeanneteau. © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Marc Jeanneteau/Art Resource, NY.

her stylish slipper, suggests comfort, repose, and insouciance. The caption of each image reveals the title of the volume that has captivated both women: *Le Mercure Galant*.

What do women want to read? Jean Donneau de Visé (1638–1710), the founder and editor in chief of the monthly French periodical *Le Mercure Galant*, was arguably the first journalist to ask this question, and to recognize and capitalize upon the influence of female readers and their social networks.¹ From the first issue in 1672 until his death, Donneau de Visé published

1 Two brief weekly gazettes in verse provided models for the *Mercure Galant*: Jean Loret's *La Muse historique*, dedicated to Mlle de Longueville, 1650–65, and Charles Robinet's *Lettre en vers à Madame*, 1665–70 (the publication continued until 1674, with slight changes in the title to reflect new royal dedicatees). However, they were only a few pages long, and their subject matter was more limited than that of the *Mercure Galant*. In fact, while Robinet promoted Donneau de Visé's early works in his *Lettre en vers*, their collaboration later degenerated into a bitter quarrel, with Donneau de Visé ultimately squelching Robinet's final journalistic initiative because it would have competed with the *Mercure*. See Christophe Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 136–43, and his "Loret's Marketing Revolution." For the text of the *Lettres en vers*, see Rothschild.



Illustration 2. Anonymous (published by François-Gérard Jollain), *Dame de qualité sur un canapé lisant Le Mercure Galant*, 1688 (*Lady on a Sofa Reading Le Mercure Galant*). Etching, with burin, 28 x 19 cm. BnF (OA-77-PET FOL).

488 volumes of *Le Mercure Galant*, a pioneering illustrated periodical that blended news, entertainment, and pro-Louis XIV propaganda, while covering a vast range of topics, from science, medicine, and philosophy to military affairs, court celebrations, the arts, and fashion. Part literary journal, it also included poems, fables, and *nouvelles*, short stories presented as factual accounts, with contemporary settings and characters.²

From its inception, the publication was organized as a letter to a fictional female correspondent, a Parisian lady transplanted to the provinces who shares the *Mercur*e's news and features with her country friends. The editor addresses this intelligent, curious, and apparently well-connected person simply as "Madame." Donneau de Visé's choice of a woman as ideal reader is rooted in seventeenth-century French salon culture, which developed in the circles of cultivated women like Catherine de Rambouillet (1588–1665) and Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701). Salons were the birthplace of *la préciosité*, a mid-century movement marked by social and literary refinement coupled with the belief in women's worth.³ In wide-ranging discussions of the arts, language, literature, and moral questions, salon participants elaborated upon the values of civility (*honnêteté*) and natural expression (*le naturel*, as opposed to learned or pedantic discourse). They espoused the idea that while men's intelligence and wit (*esprit*) stem from their study and imitation of classical authors, women's intelligence is innate, and all their own.⁴ As Donneau de Visé embarked on his career as an author, the notion of women serving as cultural arbiters, while decried by some, was firmly anchored in the court society in which he circulated.

2 I have opted to use the French term *nouvelle* throughout this study instead of the English translation (novella), both to avoid any confusion with other literary forms and traditions and to preserve the connection to the French word for "news" ("nouvelles"), an association central to Donneau de Visé's literary and journalistic production. The *nouvelles* are usually designated in each issue's table of contents by the names "histoire" or "aventure," which are used interchangeably (Vincent, *Donneau de Visé* 314).

3 On the topic of salons and *préciosité*, see Timmermans, Dufour-Maitre, DeJean's *Tender Geographies*, Stanton, Beasley's *Salons*, and Duggan.

4 Donneau de Visé expresses this concept in his 1678 dedication of the *Mercur*e's supplement, *L'Extraordinaire du Mercure Galant* [EMG], to women ("Aux Dames"): "L'esprit des hommes d'ordinaire / Est un pur ouvrage de l'art. / Si les Grecs, les Latins, en réclamaient leur part, / Il ne nous en resterait guère. / ... / [Mais] nous avons tous lieu de paraître jaloux / De ce que la Nature a soin de vous apprendre. / Grecs ni Latins n'y peuvent rien prétendre, / Et tout votre esprit est à vous" ("Men's intelligence ordinarily / Is purely a work of art. / If the Greeks and Latins were to claim their share, / Nothing would be left for us. / ... / [But] we all have reason to appear jealous / Of what Nature takes care to teach you. / Greeks and Latins have no claim to it: / Your intelligence is yours alone"; EMG 1678, vol. 1, iii). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own. I have modernized the spelling and punctuation of quotations from the *Mercur*e Galant and other seventeenth-century primary sources.

Donneau de Visé's preoccupation with questions of readership went beyond court culture to the wider literary marketplace. In an early issue of *Le Mercure Galant*, he casts women both as literary tastemakers and as influential customers: reporting on a conversation he claims to have overheard, he portrays a woman reader of the *Mercure* who asserts, "Since it is women who ensure a work's success, those who fail to find the secret of pleasing them will never succeed."⁵ This "secret," as I argue in this book, involved performing the act of listening to women. The *Mercure* situates itself both as an intermediary and an interlocutor, using the *nouvelle* specifically as a vehicle to amplify women's voices and to promote empathy for the challenges they faced. Through these short tales, readers learn of incidents and situations that women often bore silently in real life: domestic violence, romantic betrayal, dishonor, or simply loneliness. Women readers can envision themselves being vindicated in a courtroom coup de théâtre, resuscitating a moribund infant already in her coffin, confronting an abusive husband, and even taking up arms to avenge an affront or to serve their king. By publishing the *nouvelles* alongside its chronicle of current events, the *Mercure* lends credence and prestige to depictions of the private life of anonymous individuals in an early example of the journalistic genre we refer to today as the human-interest story. The two fashion engravings depicting rapt female readers of the *Mercure* provide evidence of the periodical's reputation as a stylish, enjoyable, and absorbing pastime, whether solitary or social; they also document its special allure for women, and confirm this book's thesis—that *Le Mercure Galant* represented a potent force in encouraging its women readers to reimagine their lives.⁶

Many critics who have studied the *Mercure* have noted its "feminine side." Joan DeJean, for example, speaks of the periodical's "pro-female bias" (*Ancients* 66), while Monique Vincent goes so far as to label the *Mercure* a "revue féminine" ("a women's magazine").⁷ More cautious in this respect, Alain Niderst classifies the *Mercure* as "une gazette féminine et officielle à

5 "[C]omme ce sont elles [les femmes] qui font réussir les ouvrages, ceux qui ne trouveront point le secret de leur plaire, ne réussiront jamais" (*Mercure Galant* [MG] 1673, vol. 4, 265–66). This remark repeats a statement about the influence of women readers voiced in Donneau de Visé's *Les Nouvelles nouvelles* (1663): "Si l'on n'a leur approbation ... on ne réussira jamais" ("Without their approval ... one will never succeed"; *Les Nouvelles nouvelles*, vol. 3, 165).

6 These two illustrations were sold as *feuilles volantes* (single sheets for collection or display) and did not appear in the periodical. Donneau de Visé may have commissioned them to promote *Le Mercure*, but this is pure hypothesis on my part. For more on fashion plates of this period, see Cugy. For fashion reporting in the *Mercure*, see Benhamou and Carson.

7 The full title of her 2005 monograph is *Le Mercure Galant: Présentation de la première revue féminine d'information et de culture*.

la fois” (“both feminine and official”; 27). Instead of addressing the degree to which the periodical “belongs” to women, this book demonstrates that on every level, both as readers and as subject matter, women “belong” in the *Mercure Galant*, and that the *Mercure*’s inclusive quality explains much of its appeal for women readers. As the preface to the inaugural issue states, the *Mercure*, with its diversified content, contains something for everyone (“Ce livre doit avoir de quoi plaire à tout le monde, à cause de la diversité des matières dont il est rempli”; *MG* 1672, vol. 1, “Le libraire au lecteur,” n.p.). Conscious of his readers’ tastes, Donneau de Visé curates “custom content,” but he also constantly provides his public with the opportunity to learn about “a thousand curious things” (“mille choses curieuses”) on topics they might not have expected to pique their interest (*Nouveau Mercure Galant* [*NMG*], Dec. 1677, vol. 10, “Au lecteur,” n.p.).⁸

Influence and Impact

The *Mercure*’s wide-ranging subject matter, provided in convenient, pocket-size duodecimos that averaged about 350 pages, sets it apart from other contemporary periodicals. Unlike the period’s more specialized publications—for example, *La Gazette* for politics and military affairs and *Le Journal des savants*, dedicated for the most part to science, medicine, and history⁹—the *Mercure* promised material to suit every taste. In its groundbreaking negotiation of the porous boundary between information and entertainment, *Le Mercure Galant*, an early modern “social influencer,” helped shape the institution of journalism as we know it today.¹⁰ Donneau

8 During the *Mercure*’s initial “trial period” of 1672 to 1677, Donneau de Visé experimented with different formats, genres, and publication frequencies (the *Mercure* started as a quarterly publication). He used the title *Nouveau Mercure Galant* only in 1677, after a three-year publication hiatus; the title, format, and monthly publication rhythm were standardized in 1678. For more on *Le Mercure Galant*’s different phases, see Vincent, *Donneau de Visé* 121, and Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 334–55.

9 From 1672 to 1710, the *Journal des savants* had four different editors, whose interests determined the orientation of the periodical during any given period. Literature was not always excluded: in February 1708, when the abbé Jean-Paul Bignon directed the *Journal des savants*, the *Mercure*’s Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle was also a member of its editorial team, and the *Journal* published excerpts from an anonymous work of fiction, *Mémoires de la comtesse de Tournemire*, a *nouvelle* that was over a year later featured in an issue of the *Mercure* (Nov. 1709, 125–48). For more on the *Journal des savants*, see Jean-Pierre Vittu’s entry in the *Dictionnaire des journaux* and his article “Qu’est-ce qu’un article au *Journal des savants*?”

10 Christophe Schuwey argues that the *Mercure* is really a book, not a newspaper or journal: it presents itself as such (the preface to the first issue, for example, declares, “This book will have

de Visé promoted reader engagement in unprecedented ways: some of the *Mercure's* interactive innovations, such as the publication of letters to the editor and puzzle contests, are today standard fare in modern newspapers and magazines. The *Mercure* combined the sensational news of tabloid journalism—*faits divers* like violent crimes, monstrous or multiple births, and seemingly supernatural events—with the curated miscellany of *Reader's Digest* and the celebrity watching of *People* magazine.

The *Mercure's* contributors included eminent figures, such as the writers Madeleine de Scudéry and Charles Perrault, and the Duke of Saint-Aignan, first gentleman of the king's chamber. The renowned dramatist Thomas Corneille (1625–1709), younger brother of Pierre, joined Donneau de Visé at the helm of the *Mercure* starting in 1682, adding to the periodical's prestige. Corneille's nephew, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757), another long-term member of the editorial team, began contributing to the *Mercure* as a young man.¹¹ The editor's solicitation of contributions from readers as well as from well-known authors had the double advantage of filling out each issue and helping to build a loyal readership (Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 335). Although precise circulation numbers are not available, ample evidence attests to the periodical's status as an influential publishing phenomenon. The fact that the *Mercure* was published not only in Paris but also in Lyon (from 1677 to 1695) attests to its widespread popularity.¹² It circulated not only throughout France but also beyond its borders; as a result, original issues are held today by research libraries in Europe and North America. The counterfeit editions printed in France and abroad are further testament to the demand for the periodical. To reach a wider audience, the publisher offered the *Mercure* at different price points according to the binding chosen: twenty sols for a leather-bound edition, fifteen for parchment.¹³ In 1678

something to please everyone"), and it closely resembles the prose and verse anthologies that were so popular in France at this time (see *Un entrepreneur* 323–30).

11 Among the works attributed to Fontenelle is the four-part epistolary exchange that begins with "Histoire de mon cœur" ("Story of My Heart"; *MG*, Jan. 1681) and "Histoire de mes conquêtes" ("Story of My Conquests"; *MG*, Feb. 1681). A sharp increase in the number of articles dedicated to science and medicine starting in 1690 may be due to Fontenelle's influence: in 1697 he was appointed Secretary of the Académie Royale des Sciences.

12 There was also a short-lived project to publish the *Mercure* in Bordeaux (Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 352).

13 During a limited time, the periodical was also available unbound, at a reduced price. The price of the parchment edition was comparable to the price of the least expensive theater ticket available at the time, admission to the *parterre* (Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 345). The *Mercure* was thus a purchase only the reasonably well-off could afford, although those with only modest disposable incomes could and did form reading circles, thereby accessing the publication for free

Donneau de Visé claimed to have received five to six hundred letters a month from readers who sought to contribute to the journal or to comment on its content (*EMG*, Jan. 1678, "Preface," n.p.). From 1678 to 1685, in order to accommodate the abundant submissions from enthusiastic readers eager to see themselves in print, Donneau de Visé published a quarterly supplement, the *Extraordinaire du Mercure galant*.¹⁴

Did Donneau de Visé succeed in his effort to cultivate a large female audience? In the absence of subscription data, it is difficult to be sure. Mme de Sévigné and her daughter appear to have been regular readers of the *Mercure*: Sévigné's letters reveal that the periodical had the power both to delight and infuriate her, depending on what it said (or failed to say) about her acquaintances.¹⁵ We know furthermore that a considerable number of women submitted their answers to the riddles (*énigmes*) printed monthly. In the table of contents of the November 1677 issue of *Le Nouveau Mercure Galant*, for example, the editor specifically acknowledges "the lovely ladies of Paris, Lyon, Noyon, and Poitou" for their witty responses, and at the height of this trend, the *Mercure* published the names or pseudonyms of dozens of riddle-solvers in each issue, many of whom identified themselves as women.¹⁶ Geoffrey Turnovsky documents the identity of one woman reader of the *Mercure* whose case is illustrative: she wrote in 1678 to praise the publication, and particularly to thank the editor for printing so many works by and for women (Turnovsky 73).

This highly successful and influential periodical was not without its detractors. Critics from Donneau de Visé's time forward have objected to the *Mercure*'s content. During Donneau de Visé's lifetime, many of the attacks came from bitter rival authors. Jean de La Bruyère, for example,

or at a reduced cost (DeJean, *Ancients* 60, 166n34). As Schuwey points out, with the publication of its pricing structure—a new practice for the time—the *Mercure* presents itself as consumer product (*Un entrepreneur* 345).

14 For more on the *Extraordinaire*, including detailed information about its contents, see Harvey, "Commerces et auctorialités."

15 Sévigné declared in a 1680 letter to her daughter, "J'aime trop le Mercure galant, je veux dire à la princesse ce qu'il dit de sa nièce" ("I just love the Mercure galant, I want to tell the princess what it said about her niece"; Sévigné, vol. 2, 1051, letter to Mme de Grignan, 18 Aug. 1680). Ten years later she wrote, "Je suis en furie contre le Mercure galant" ("I am furious with the Mercure galant"), to the point that she playfully threatened to throw it out ("je jette le livre") for its omission of a friend's name from a battle account (Sévigné, vol. 3, 930, letter to M. du Plessis, 20 Aug. 1690).

16 In 1677 only, Donneau de Visé published the journal under the title *Le Nouveau Mercure Galant*. For more on the *énigmes*, see Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 349–52 and 437–42; Harvey, "Les fins de l'obscurité"; and Veret-Basty, "Être quelque chose comme un auteur."

claimed in *Les Caractères* (1688) that the *Mercur*e was of the lowest possible quality, “immédiatement au-dessous de rien” (“immediately below nothing”; La Bruyère 83). Edme Boursault’s play *La Comédie sans titre*, satirizing the *Mercur*e Galant phenomenon, depicts foolish people clamoring to pay to see their names printed in the periodical’s pages.¹⁷ The *Mercur*e’s relationship with its women readers drew especially virulent remarks: in mordant verses published in contemporary poetry collections, an anonymous critic objected to the *Mercur*e’s catering to women’s tastes, and even associated the monthly publication with menstruation, to disparage it and to mock its editors.¹⁸ Resentful of the *Mercur*e’s commercial success, rival journalists François Gacon and Eustache Le Noble derided the periodical’s “insipid” content and its lack of entertainment or educational value; Gacon called the *Mercur*e a “fade recueil” (“dull volume”) and dismissed its fiction pieces as outmoded “historiettes” (Hatin 389), while Le Noble asserted that one learned nothing from reading *Le Mercur*e.¹⁹ The same pair questioned the periodical’s reliability as a news source: Gacon labeled it a “mercenary flatterer” (Hatin 389), while Le Noble accused Donneau de Visé of misleading readers with inaccuracies, for instance by suppressing casualty numbers at the battle of Fleurus in 1690 (Vincent, *Donneau de Visé*, vol. 1, 282).²⁰ Similarly, Pierre Bayle bristled at the *Mercur*e’s propaganda, taking issue in 1704 with Donneau de Visé’s overoptimistic appraisals of France’s military affairs (Bayle, vol. 1,

17 In his preface to the play, which was titled *Le Mercur*e Galant until Donneau de Visé purportedly demanded its name be changed, Boursault confirms the *Mercur*e’s commercial success, calling it “un livre que son débit justifie assez” (“a book justified by its sales”; *La comédie sans titre*, n.p.).

18 “Le sot livre qu’on voit dans les mains des bourgeois, / Revenant à toutes les lunes! / Serait-ce pas l’égout du Parnasse français? / Non, mais c’est que, selon les lois / Au sexe féminin communes, / La Muse française a ses mois” (“That stupid book that one sees in bourgeois hands / Returning every month! / Might it not be the sewer of French Parnassus? / No, it’s just that, according to the laws / Common to the female sex / The French Muse has her monthlies”; cited in Hatin 388). Christophe Schuwey has identified a similar piece in two other poetry anthologies from the period (Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur*, 428n).

19 Gacon writes, “Le conte vient ensuite, où d’un ton doucereux / De Visé fait parler des amants langoureux. / Si l’on était encore aux siècles des fleurettes, / Il pourrait divertir par ses historiettes; / Mais par malheur pour lui le temps en est passé” (“Next comes the story, where, in dulcet tones / De Visé makes languishing lovers speak. / If we were still living in the age of sweet nothings, / He might entertain with these little stories. / But unfortunately for him, that time is past”; cited in Hatin 389). A sonnet by Le Noble ends in a brief dialogue where the speaker asks the nymph Echo what one can learn from *Le Mercur*e. Her response is “nothing”: “Echo, divine Echo, par ces galants ouvrages, / Dis-moi, que nous apprend ce rare historien?” “RIEN,” answers Echo (Le Noble 14). For more on Gacon’s objections to Donneau de Visé’s monopoly of the periodical press, see Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 374–75.

20 On the *Mercur*e’s war reporting, see Hogg 97–130.

151–52; cited in Klaitis 69). In our time, too, some critics have emphasized the periodical's servile relationship to the interests of the monarchy. While Joseph Klaitis claims that the *Mercure* served as “cultural cement,” prescribing “uniform standards of thought and behavior” (67), François Moureau refers to its “sometimes unbearable political conformism” (“un conformisme parfois insupportable en politique”; 8). More recently, Jennifer Perlmutter has written that in its day, the *Mercure* “serve[d] traditional, outmoded ideals” (“Journalistic Intimacy” 231).

Donneau de Visé was indeed an industrious and well-paid propagandist devoted to the interests of his royal patron: the *Mercure* was initially dedicated to Louis XIV, and from 1678 onward to his son, the Dauphin. The king rewarded Donneau de Visé, a key player in what Chloé Hogg terms “the Sun King’s political-literary machine” (95), with a generous pension and lodged him in the Louvre. However, I argue here that despite his political allegiance to the monarchical-patriarchal order, there is another side to Donneau de Visé, particularly evident in the *nouvelles* of the *Mercure Galant*: that of a critic advocating change. Alongside the texts glorifying the king’s policies and military campaigns, the *nouvelles* create a space for cultural criticism. In so doing, they illustrate Christian Biet’s characterization of *fin-de-règne* literature as a laboratory for ideas that employed fiction to model new possible behaviors, in an age when the prevailing social and political norms were being called into question.²¹ As Joan DeJean and Anne E. Duggan have emphasized, Donneau de Visé, like Charles Perrault, was aligned with the Moderns during France’s Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns. This politically charged academic debate over the relative value and pertinence of ancient and modern literary models pitted classical genres, like “pagan” tragedy, defended by authors like Nicolas Boileau, Jean de la Bruyère, and Jean Racine, against more recently developed forms, like the novel and the literary fairy tale. Because women writers were especially active in these contemporary genres, the modern camp was seen as more favorable to women authors and readers.²² Based upon Donneau de Visé’s position in the late seventeenth-century reprise of the related *Querelle des femmes*, or the Woman Question—particularly in his play *Les Dames vengées*

21 “C’est un moment de crise des valeurs”; “dans le monde social, c’est le moment du doute sur la nature des normes” (Biet 8, 291). Similarly, Guy Spielmann highlights the “social and political dissidence” (“courants de dissidence sociale et politique”) underlying *fin-de-règne* comedy (“Viduité et pouvoir” 343).

22 See DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns* (especially ch. 2, 31–77), and Duggan 97–142. For a recent examination of the relationship between the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns and the *querelle des femmes*, see Taylor.



(1695), where he responds to Boileau's Satire X on women (1694)—Duggan designates Donneau de Visé an “ally” to women (*Salonnières* 256n23), in that he publicized their literary and intellectual accomplishments and “refus[ed] the essentialist dichotomy ... between male reason and female folly” (*Salonnières* 117). She distinguishes him in this respect from Perrault, whose views on women's role in the sociocultural public sphere were more traditional (*Salonnières* 142).

In fact, as I demonstrate in Chapter 1 of this book, throughout his literary career, Donneau de Visé took what we might call proto-feminist positions. His early theater included unusually realistic comedies that express curiosity and concern about topics like childbirth and widowhood. Later, as editor of *Le Mercure Galant*, he continued to portray women's life experiences, defended women's dignity, and energetically endorsed their accomplishments. For example, right after an article about a male child prodigy, there follows an account of the exploits of a “jeune fille philosophe” (“girl philosopher”) from Lyon, proficient in Latin, who amazed the university professors who examined her on erudite topics (*MG*, Sept. 1684, 161–64). This extraordinary person, excluded from participating in a public thesis defense because of her sex, is in effect given a voice in the *Mercure*. In another example, the *Mercure* praises and publicizes the work of Mademoiselle de Remirand, a skilled bonesetter (*MG*, Sept. 1685, 326–27). In nearly every issue, the periodical enthusiastically promotes the work of women writers, some of whom are famous (Madeleine de Scudéry, Antoinette Des Houlières, Catherine Bernard, and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, for example) and some who are completely anonymous: “a lady who writes so well” (“une dame qui écrit si juste”; Nov. 1680, 80), or “a witty person, whose style will please you” (“une personne d'esprit, dont le style vous plaira”; Mar. 1683, 99).

What's in a Name

With the choice of the adjective “galant,” denoting the behavior of a refined man seeking to please and charm women,²³ Donneau de Visé sets the *Mercure* apart from other contemporary periodicals: he associates his enterprise with the ideal of polite sociability, a form of interaction based

23 In his *Dictionnaire universel*, Furetière applies this adjective to “a man imbued with the air of the court, who seeks to please, and particularly to please the fair sex” (“un homme qui a l'air de la cour, les manières agréables, qui tâche à plaire, et particulièrement au beau sexe”). For two fundamental works on *galanterie*, see Denis and Viala.

on conversation and exchange, and he signals that he embraces a female readership.²⁴ Scholars who have written about the concept of *galanterie* emphasize its encouragement of cultural collaboration between men and women. For Claude Habib, the term evokes “un milieu mixte où se poursuivait, dans une collaboration joyeuse, le travail renouvelé de l’expression” (“a mixed environment where new work on expression took place in joyful collaboration”; *Galanterie française* 120). Juliette Cherbuliez calls *galanterie* “a system of mutual dependence wherein men and women relate to each other for the common goal of mutual pleasure and the avoidance of harm” (151). For Jennifer Tamas, *galanterie* seeks to promote enjoyable conversation between the sexes (“elle vise une conversation agréable entre les sexes”; 60). As depicted by its greatest theoretician, the influential writer (and occasional *Mercure galant* contributor) Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701), the ideal of gallant conversation involves true exchange, where one adapts one’s discourse to the tastes and interests of one’s interlocutors and listens to them attentively.²⁵ Attentiveness to one’s interlocutor breeds empathy: Habib states that *galanterie* in literature consists of “a strong empathic movement” in which authors imagine themselves in a woman’s place.²⁶

Donneau de Visé’s adoption of an epistolary format for his periodical and his solicitation and publication of reader contributions enhance the illusion of real-time exchange, creating a forum that Christophe Schuwey terms a “paper salon” (“un salon de papier”; *Un Entrepreneur* 420) and that Allison Stedman describes both as “a textually mediated social sphere” and as “a liberal and inclusive socioliterary enterprise in which people

24 Alain Viala refers to the title as a “marketing coup” (“La grande trouvaille publicitaire de Donneau, c’était le titre”; 277).

25 See Scudéry, “De la conversation” and “De parler trop, ou trop peu”: “[La conversation] ... doit être libre et diversifiée, selon les temps, les lieux, et les personnes avec qui on est” (“Conversation should be free and varied, according to the time, place, and the people one is with”; 38–39); “il y a sans doute de l’incivilité à n’écouter point du tout ce qui se dit où l’on est” (“it is certainly uncivil when one is in company not to listen at all to everything that is said”; 248). Scudéry’s contemporary, the moralist François de la Rochefoucauld, held similar views: “Il faut écouter ceux qui parlent, si on en veut être écouté ... on doit ... entrer dans leur esprit et dans leur goût, montrer qu’on les entend, leur parler de ce qui les touche, louer ce qu’ils disent autant qu’il mérite d’être loué, et faire voir que c’est plutôt par choix qu’on le loue que par complaisance” (“One must listen to those who speak, if one wants to be listened to ... one should ... enter their mind and understand their tastes, show that one hears them, speak to them of things that matter to them, praise what they say to the extent that it merits praise, and make it clear that this praise is sincere and not mere kindness”; La Rochefoucauld, *Réflexion* 4, “De la conversation,” 509).

26 “La galanterie a généré en littérature un fort mouvement empathique consistant à se mettre à la place des femmes” (Habib, “Entretien”).

who have never met one another can share news, stories, and information regardless of their rank, age, religion, nationality, or gender” (97). Donneau de Visé markets *Le Mercure Galant* as a periodical that is as, if not more, accessible, welcoming, and appealing to women as it is to men—a place where women are addressed and depicted as capable equals and competent interlocutors. The *Mercure* does not talk down to women, nor does it segregate them: it makes them feel that their preferences and opinions are valued and heard.

New Stories, Inclusive Storytelling

Inspired by sources as diverse as the sensational *histoire tragique*, the canard or broadside, and the literary fairy tale, the *Mercure’s nouvelles* (literally, “news”) are hybrid texts that occupy the space between fact and fiction, between instruction and entertainment. With rare exceptions, one to three *nouvelles* appeared in each issue, for a total of 373 during the years of Donneau de Visé’s editorship. While in the *Mercure’s* early years these stories were separated from the rest of the content by titles and flourishes, beginning in 1677 they were integrated typographically into the main text, interspersed with nonfiction content.

Many of the stories, especially from 1681 onward, begin with a maxim in lieu of a title, for example “Les amants qui ont le plus de traverses ne sont pas toujours les plus malheureux” (“Those lovers who face the most obstacles are not always the most unfortunate”; May 1680), or “L’amour sincère est souvent récompensé” (“Sincere love is often rewarded”; Jan. 1689). Notably, these introductory maxims are almost always gender-neutral: they seem to reflect a studied effort on the editor’s part to avoid characterizing the sexes in any particular way. Use of the neutral pronoun “on” is frequent: “On ne perd souvent rien pour attendre” (“Often, one loses nothing by waiting”; June 1680), or “De quoi n’est-on point capable quand on aime véritablement?” (“What can one fail to accomplish when one loves truly?”; Jan. 1697). This principle took shape early in the publication’s history, when the *Mercure* published its very first *nouvelle* featuring a moralizing title, “Les femmes sont souvent cause de la perte des hommes” (“Women are often the cause of men’s downfall”; 1674, vol. 6, 207–48). The narrator is an old woman who tells the story of Clitandre, a man suffering from venereal disease.²⁷ The sick

27 Although this narrator is referred to as “la vieille” (“the old woman”) at the beginning and the end of the story (*MG* 1674, vol. 6, 216 and 246), in its opening pages it is implied that she is

man makes a deal with a mysterious stranger: he exchanges a cure for his malady for a promise, on pain of death, never again to lie with a woman. But Clitandre eventually falls in love and breaks his promise; shortly thereafter, the man who had cured him, who turns out to be the Devil, reappears and tells him he must choose to die by the sword or by poison. Clitandre takes the poison, goes mad, and jumps from an attic window into a well. His body is never found. The water in the well becomes subsequently so clear and fresh that the site attracts visitors from miles around. The narrator reveals at the end of her tale that this is not actually a *nouvelle* but rather a centuries-old story. As such, the editor points out, it is an anomaly and really had no place among the new stories (“histoires nouvelles”) he had promised to “Madame”:

[Cette aventure] ne devait pas avoir ici de place, puisque je ne vous dois envoyer que des histoires nouvelles; mais puisqu'elle est écrite, vous souffrirez, s'il vous plaît, Madame, qu'elle tienne son rang parmi les autres.

[This adventure] ought not to appear here, since I am supposed to send you only new stories; but since it is [already] written, please allow it to take its place among the others. (*MG* 1674, vol. 6, 247–48)

The storyteller, who defends the truth value of orally transmitted folk stories like this one, represents unenlightened tradition:

Il y a plus de deux cents ans, continua-t-elle, que cette aventure est arrivée, et qu'on la sait par tradition; et comme les choses qu'on sait de la sorte sont toujours très véritables, on ne doit point douter de cette histoire, qui doit faire connaître à tout le monde, que les femmes sont souvent cause de la perte des hommes.

These events occurred over two hundred years ago, she continued, and the tale has been passed down from generation to generation; and since the things one learns in this manner are always very true, this story, which ought to demonstrate to all that women are often the cause of men's downfall, must not be doubted. (246–47)

only twenty-five or so, since she is a member of a group of four women whose combined age is one hundred (207). The use of the epithet “la vieille” thus may be ironic, but it may also refer to her preference for legends and superstition over modern “true stories” like those the *Mercure* normally features.



Her modern, enlightened listeners, however, who represent the *Mercur*e's readership, are skeptical. With ironic smiles, they dismiss her unbelievable tale, along with its misogynistic message:

Toute la compagnie n'approuvait à cette histoire qu'en souriant; il y eut même quelques malicieux qui plainirent la catastrophe du malheureux Clitandre, mais ce fut d'une manière qui fit connaître qu'ils n'ajoutaient guère de foi à son aventure.

The story was received with knowing smiles; there were even some who playfully lamented poor Clitandre's downfall, but in a way that made it clear that they did not for a minute believe his adventure. (247)

By presenting the story as an object of skepticism and even ridicule, the framing text thus discredits the tale and the anti-woman tradition it represents. This account of the tale's reception signals a break with tradition. The *Mercur*e Galant will never blame women in general for men's ills, nor will the shortcomings of some men be imputed to men as a group: the *nouvelles* are about individuals. This principle is in keeping with the core values of the Modern movement, which according to Joan DeJean included "a defense of the right to individuality" (*Ancients* 131). Donneau de Visé suggests that his *Mercur*e is part of a movement of renewal as he rejects essentialist maxims and sweeping generalizations in favor of inclusive storytelling. In a similar gesture, he publishes an article in the *Extraordinaire* of July 1679 that asks whether women's love is stronger than men's ("Si les femmes aiment plus fortement que les hommes"), but in this text, after a brief, perfunctory discussion of the beliefs of the Ancients and the theory of the humors, the author dismisses the question as fruitless, leading to "travaux inutiles" ("useless research"; 294–97)—a decidedly pro-Modern conclusion, and one that highlights the folly of trying to characterize women as a group fundamentally different from men.

The *Mercur*e's contributions to European journalism, and particularly its engagement with women readers, predate and prefigure the work of writers like Addison and Steele in England. However, the *Mercur*e's representation of women contrasts sharply with that of early English popular periodicals that, as Kathryn Shevelov has argued, serve an ideology that constructs women as "other" and offers "an increasingly narrow and restrictive model of femininity," that of the domestic woman (1–2, 5). According to Shawn Lisa Maurer, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* subscribed to "an ideology of separate spheres" and to "the doctrine of gender difference," with the *Spectator* regarding the crossing of gender boundaries as "especially odious" (119–20). The *Mercur*e, on the other

hand, challenged such rigid views with its stories of dynamic cross-dressed heroines who vie with men, and of women who strive to take control of their own lives, in some cases refusing marriage. Outside the field of French studies, however, the *Mercure's* innovations have been largely overlooked. Shevelov describes the appearance of English “instructive-and-entertaining periodicals” in the 1690s as a pioneering development (25), but the *Mercure* had already been combining instruction and entertainment in its pages for decades. Furthermore, in his 2014 book on early modern European journalism, Andrew Pettegree devotes only a paragraph to the *Mercure*, despite the fact that it dominated the French periodical press for decades and was widely read and disseminated beyond France's borders.²⁸ *Mercure* studies are a much-needed complement to the large body of scholarship on eighteenth-century English journalism, and this book will, I hope, contribute to fruitful dialogue between researchers of different national journalistic traditions.

My study draws inspiration from the trailblazing work of Monique Vincent and Joan DeJean. Vincent was the first to classify the *Mercure's* ample and diverse contents by publishing an invaluable subject index of the periodical, as well as summaries of the 373 *nouvelles* that were printed during Donneau de Visé's tenure as editor in chief (*Donneau de Visé*, vol. 1, 387–667); she was also the first to study the question of the *Mercure's* female readership.²⁹ Joan DeJean, in *Ancients against Moderns* (1997), also examines the *Mercure* through a gender studies lens: using Donneau de Visé's 1678–79 reader-centered publicity campaign for Mme de Lafayette's novel *La Princesse de Clèves* as an example, she highlights his invitation to non-specialists and women to debate literary topics. Allison Stedman reserves a prominent place for *Le Mercure Galant* in her 2013 book on rococo fiction in France; her emphasis on the *Mercure's* embrace of hybrid forms and its inclusive approach to reader engagement has marked my work. I refer throughout this book to a number of other enlightening recent contributions to the field of *Mercure* studies: Chloé Hogg's and Jennifer Perlmutter's explorations of the role of propaganda in the periodical, in the form of war-related narratives and moralistic fiction, respectively; Geoffrey Turnovsky's study of the readers of the *Mercure* and their letters to the editor; and the work of Sara Harvey, Elsa Veret-Basty, and Jennifer Tsien on the *énigmes*, or riddles, that for many years were a regular feature of the *Mercure*. Most recently, Christophe

28 Pettegree's book is entitled *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself*. The *Mercure's* first volume (1672) was translated into English (Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur* 340).

29 Vincent, “*Le Mercure galant* et son public féminin,” and “*Le Mercure galant*, témoin des pouvoirs de la femme du monde.”

Schuwey's authoritative study, *Un entrepreneur des lettres au XVIIe siècle* (2020), presents the *Mercure* as a "radically novel media venture" (444) and as an important chapter in Donneau de Visé's career as an innovative producer and marketer of literature. While Schuwey focuses on the *Mercure's* development up to 1678, my study highlights the 1680s and 90s, two decades during which Donneau de Visé refined and developed his journalistic project, and particularly his use of the *nouvelle*, not as "cultural cement" (Klaits 67) but as thought-provoking commentary on gender relations.³⁰

As I wrote this book, I faced two related challenges. First, the extensive corpus: the *Mercure* published hundreds of *nouvelles* between its founding in 1672 and Donneau de Visé's death in 1710.³¹ The present study rests upon my conviction that these diverse narratives tell a cohesive story: for Donneau de Visé, the author and editor, listening to and writing about women was a choice that was simultaneously commercial, artistic, and ethical. My approach, necessarily selective, is based on close readings of representative *nouvelles*. I have no doubt that the rich primary material of the *Mercure's* fiction, viewed from other angles, will continue to yield diverse and compelling interpretations for many years to come. The second challenge stems from the problem of authorship in a collaborative work like the *Mercure*. Although Donneau de Visé refers to himself as the author ("l'auteur") of the *Mercure Galant*, and he was an astonishingly prolific writer, he clearly did not compose all the material that was published in the periodical: he is its "auteur" in the sense that he is its creator or director. The fact that there were numerous, often anonymous contributors to the periodical complicates the process of identifying motives and ascribing unitary viewpoints in the *nouvelles*. Nonetheless, as editor in chief, Donneau de Visé oversaw the periodical and acted as gatekeeper: his vision determined the *Mercure's* direction.

Chapter Overview

Donneau de Visé's commitment to listening to women and publishing their stories is a unifying thread that runs throughout his long career and

30 For Schuwey, see his *Un entrepreneur*, part 4, 321–447.

31 After Donneau de Visé's death, the king entrusted the *Mercure* to Charles Larivière Dufresny (1657–1724); see Moureau. Noteworthy among Donneau de Visé's imitators is Anne-Marguerite Petit, Mme Dunoyer (1663–1719), whose journalistic production included a short-lived *Nouveau Mercure Galant*, published in Holland (1710), as well as her *Lettres historiques et galantes* (1704–17) and *La Quintessence des nouvelles* (1710–19). On Mme Dunoyer's career, see Brétéché, Goldwyn, and Van Dijk.



spans multiple genres, beginning with his early comedies and prose fiction collections and continuing in his later theater, as well as in *Le Mercure Galant*. Chapter 1 traces Donneau de Visé's incorporation of female perspectives and experiences from his pre-*Mercure Galant* days onward in a selection of woman-centered texts, from his *La Cocue imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Female Cuckold*, 1660), a re-gendered version of a comedy by Molière, to the "Événement qui peut tenir lieu d'histoire" ("Event That May Serve as a Story") published in the *Mercure Galant* in 1699. This epistolary account of a medical case history involving a mother and her daughter is both a maternal survival story and a fable of female agency.

The following chapters (2, 3, 4, and 5) are organized thematically and concentrate on *nouvelles* from the *Mercure Galant*. Chapter 2 focuses on a group of stories published in the *Mercure* in the 1680s that deal with the theme of female friendship and that anticipate the treatment of this theme in the fairy tale vogue that would dominate the literary landscape of the decade that followed. I demonstrate that like many of these tales, the *Mercure's nouvelles* employ folklore-based structures and characters to allude to contemporary social practices and to challenge normative discourse, confronting a system weighted in favor of men as judges of women's worth. My approach highlights the dissonances generated in the *nouvelles* as they maintain a judicious but tenuous balance between conformism and subversion: I show how the stories celebrate female social networks even as they operate within the confines of a patriarchal society.

The next two chapters portray women who take up arms, either to escape difficult family situations by serving as soldiers (Chapter 3) or to take revenge on the men who have mistreated them (Chapter 4). The women soldiers' stories complement the *Mercure's* extensive coverage of male martial valor (battle accounts, lists of war dead and wounded). These courageous cross-dressed female figures, recuperated from folklore, fiction, and the civil war known as the Fronde, form part of Donneau de Visé's editorial strategy of inviting women readers to engage with current affairs, as the stories intertwine narratives of female heroism with glorification of the monarch. Chapter 4 focuses on "true crime" narratives in the *Mercure*, where women resort to violence either to avenge their honor or to respond to domestic abuse. I characterize these *nouvelles* as exploratory fictions that point to gaps in the existing legal framework, and I demonstrate how they enlist the court of public opinion as they advocate women's dignity and personhood.

While the first four chapters present for the most part narratives of women's empowerment, the final chapter is the exception to this rule: it



explores the limits of Donneau de Visé's project of listening to women as it examines stories of Protestant women faced with the prospect of conversion to Catholicism during the period surrounding Louis XIV's 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In an awkward pairing of salon literature (*nouvelle galante*, madrigal, fairy tale) and propaganda, the *Mercur*e presents conversion in terms of amorous conquest: Louis XIV plays the role of Prince Charming, awakening the "Sleeping Beauty," the benighted Protestant woman. Against the historical backdrop of religious repression, these conversion-themed narratives dramatize the clash between the misogynistic tendencies of the Counter-Reformation and the pro-woman, gallant orientation of the *Mercur*e; they represent a failed attempt to unite the gallant ideal with a campaign based on intolerance.

Although the primary focus of this book is the *nouvelle*, I also emphasize the connections between the *nouvelles* and the other types of texts found in the periodical. For example, Chapter 3 presents the *Mercur*e's stories about cross-dressed women soldiers and its battle accounts as complementary forms of political propaganda. Chapter 5 highlights a *nouvelle* about a Protestant couple's courtship and the woman's ultimate decision to follow her fiancé's lead in converting to Catholicism; I situate this story in the political context of the periodical's nonfiction pieces and poems extolling Louis XIV's repression of the Huguenots.

The present study represents a corrective: the *nouvelles* are not, as Donneau de Visé's critics once claimed, "fades" or "doucereux," insipid or cloying stories of languishing lovers. Despite the somewhat suggestive poses of the women pictured reading the *Mercur*e in the fashion engravings previously described (Illustrations 1 and 2), the *nouvelles* are not racy, or even particularly sentimental. Instead, these stories are often humorous, surprising, compelling, and restrained, written (or at least edited) to adhere to what Donneau de Visé describes as "le style serré du *Mercur*e" ("the *Mercur*e's 'tight' [terse] style"; *NMG*, Dec. 1677, "Au lecteur," n.p.). The misrepresentation and marginalization of the *Mercur*e's *nouvelles*, at the time of their publication and in the centuries since, is akin to the satirical depiction of *précieuses* (or any politically or intellectually engaged women), or the exclusion of women writers from the canon, writers discredited until the much-needed reevaluation of their work by feminist scholars starting in the late 1980s.³²

32 I am referring to the work of Linda Timmermans, Micheline Cuénin, Domna C. Stanton, Joan DeJean, Donna Kuizenga, Gabrielle Verdier, Henriette Goldwyn, Perry Gethner, Faith E. Beasley, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, Aurore Évain, Myriam Dufour-Maitre, Delphine Denis, Nathalie Grande, Edwige Keller-Rahbé, and many others.

Donneau de Visé was an imaginative and prolific writer exceptionally attuned to the challenges women faced in their daily lives. He regularly ventured beyond the bounds of gallant entertainment in the *nouvelles*, exploiting the ostensibly anodyne genre of “women’s fiction” to publish scenes from private life, not simply to provide a pleasant pastime but also to disseminate evolving ideas about women’s agency. The *Mercur*e’s *nouvelles* include depictions of characters who cross traditional gender boundaries, in stories that are startlingly modern, inclusive, and relevant for twenty-first-century readers. For example, the *Mercur*e portrays and even appears to validate lesbian desire in the *nouvelle* “Maîtresse et Serviteur” (Chapter 2). Some of the women soldiers’ stories I present in Chapter 3 feature characters we would call today non-binary or trans. We encounter in the periodical’s pages the story of a wise new mother who makes life-or-death decisions about her body and her child (Chapter 1), and we read of women who achieve happiness while living independently, rejecting marriage (Chapter 2). In sum, the *Mercur*e’s “case studies” attend to the unique challenges of women’s lives.³³ This willingness to listen to women’s voices, and to try to see the world through a woman’s eyes, may be what one anonymous woman reader of the *Mercur*e *Galant* had in mind when she expressed her wish, in a letter to the editor, that the *Mercur*e’s author might one day become “the women’s historian” (“l’historien des femmes”; *NMG*, May 1677, 108–09).³⁴

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33 Even if most of these *nouvelles* were not written by women, they employ techniques that feminist critics today have ascribed to female-authored texts. According to Josephine Donovan, women writers of realist fiction employ “case studies of women’s circumstances ... to refute misogynist generalities and maxims” (Donovan 12).

34 Letter cited in Perlmutter, “Sociopolitical Education” 57; Vincent, “*Le Mercure galant* et son public féminin” 78.

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