

***Le Mercure Galant* and its Student Body:  
Donneau de Visé's Inclusive Pedagogy**

by  
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Twenty-first-century scholars have characterized *Le Mercure Galant* in many different ways: they have described it, for instance, as a forerunner of the modern newspaper, a propaganda vehicle in the service of Louis XIV, a literary journal promoting the esthetic of *galanterie*, and a compendium of scientific and social information.<sup>1</sup> No single description does justice to the publication, founded in 1672 by Jean Donneau de Visé, who served as editor in chief until his death in 1710.<sup>2</sup> The essence of the *Mercure Galant*, indeed its founding principle, is its appealing diversity. The preface to the inaugural edition announces, “Ce livre doit avoir de quoi plaire à tout le monde à cause de la diversité des matières dont il est rempli” (“Le libraire au lecteur,” *Mercure Galant* 1672, 1: n.pag.).<sup>3</sup> Despite this stated ideal of universality, some scholars, notably Monique Vincent, have claimed that the knowledge the periodical seeks to impart is

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the studies by Monique Vincent, Joan DeJean, Jennifer Perlmutter, and Allison Stedman cited in this article, I refer here to points of view expressed by Chloé Hogg, Sara Harvey, and Alain Viala in their respective works (please see “Works Cited”).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Corneille joined Donneau de Visé at the helm of *Le Mercure Galant* in 1682, and the two collaborated until Corneille became too ill to continue in this role, around 1700. Charles Rivière Dufresny (1648–1724) took over as editor in chief after Donneau de Visé's death in 1710. Since Donneau de Visé conceived the project and laid its groundwork, when I allude to “the editor” I am mostly referring to him, though admittedly it is at times difficult to distinguish his contributions to the publication from Corneille's.

<sup>3</sup> Nearly all citations from *Le Mercure Galant* are taken from the edition available on Gallica ([gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr)). The few issues of the periodical from the period 1672–1710 that have not yet been digitized are available on microfilm created by the Bibliothèque Nationale and held by major research libraries.

Issues of *Le Mercure Galant* published between 1672 and 1677 appeared irregularly and were assigned volume numbers, which I cite in my references. In 1677 only, the publication's title was modified to *Nouveau Mercure Galant*. After 1677, the periodical returned to its original title and appeared monthly; volume numbers were used only exceptionally, when the quantity of material was so great that a single month's issue was divided into multiple tomes issued simultaneously.

gender-specific. Vincent pronounced *Le Mercure Galant* “la première revue féminine d’information et de culture” in the subtitle of her important 2005 study of the publication. She cites as evidence the *Mercure*’s fictional female *destinataire*, an inquisitive and well-read Parisian lady living in the provinces, referred to throughout as “Madame”; she also emphasizes the prevalence of literary forms thought to be popular with women, such as love stories, poems, and songs (Vincent, *Le Mercure Galant* 10–11).<sup>4</sup> But Jennifer Perlmutter has remarked, and even Vincent has noted, that after its initial “période d’essai” of 1672–1677, a span of years during which the periodical experimented with different formats, genres, and publication frequencies, the *Mercure* seems less “feminine,” and more “unisex”: in Perlmutter’s words, it becomes “an exemplary text for both women and men” (58).<sup>5</sup> The present study argues that this change is linked to Donneau de Visé’s evolving resistance to classification of his readership by gender, and to his ultimate rejection of divisive gender stereotypes, in favor of a more inclusive editorial approach. Analysis of a number of *nouvelles* and other texts from the *Mercure* leads to the conclusion that the publication’s founder came to regard his magnum opus as neither “feminine” nor “masculine,” but rather as an all-embracing “coeducational” project, providing information and instruction for the benefit of both sexes.

In fact, in December 1677, the editor refers to the characterization of the *Mercure* as a women’s magazine as an error, and signals that the periodical has now found another audience:

Je sais que le titre a fait croire d’abord que le *Mercure* était simplement *Galant* et qu’il ne devait tenir place que dans la bibliothèque des femmes, mais on est sorti de cette erreur . . . il est devenu le livre des savants et des braves après avoir été le divertissement du beau sexe. (*Nouveau Mercure Galant* Dec. 1677, 10: n.pag.)

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<sup>4</sup> In her analysis of the *Mercure*’s role in the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, Joan DeJean cites the paper’s “pro-female bias” (*Ancients* 66).

<sup>5</sup> Perlmutter emphasizes Donneau de Visé’s dedication of his periodical to the Dauphin starting in 1677, which “further legitimizes it and provides a male counterpoint that represents the male readership to the ‘Madame’ figure to which he addresses each issue of the journal” (58). According to Monique Vincent, after 1677 “[*Le Mercure Galant*] complétait son image en ne dissociant pas belles-lettres et galanterie, savants et beaux esprits, lecteurs et lectrices” (“*Le Mercure Galant* à l’écoute” 194). For more on *Le Mercure Galant*’s different phases, see Vincent, *Donneau de Visé et le Mercure Galant* 121.

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It is not immediately clear whether the editor is implying that the publication has evolved and become something new, leaving behind *le beau sexe* and its predilection for *divertissement*, or simply that its audience has expanded. But in view of the publication's trend away from classification of subject matter according to reader gender, the latter scenario seems more plausible. The *Mercure* becomes increasingly gender-neutral: editorial categorizations and assumptions about the preferences of male and female readers voiced during the periodical's first years (early to mid-1670s) seem to fade as the *Mercure* finds its footing and its public. At first, the editor had assumed that women would want to read *nouvelles* and fashion news, while men would favor war reports. In 1673, for example, the editor feels the need to apologize to some of his female readers for the paper's extensive war coverage (4: 263–266). By 1684, however, "Madame" is clamoring for war news. Speaking of the paper's reports on the taking of Luxembourg and Genoa, the editor tells her, "J'ai beaucoup de joie de ce que vous me temoignez estre satisfaite du soin que j'ay eu de n'oublier aucune circonstance essentielle dans les deux relations dont je viens de vous parler" (July 1684, 4–5). "Madame" is an insatiable consumer of all sorts of information and current events. This ideal reader wants to know about politics as well as arts and culture: the editor tells her, after reporting on new plays by the Corneille brothers, "Je voudrois bien ne vous parler que de divertissemens; mais il faut, *puis que vous voulez tout sçavoir*, que je reprenne le Chapitre de la guerre" (1673, 4: 227–228; emphasis added). The following year, the editor makes a point of distinguishing "Madame" from the ladies with whom she socializes in the provinces:

Je vous entretiendray des affaires de la guerre, mais j'en laisseray les raisonnemens aux politiques, et ne parleray de sieges et des combats, que pour louer toutes les belles actions de nos braves, dont je ne pretends laisser échaper aucune. Le récit n'en sera toutefois pas si long, qu'il puisse ennuyer celles de vos belles provinciales qui n'aiment que les histoires. (1674, 5: 2)

The worldly, inquisitive Madame has more diverse interests than the provincial ladies among whom she lives: a Paris transplant who is unlike her neighbors, a woman who appreciates military accounts, in her pursuit of knowledge she bridges and transcends social and gender categories, thereby embodying the spirit of *Le Mercure Galant*.

The description of the *Mercure* as a "coeducational" project aligns generally with Joan DeJean's assertion that Donneau de Visé, a proponent of the Modern movement, sought to create a "gender blind" public (*An-*

*cients* 66) as part of his program; it also confirms Allison Stedman's recent characterization of *Le Mercure Galant* as "a liberal and inclusive socio-literary enterprise" (Stedman 97). While DeJean states that "[n]o Modern spokesperson ever bothered to compose a work of educational theory" (*Ancients* 138), it is nonetheless true that the *Mercure's* pioneering promotion of the education of men and women together was a defining element of its journalism and in its way, a contribution to the theory of education.

Although the entire *Mercure* is ostensibly addressed to a lady, Donneau de Visé goes to great lengths to appeal to readers of both sexes, sometimes sequentially, but most often simultaneously. The point of view varies: the male authorial voice is balanced by intermittent contributions from celebrated women writers such as Antoinette Deshoulières and Madeleine de Scudéry, as well as from numerous lesser-known female authors. Furthermore, the editor displays evenhandedness, even egalitarianism, by occasionally printing "his and hers" versions of matching articles. A piece by a Monsieur Taisand, a lawyer from Dijon, which examines the advisability of marriage, is divided into two sections, "Si une femme doit se marier" and "Si un homme doit se marier" (*Extraordinaire* April 1679, 6:10-23).<sup>6</sup> The text, which takes for granted women's subaltern status, could certainly not be called feminist, but it is remarkable that the author assumes a mixed readership as he presents advice for both sexes. The author of this article had proposed the previous year another piece geared to a mixed public, which asked the question, "La condition des femmes est-elle plus commode et plus avantageuse que celle des hommes?"<sup>7</sup> Both of Taisand's pieces seem intended to encourage men and women to enter into dialogue with each other on these questions. A comparable structure exists in two complementary stories from January

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<sup>6</sup> The *Extraordinaire*, a supplement to the *Mercure*, appeared quarterly starting in 1678, and showcased contributions from readers on a wide variety of subjects and in numerous genres. *Questions*, or topics for debate, a salon-inspired activity, were a frequent feature; readers were invited to respond, often in verse. Monique Vincent finds little to distinguish the monthly *Mercure* from the *Extraordinaire*: "[P]arues sous le titre d'ensemble du *Mercure Galant*, [ces publications] n'en font qu'une et la matière qui les compose s'interpénètre de telle manière qu'une dissociation systématique entraînerait une confusion ou des répétitions regrettables" (Vincent, *Donneau de Visé* 219). Nonetheless, a distinct editorial voice is mostly lacking in the *Extraordinaire*, and its wholly reader-generated contents appear more random, and more clearly the product of amateurs.

<sup>7</sup> These pieces are cited in Vincent, *Donneau de Visé* 264. The question was announced in the *Extraordinaire* of October 1678 (391), and a response appeared in the following issue (*Extraordinaire* January 1679, 136–138).

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and February 1681, “Histoire de mon cœur” and “Histoire de mes conquêtes,” both written by Fontenelle, where a man and a woman exchange accounts of their sentimental history.<sup>8</sup> Although these are fictional pieces written entirely by a man, the idea of balance, of dialogue between equals, is noteworthy. According to the same principle of equal time, or balanced reporting, right after an article about a male child prodigy, there follows an account of the exploits of a “jeune fille philosophe” from Lyon who amazed the university professors who examined her in Latin on erudite topics (Sept. 1684, 161–164). This young woman, excluded from participating in a public thesis defense because of her sex, is in effect given a voice in the *Mercure*.

Donneau de Visé’s efforts to remain gender-neutral, or at least (to borrow the Fox News slogan) to appear “fair and balanced,” extend to other genres featured in the periodical, *nouvelles* and *questions d’amour*. The *Mercure*’s numerous stories about women disguised as men prove that women can do everything that men do, both good and bad. Disguise may facilitate daring or violent deeds, but the capacity to perform them is not determined by a person’s sex. For example, in one *nouvelle* a young woman disguised as a man serves ably in the army in place of her fiancé, whom she had wanted to protect from the dangers of war (April 1692, 103–116). On the other hand, extreme emotions such as jealousy, the *nouvelles* show us, can drive either sex to senseless acts of violence. Similarly, traits like inconstancy and fidelity are never portrayed as gender-specific: for every *nouvelle* about a fickle female, there is one about a faithless man. One month after the publication of the “Histoire tragique arrivée à Arles” (March 1680, 251–274), which recounts a man’s crime of passion—he murders his mistress for her infidelity—the *Mercure* publishes “L’Infidèle puni,” the story of a woman who disguises herself as a man, ambushes her ex-lover, and commits a revenge murder. The narrator reminds readers that women, too, are capable of such bloody actions:

Vous avez blâmé avec beaucoup de justice l’emportement furieux du Cavalier d’Arles, qui s’est vengé si cruellement de la prétendue infidélité de sa Maîtresse. Les belles ne sont pas exemptes (sic) de ces sortes de fureurs. En voicy la preuve. (April 1680, 276)

The *Mercure* seems to suggest that the passions of men and women are indistinguishable. An article in the *Extraordinaire* of July 1679 asks the

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757) was the nephew of the Corneille brothers, and a frequent contributor to *Le Mercure Galant*.

question “Si les femmes aiment plus fortement que les hommes,” but 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” (294–297)—a decidedly pro-Modern conclusion.

In sum, there seems to be a conscious effort on the part of the *Mercure*'s editor to discredit gender stereotypes. Instead, the periodical purports to portray life as it is—as befits a news publication.<sup>9</sup> In the *Mercure*, Donneau de Visé claims to strive to tell the whole story. For instance, when recounting a battle, he boasts that unlike other contemporary chroniclers, he assembles accounts from multiple viewpoints.<sup>10</sup> Another way he endeavors to hold a mirror up to life, as we have seen, is by providing both male and female perspectives on the same question. It stands to reason that women readers would seek out a publication that treated their sex with respect, fairness, and objectivity. This evenhanded approach is of course strategic as well as ethical: it is in large part a question of marketing, a calculation aimed at selling subscriptions and maximizing the *Mercure*'s readership. The journalist's interest in entrepreneurship and his prowess as a businessman led Victor Fournel in the nineteenth century to call Donneau de Visé “un industriel littéraire” (*Les Contemporains de Molière* 445, qtd. in Vincent, *Donneau de Visé* 2). Jean Sgard attests to the editor's financial success: “Il passe pour avoir été le plus riche des écrivains du temps” (*Dictionnaire des journalistes*).

To ensure his publication's universal, “coeducational” appeal—and thereby to reach the largest audience possible—Donneau de Visé carefully controls tone and content. A preface to both the September and October 1684 issues states, “On mettra tous [les mémoires] qui ne desobligeront personne, et ne blesseront point la modestie des dames” (n.pag). Often, the paper appears to take the side of the wife in domestic issues. A 1684 verse piece called “La Bourse du bon sens,” by a certain Monsieur de la Barre, from Tours, celebrates the stratagem used by a clever and virtuous wife “Pour tirer son Epoux des bras d'une coquette,/ Et pour le rappeler au gi-

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<sup>9</sup> We see this trait in Donneau de Visé's theater as well as in his journalism. His dramatic production includes unique “slice of life” comedies, usually centered on women's experiences; they treat the moments surrounding childbirth, or the loss of a husband (*L'Embarras de Godard* and *La Veuve à la mode* respectively, both first performed in 1667). For more on these comedies, see Steinberger, “The Difficult Birth of the Good Mother: Donneau de Visé's *L'Embarras de Godard* ou *l'Accouchée*.”

<sup>10</sup> Describing the French victory at Genoa, for example, he says of his sources, “Ces diverses lettres écrites par divers particuliers qui se sont trouvez aux endroits dont ils parlent, sont des preuves convaincantes de la vérité” (June 1684, 3: 200).

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ron de l'Hymen" (October 1684, 44–59). A question for debate proposed in the July 1685 *Extraordinaire* asks why so many men take ugly mistresses when they have attractive wives. Can one show support for wronged wives without seeming anti-male (or at least anti-husband)? Despite the periodical's overarching goal of inclusiveness, the publication of tendentious questions such as this one sometimes make the world of the *Mercure*'s readership appear more polarized than integrated. However, this apparent contradiction can be resolved when we consider that marital harmony was seen as beneficial for all of society, and that the reigning patriarchy had a vested interest in preserving marriage's strength and sanctity.<sup>11</sup> Good husbandly conduct is a recurring theme, a value that *Le Mercure Galant* tirelessly promotes. Donneau de Visé brings in celebrity instructors to teach by example: in July 1683, we hear about the admirable affection of M le Dauphin for Mme la Dauphine: "Il est bien doux et bien agréable, de trouver dans un Mary la galanterie d'un amant" (282). Similarly, a year later, the *Mercure* approvingly notes that this model husband refused to retire to his chambers when the Dauphine was ill, and passed the entire night at her bedside (August 1684, 306). But we also hear about wayward husbands, and there are numerous stories about praiseworthy or model wives who tolerate and sometimes even reform their unfaithful spouses: for instance, the September 1683 account of a young woman who patiently bears her husband's infidelity and resists her family's attempts to separate her from her unworthy spouse. She dies of grief, but her unflinching virtue and devotion ultimately inspire her widower to change his life and enter a monastic order.<sup>12</sup> The story's moral, "L'amour le plus violent n'est pas celui qui dure le plus," announces an important lesson for men and women alike.

A school for both husbands and wives, *Le Mercure Galant* is at heart a mass-educational enterprise, one that aims to instruct as it informs and entertains. The publication may be seen as a precursor of the correspondence course, and even as a distant ancestor of the MOOC (massive open online course), for Donneau de Visé places emphasis on accessibility: thanks to the *Mercure*, one need not leave one's home to become well-informed about a wide range of subjects. While we take it for granted today that newspapers perform this function, nationwide circula-

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<sup>11</sup> See Sarah Hanley's examination of this subject, "Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France."

<sup>12</sup> Monique Vincent includes this story in her *Anthologie des nouvelles du Mercure Galant* (324–336).

tion of a periodical to readers from varying social backgrounds, from the middle classes to the upper echelons, was something quite new in the seventeenth century, as DeJean and Stedman have shown in their respective studies. The editor speaks of his goal of providing readers with convenient and inexpensive routes to learning, helping them to “s’instruire à peu de frais de tout ce qui arrive de jour en jour touchant [les] arts,” and to “apprendre ce qui se passe dans toute la terre parmi le monde politique et galant” (“Avis,” Jan. and Feb. 1686, n.pag.).<sup>13</sup>

What can one learn in the *Mercure*? Its highly diversified “course content” distinguishes the publication from its precursors and competitors (*La Gazette*, most notably);<sup>14</sup> it extends beyond news from the court and battlefield to include such topics as Chinese characters, literary news, algebra, geometry, numismatics, and architecture, just to name a few.<sup>15</sup> Science writing becomes more prevalent in the *Mercure* around 1681, the year the passage of Kirch’s comet stimulated scientific speculation and spurred popular interest in astronomy: numerous articles and stories in the paper were inspired by this event. This was also the year when the philosopher and mathematician Claude Comiers started writing for the publication, contributing pieces on optics, astronomy, health, and medicine, including a letter “Sur l’art de se conserver en santé et de prolonger sa vie” (March 1687, 227–236). The *Mercure* also provides advice for readers suffering from maladies such as gout (Nov. 1685, 239–242), hernias (Feb. 1686, 1: 69–82), and the vapors (Nov. 1691, 85–116).

Cultural anthropology is another frequent topic: a treatise on burial and tombs appears in the July 1685 *Extraordinaire* (24–93), and in December 1691, Comiers contributes a “Lettre sur les cérémonies à la synagogue” (244–261). Starting in March 1685, the *Mercure* publishes what may be the first “multicultural course,” a series of nine “dialogues des choses dif-

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<sup>13</sup> See also *Time and Ways of Knowing*, in which Roland Racevskis highlights the “accelerated processes of knowledge acquisition and transmission” facilitated by both the *Mercure Galant* and the newly-instituted postal service.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Loret’s gazette *La Muse Historique* (1650–1665) did provide literary news, but its circulation was much more restricted than that of *Le Mercure Galant*; it was originally intended solely for Marie de Longueville and her circle.

<sup>15</sup> For additional topics covered in the periodical, see Monique Vincent’s subject index (*Mercure Galant, Extraordinaire, Affaires du temps: Table analytique contenant l’inventaire de tous les articles publiés 1672–1710*), an invaluable resource for *Mercure* research.

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ficiles à croire” by the abbé Laurent Bordelon.<sup>16</sup> The dialogue, the editor tells us, is a teaching method especially suited to readers who are pressed for time (he refers to “les curieux, qui sont bien-aises d’apprendre beaucoup, et de s’épargner la peine de longues lectures,” April 1685, 49). The purpose of Bordelon’s dialogues is to introduce readers to a range of unusual social practices from all over the world. Readers also learn to battle prejudice and superstition in similar pieces, like the “Discours contre la superstition populaire des jours heureux et malheureux” by a contributor from Marseille named Malaval (June 1688, 1: 32–119). As one might expect in a publication that calls itself “galant,” there are many articles dealing with savoir-vivre and civility, for example, “De la manière dont on doit avertir ses amis de leurs défauts” (Dec. 1696, 39–57). The *Mercure* places special emphasis on discoveries and stories that transcend barriers, be they national, linguistic, psychological, social, or gender-related. For instance, one finds articles on “l’écriture universelle,” a number-based writing system for use by people of different nations, as well as this praise of the visual arts as a universal means of communication:

[Les estampes] parlent également par tout aux yeux, et tous les yeux voyent également ce qu’elles représentent. Ainsi rien n’est plus agréable, rien n’est plus utile, et rien n’instruit en moins de temps, sans qu’il soit besoin d’aucune étude pour apprendre à voir ce qu’elles contiennent. (Feb. 1686, 1: n.pag.)

For those whom we would call today visual learners, the *Mercure* supplies countless diagrams and illustrations. In 1686, the editor announces a plan to make instructive images even more readily available by including in each month’s issue a list of all newly printed engravings, with notes on where they can be purchased. All in all, the periodical presents itself as an educational treasure chest: “On y ramasse mille choses curieuses qu’on n’auroit pû trouver ensemble, si le *Mercure* n’avoit jamais esté fait...” (“Au lecteur,” *Nouveau Mercure Galant* Dec. 1677, 10: n.pag.; qtd. in Vincent, *Donneau de Visé* 187).

Whether in the form of treatises or *nouvelles*, *Le Mercure Galant* devotes many pages to moral teaching.<sup>17</sup> Often the stories have moralizing

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<sup>16</sup> The connection between one of the *Mercure*’s principal authors, Fontenelle, and our modern notion of multiculturalism has been drawn by Joan DeJean (*Ancients* 125–126).

<sup>17</sup> For a perceptive discussion of the “injunctive exemplarity” of the *Mercure*’s *nouvelles*, see Perlmutter, “Sociopolitical Education.”

titles, maxims such as “Les amants qui ont le plus de traverses ne sont pas toujours les plus malheureux” (May 1680), or “L’amour sincère est souvent récompensé” (Jan. 1689).<sup>18</sup> Notably, the titles of the *nouvelles* are almost always gender-neutral: they seem to reflect a studied effort on the editors’ part to avoid characterizing the sexes in any particular way. For example, use of the neutral “on” is frequent: “On ne perd souvent rien pour attendre” (June 1680), or “De quoi n’est-on point capable quand on aime véritablement?” (Jan. 1697). This principle took shape early on 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” (1674, 6: 207–248). The narrator is an old woman who tells the story of Clitandre, a man suffering from venereal disease. The sick 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. Clitandre eventually falls in love and breaks his promise; shortly thereafter, the man who had cured him 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 old woman 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 that really had no place among the news stories (“histoires nouvelles”) he had promised to “Madame”:

[Cette aventure] ne devoit pas avoir icy de place, puis que je ne vous dois envoyer que des Histoires nouvelles; mais puis qu’elle est écrite, vous souffrirez, s’il vous plaist, Madame, qu’elle tienne son rang parmy les autres. (1674, 6: 247-248)

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

Il y a plus de deux cens ans, continua-t-elle, que cette aventure est arrivée, et qu’on la sçait par tradition; et comme les choses qu’on sçait de la sorte sont toujours très-véritables, on ne doit point douter de cette Histoire, qui doit faire connoistre à tout le monde, que les Femmes sont souvent cause de la perte des Hommes. (246–247)

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<sup>18</sup> The first of these two *nouvelles* is reprinted in Vincent’s anthology, pp. 241–250.

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However, her modern, enlightened listeners, 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'applaudit à cette Histoire qu'en  
soûriant; il y eut mesme quelques malicieux qui plainirent  
la catastrophe du malheureux Clitandre, mais ce fut d'une  
maniere qui fit connoistre qu'ils n'adjoûtoient guere de foi  
à son aventure. (247)

The framing text thus discredits the old woman's tale and the anti-woman tradition it represents, presenting the story as an object of skepticism and even ridicule. This account of the tale's reception signals a break with tradition: the *Mercur*e Galant will never blame the fair sex 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, along with "an openness to cultural difference," "a defense of the right to individuality" (*Ancients* 131).

The *Mercur*e's resistance to gender stereotypes and traditional prejudices extends also to lighter topics, like fashion. After a discussion of the latest women's styles, published during the paper's first year (1672, 3: 283–308), a lady named Lucesse asks the narrator-editor to give equal time to men's style trends. Men, she argues, are just as interested in fashion novelties:

Il me semble que nous avons assez parlé de Modes qui  
regardent les Femmes, et que vous devriez à vostre tour  
nous entretenir de celles des Hommes; car vôtre Sexe en  
Amour et en Mode n'a pas moins d'inconstance que le  
nostre. (308)

The narrator concedes that men are no less slaves to fashion than are women:

[J]'ajoutay que pour faire voir que j'étois persuadé de  
cette verité, j'alois montrer que les Hommes avoient en tres  
peu de temps fait changer huit ou dix fois les modes de  
leurs manches, et que j'estois assuré qu'on ne me mon-  
treroit point parmy les Femmes pour ce qui regardoit les  
Modes un exemple de pareille inconstance. (309)

This attribution of fashion fickleness to men makes a favorable impression on Lucesse and her friend; the narrator tells us that “Cette réponse de bonne foy, et qu’elles n’atendoient point, les fit soûrire” (310).

Here too, the narrator is attempting to discredit a stereotype, demonstrating that men and women are not as different as we have been accustomed to believe. To prove this point, the *Mercur*e shows its readers individuals who defy accepted norms and *idées reçues*, such as fashion-obsessed men and hardy women soldiers who distinguish themselves in battle. Dianne Dugaw’s work early-modern English female warrior ballads—popular songs about real or mythical cross-dressed women soldiers—provides a useful way of thinking about the representation of women in the *Mercur*e. Dugaw writes,

If the ballads suggest anything, it is that “masculine” (or “feminine”) behavior—playing the part—and “male” (or “female”) identity—being the person—can be two different things. Thus the ballads do not in fact privilege the “masculine” at all, because at a deeper level they actually subvert not only the privilege of one gender over the other, but the very category of gender itself. How reliable is such a category that can so easily conceal as much as it reveals? (Dugaw 158–159)

Characters who transgress traditional gender-based behavioral norms lead us to reexamine the assumptions upon which these norms depend.<sup>19</sup>

Concealed sex and questions of gender identity lie at the heart of one the *Mercur*e’s most famous *nouvelles*, the “Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville,” published in the periodical first in 1695, and then again in 1696 in a revised and expanded version. In her introduction to the MLA critical edition of this novella, Joan DeJean attributes the piece to a trio of authors: François-Timoléon de Choisy, Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier, and Charles Perrault. DeJean, who had previously distinguished the story as “the first true fin de siècle literary work” (*Ancients* 119), notes that it “presents the frontier between femininity and masculinity as . . . thoroughly permeable” (“Introduction” xix). The “Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville” is a sort of fractured modern fairy tale where a boy raised from birth as a girl, the ravishingly beautiful Marquise de Banneville, who for most of the story does not know she is biologically a

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<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Garber makes a similar argument about transvestism in her *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Identity*.

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man, meets and falls in love with the Marquis de Bercourt, a girl who has decided to dress and live as a man. After a courtship complicated by the secrets of their sexual status, they marry, and once they experience and understand their sexual compatibility, live happily after ever.

One may interpret the story's title character, La Marquise-Marquis de Banneville, as a metaphor for the treatment of gender in *Le Mercure Galant*. Joan DeJean has already demonstrated that the story, published during the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, represents Modern principles. One could further argue that the Marquise specifically emblemizes the *Mercure's* "coeducational," gender-blending pedagogy. The "Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville" contrasts starkly with the 1674 Clitandre tale ("Les femmes sont souvent cause de la perte des hommes"). Unlike the hoary venereal disease legend presented as the antithesis of the *nouvelle*, the Marquise's story is an explicitly contemporary tale, as befits the Modern sympathies of its authors and of Donneau de Visé; it is complete with allusions to recent literary news and trends, such as the publication of Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant" in the *Mercure* in 1695, or the fairy tale vogue in general. The moralizing title of the Clitandre story, a tale dismissed as inane and outdated by the storyteller's listening public, suggests that sexual categories are immutable: women will be women and men will be men, and women often bring men's downfall. In "La Marquise-Marquis," however, sexual categories are not fixed.<sup>20</sup> This *nouvelle*—like the *Mercure* itself, with its stories of valiant female warriors and learned women—demonstrates that differences between the sexes are sometimes arbitrary, that outward appearances can be deceiving, and that for this reason, we should combat prejudice and stereotypes.<sup>21</sup> When the young Marquise criticizes the

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<sup>20</sup> The question of the tale's attribution emphasizes the instability of these categories. In his 1695 introduction to the *nouvelle*, the *Mercure's* editor refers to its author as a woman. However, when "La Belle au bois" was published in the *Mercure* in 1696, the editor indicated that the author of this story was the same person who wrote "La Marquise." At the same time, it was common knowledge that Perrault was the author of "La Belle," and in fact, within the narrative of "La Marquise-Marquis," the author of "La Belle" is referred to as a man (Choisy, L'Héritier, and Perrault 51). Joan DeJean cites these discrepancies as evidence that the "Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis" was the product of collaboration by both male and female authors. On the other hand, the fact that the author's gender appears undetermined or unstable perfectly suits the story's main themes ("Introduction" xvii).

<sup>21</sup> Except perhaps when it comes to Protestants. See Steinberger, "Obstinate Women and Sleeping Beauties in the Kingdom of Miracles: Conversion Stories in the *Mercure Galant's* Anti-Protestant Propaganda."

choice of a minor character, Prince Sionad, to dress in flamboyant feminine fashion, the Marquise's mother reprimands her daughter with a message of tolerance. She advises her to refrain from judging others and instead to focus on her own conduct: "Contentez-vous, ma chère enfant, de faire votre devoir et ne trouvez jamais à redire à ce que font les autres" (15). The fact that the story enjoyed special, "signature" status in the *Mercur*e bolsters my claim that it presents in microcosm some of the publication's guiding pedagogical principles. "La Marquise-Marquis" is one of the few texts, if not the only one, to be published twice in the *Mercur*e's pages, presumably because its first printing met with success and its reappearance helped sell issues of the periodical. Furthermore, within the story, the Marquise "sells" the *Mercur*e with this somewhat backhanded "product endorsement": "Je l'ai lue ["La Belle au Bois Dormant"] quatre fois, et ce petit conte m'a raccommoquée avec le *Mercur*e Galant où j'ai été ravie de le trouver," 51). The Marquise-Marquis, at once male and female, promotes the publication even as she symbolizes its inclusive, "coeducational" approach. This close relationship between the character and the periodical in which her story was published should not surprise: in classical mythology, after all, the messenger god Mercury, god of eloquence, commerce, boundary-crossings, communication, and, by extension, journalism, is the father of the hermaphrodite. The publication that bears his name sets out to entertain and instruct without prejudice polite society, a public composed of men and women.

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