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'Fake news' in 17th-century France: The Case of *Le Mercure galant*

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ABSTRACT:

Le Mercure galant, one of France's first newspapers, is notable for its diverse content: politics and foreign affairs, court news, science and medicine, the arts and literature. Directed by Jean Donneau de Visé from its inception in 1672 until his death in 1710, this influential and innovative monthly publication circulated throughout France and beyond its borders. The *Mercure*'s tendency to blur the lines between truth and fiction, between history and propaganda, and between information and entertainment, makes it an instructive case study in early modern 'fake news'. Donneau de Visé, a self-styled royal historiographer and the beneficiary of a generous royal pension, dedicated his periodical to the Dauphin and published abundant praise of Louis XIV. The *Mercure*'s news reporting included distortions and propaganda intended to bolster and further entrench the King's foreign and domestic policies. The *Mercure*'s *nouvelles*, short stories presented as true recent events, constituted another type of 'fake news', one that often had a different effect, inviting the reexamination of social norms. The *nouvelles* appealed to the *Mercure*'s sizable community of women readers by accentuating female agency and providing a vehicle for the exploration of scenarios of female empowerment.

In November 1683, the French periodical *Le Mercure galant* reported that a woman in the region of Provence had given birth to a monstrous, barking, clawed creature, which the horrified witnesses had promptly smothered between two mattresses. Two months later, the periodical issued a retraction, in which the editor explained that he had trusted what turned out to

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be an unreliable third-hand account of the sensational story: 'The account I sent you last November, about the birth of a clawed monster in a town in the principality of Orange, is not true. It is a made-up story. The authors of this tale have nothing to be proud of.'[1] As he admits his mistake, cast as an honest one, he comments upon the difficulty of fact-checking his sources, and he reassures his readers that with this minor lapse, no harm was done: 'Despite all the precautions I take, I may sometimes be caught making trivial mistakes of no consequence, good or bad.'[2]

This vague rectification, accompanied by a slap on the wrist for those who invented the story ('[They] have nothing to be proud of'), leaves out some key details of the account printed the previous November. Significantly, the editor omits from his acknowledgement of error any reference to the context of the original story: the horrific birth had followed a dispute between two mothers-to-be, one Protestant and the other Catholic, over whose was the true faith. The Protestant woman had asked God to settle the question by granting that the mother of the false faith give birth to a devil; God apparently heeded her prayer, ostensibly to signify his disapproval of 'la religion prétendue réformée', as its French opponents referred to Protestantism. Getting this story wrong is thus hardly the 'trifle' (*bagatelle*) that the editor claims in his retraction. The original notice of the monstrous birth had ended with this succinct note: 'You may draw

[1] 'Ce que je vous ay mandé au mois de Novembre, d'un Monstre né avec des griffes, dans un Bourg de la Principauté d'Orange, n'est point véritable. C'est une Histoire inventée. La gloire n'en est pas grande pour les Autheurs de ce Conte' (*Mercure galant* Jan. 1684, 338). Unless otherwise noted, all French citations are taken from scans of the original Paris edition of the *Mercure galant (MG)*, available at Gallica.bnf.fr. I have preserved the original spelling but corrected any obvious typographical errors. All the English translations provided are my own.
[2] 'Malgré toutes les précautions que je prens, on peut me surprendre en des Bagatelles qui ne font ni bien ni mal' (*ibid.*, 339).

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whatever conclusions you wish from this anecdote. I recount the event without comment'.[3] Despite this statement of (pseudo)neutrality — the apophatic 'no comment' — the *Mercure galant* was anything but impartial in matters of faith: editor-in-chief Donneau de Visé used his periodical to champion Louis XIV's repression of Huguenots, perpetuating the regime's fiction that the religious conversions of this period were spontaneous rather than coerced. The *Mercure* publishes lavish praise for the King's policies, along with triumphant accounts of mass conversions and temple-razings, and poems celebrating the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. It is not surprising, then, that the publication does not make much effort to explicitly enlighten readers who are inclined to believe that Protestant monster births are anything more than a metaphor.[4]

As this sensational story illustrates, centuries before the term was coined, 'fake news' found its way into early modern mass media. I use the term 'fake news' to refer to the conscious presentation of inauthentic or invented information in a publication that claims to report the truth. For Donneau de Visé, the dissemination of 'fake news' represented a business strategy: surprising and colorful stories attracted readers, while propaganda-laden content helped secure financial support from the King. Donneau de Visé deploys his 'fake news' by playing with forms, creating hybrid texts. In the example just cited, a monstrous birth story, a staple of the *canard* or broadsheet, is adapted for political purposes. In other supposedly true stories, Donneau

[3] 'Vous tirerez telles conséquences qu'il vous plaira de cette Avanture. Je vous dis le fait sans raisonnement' (*MG* Nov. 1683, 193).
[4] See Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic* (Oxford, 2011), for a detailed study of what he calls 'the cultural work performed by monsters' in early modern France. For Williams, monsters are metaphors for anxiety inspired by hybridity and otherness.

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de Visé incorporates elements of the *histoire tragique* and the *nouvelle galante*.[5] The 'fake news' published in the *Mercure* ranges from overt propaganda to more subtle forms of persuasion, and the degree of misinformation varies from flagrant invention or distortion to strategic embellishment. As we will see, the *Mercure*'s blend of fact and fiction is frequently deployed, especially via its *nouvelles*, to appeal to its sizable community of women readers by accentuating female agency and advocating for modifications to women's social and cultural position.

Directed by Jean Donneau de Visé from its founding in 1672 until his death in 1710, the monthly *Le Mercure galant*, one of France's first newspapers, published on a vast range of topics, from politics, war, science and medicine, to fashion, the arts, and literature.[6] Its coverage of court luminaries and its human-interest stories have inspired comparisons to *People* magazine.[7] Its format as a small (in-duodecimo), roughly 300-page book (see Figure 1) and its wide-ranging content set it apart from contemporary periodicals. Unlike the period's more

[5] For more on canards — pamphlets, often sold on street corners, describing extraordinary, supernatural, or fearsome events — see Maurice Lever, *Canards sanglants: Naissance du fait divers* (Paris, 1993). For the *histoire tragique*, see Nicolas Cremona, *Poétique des histoires tragiques* (Paris, 2019).

[6] Because Donneau de Visé refers to himself as the 'author' of the publication, and contemporaries like Edme Boursault applied this title to him, I assume here for simplicity's sake that he is the author of the pieces discussed in this article, unless another author is specified. For more on the identity of the *Mercure*'s editorial team and its contributors, see Monique Vincent, Le Mercure galant: *Présentation de la première revue feminine d'information et de culture, 1672–1710* (Paris, 2005). For more on Donneau de Visé's life and works, see Monique Vincent, *Donneau de Visé et* le Mercure galant (Paris, 1987) and Christophe Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur des lettres au XVIIe siècle: Donneau de Visé, de Molière au* Mercure galant (Paris, 2020).

[7] The comparison to celebrity news magazines and the classification of the *Mercure* as a newspaper are reductive, and not only because of the periodical's format. For a detailed discussion of these questions, see Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur*.

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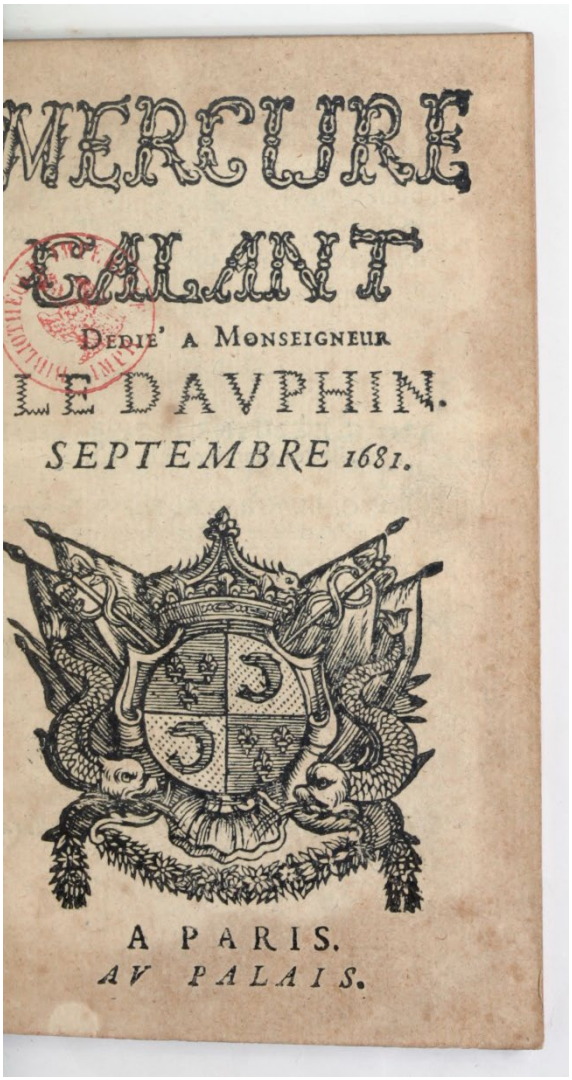

Fig. 1 *Le Mercure galant*, title page, Sept. 1681 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

specialized publications, *La Gazette* for politics and military affairs and *Le Journal des savants* for science and medicine, the *Mercure* promised material to suit every taste: the preface to the inaugural volume states, 'This book should have something to please everyone, because of the diversity of its subject matter'.[8] The *Mercure* was published not only in Paris but also in Lyon,

[8] 'Ce livre doit avoir de quoi plaire à tout le monde à cause de la diversité des matières dont il est rempli', *Le Mercure galant, contenant plusieurs histoires véritables,* vol. i, Paris, 1672 (repr. Geneva, 1982), n.p.

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and it circulated widely throughout France and beyond its borders. Although no subscriber lists have been discovered, ample evidence attests to its popularity and its status as a cultural phenomenon. In 1678, Donneau de Visé claimed to have received five to six hundred letters a month from readers.[9] The publication was well-known enough to be targeted for criticism by La Bruyère in *Les Caractères* and satirized in a popular comedy by Edme Boursault (*La comédie sans titre*, 1683). The *Mercure*'s contributors included eminent figures like the writer Madeleine de Scudéry and the duke of Saint-Aignan, first gentleman of the King's chamber.

Dedicated initially to Louis XIV, and to the Dauphin from 1678 onward, *Le Mercure galant* offered abundant praise of the monarch and support for his policies. Louis returned the favor, granting Donneau de Visé a series of generous pensions.[10] While the ideal of non-partisan or objective reporting may seem anachronistic when applied to seventeenth-century France, where every book printed required royal authorization in the form of a *privilège*, some of Donneau de Visé's contemporaries did object to his publication in the *Mercure* of unfounded speculation favorable to the régime. In 1704, Pierre Bayle (writing from Holland, where he fled to escape censorship and religious persecution) criticized this type of disinformation, taking issue with Donneau de Visé's overoptimistic appraisals of France's military affairs.[11] Responding to an offending passage from the October 1702 issue of the *Mercure*, Bayle made a plea for evidence-based journalism, writing that purveyors of news (*nouvellistes*) should speak only of

[9] 'Preface', *Extraordinaire du Mercure galant*, (Jan. 1678), n.p.
[10] There is some debate about the exact amount of these pensions, but Jean Sgard specifies that Donneau de Visé received six thousand livres in 1684 and again in 1691. See http://dictionnaire-journalistes.gazettes18e.fr/journaliste/244-jean-donneau-de-vise.
[11] For more on Donneau de Visé's propaganda 'fails', see Chloé Hogg, *Absolutist Attachments: Emotion, Media, and Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Evanston, 2019), esp. ch. 3. Christophe Schuwey cites Jean Racine's fears that, left to his own devices, Donneau de Visé would 'disfigure' a French military victory: see his *Un entrepreneur*, 417.

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what they know, that is, the past and the present: '*Nouvellistes* would do well to avoid speculating about the future'.[12] Contemporary critics like François Gacon and Eustache Le Noble lambasted the *Mercure* for its tiresome royal encomium; Gacon, for example, called the paper a 'mercenary flatterer'.[13] Perhaps to address such criticism, Donneau de Visé promised in 1682 that the *Mercure* would only mention the King when the news warranted it.[14]

But the publication's pro-Louis propaganda could take other, less overt forms, notably springing up in the *nouvelles* that were a regular monthly feature.[15] Over the course of Donneau de Visé's tenure as editor-in-chief, nearly 400 *nouvelles*, short stories or accounts consistently billed as true ('histoires véritables'), appeared in the *Mercure*.[16] Some of these texts do double duty, serving both as entertainment and propaganda: one finds, for example, mixed in with stories about courtship, romantic betrayal, and intergenerational conflict, anti-Protestant screed disguised as a love story (Feb. 1686)[17], and subtle pro-war boosterism conveyed in supposedly-

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[12] '[L]es nouvellistes feraient bien de ne pas anticiper sur l'avenir.' He adds, 'Il n'y a rien de plus trompeur que l'avenir' ('There is nothing fickler than the future'). Pierre Bayle, *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, i, 151–152. Cited in Joseph Klaits, *Printed Propaganda Under Louis XIV : Absolute Monarchy and Public Opinion* (Princeton, 1976), 69.

[13] Eugène Hatin, *Histoire de la presse en France* (Geneva, 1967), i, 389.

[14] This pledge to avoid gratuitous references to the monarch appears in the contract in which he formalized his association with the eminent dramatist Thomas Corneille as co-editor of the paper. Cited in Pierre Mélèse, *Un homme de lettres au temps du Grand Roi, Donneau de Visé, fondateur du MG* (Paris, 1936), 163–166. The agreement signed by Donneau de Visé and Thomas Corneille in 1682 specifies that 'Le *Mercure* sera toujours composé de quatorze et quinze feuilles, et de jamais plus de seize; il y aura toujours deux planches et deux chansons, et on n'y parlera point du Roi sans occasion nouvelle.'

[15] Christophe Schuwey has studied Donneau de Visé's 'subtle use of literature in the service of power' in a pre-*Mercure* collection of *nouvelles*: see his 'Lampadaires et avortements : le réalisme, vecteur de propagande sociologique dans les *Nouvelles galantes, comiques et tragiques* (1669)', *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* XLVII, 92 (2020), 7.

[16] The full title of the publication in its early years (1672–73) was *Le Mercure galant, contenant plusieurs histoires véritables* ('containing many true stories').

[17] 'Histoire singulière de deux amants calvinistes', 352–393 in Monique Vincent, *Anthologie des nouvelles du* Mercure galant (Paris, 1996). For more on this *nouvelle*, see Deborah Steinberger,

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true accounts of the adventures of cross-dressed female soldiers. As Emily Butterworth emphasizes in the article 'Disinformation and Discrimination in Marguerite de Navarre's Heptameron' in this issue, the *nouvelle* is a genre situated at the boundary between truth and fiction: in French, the word denotes both 'news' (a recent event) and a fictional genre.[18] While each issue's table of contents normally identifies each *nouvelle* as an 'Histoire' or an 'Aventure' — the terms are used interchangeably[19] — the *Mercure*'s format as a continuous long letter (usually more than 300 pages per issue) tends to obscure the distinction between truth and fiction: the brief *nouvelles* appear not in a literary anthology, but fully integrated into a news publication purporting to chronicle true events. The confusion appears to be deliberate, as the *nouvelles* are increasingly incorporated into the *Mercure*'s 'news feed': in the paper's early days, the *nouvelles* are separated from the main narrative typographically, but after 1674, as Jennifer R. Perlmutter has noted, 'the novellas blend in seamlessly with the news articles to shape an overall image of France's history'.[20] Although the *nouvelles* were depicted early on by the editor as a sort of seasoning, or 'assaisonnement',[21] a supplement to the 'main course' of the news, they

'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* lxxviii (2013).

[18] Writing about the situation in England, Lennard J. Davis asserts that the division between fact and fiction in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century narrative had not yet fully developed: during this period, he suggests, journalistic accounts, history and novels/fiction, all referred to as 'news,' existed together in 'a kind of undifferentiated matrix' or 'news/novels discourse' that would later in the eighteenth century constitute separate categories, with 'factual narratives … clearly differentiated from fictional ones'. Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions* (Philadelphia, 1983), 67.

[19] Monique Vincent, *Donneau de Visé et* Le Mercure galant (Paris, 1987), 314.

[20] Jennifer R. Perlmutter, 'Sociopolitical Education and the *Nouvelles* of the *Mercure galant*'. In Anne L. Birberick (ed.), *The Art of Instruction: Essays on Pedagogy and Literature in 17th-Century France* (Amsterdam, New York, 2008), 70.

[21] *Nouveau Mercure galant*, Jan.–March 1677, 13–14. After a three-year hiatus, the *Mercure* took this new title, but reverted to *Le Mercure galant* the following year.

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in fact function in tandem with the 'real' news to influence opinion even as they entertain readers. The *Mercure*'s tendency to blur the lines between truth and fiction, between information and entertainment, and between history and propaganda, is tied to its distinctive status as a 'universal', multi-subject periodical in a rapidly evolving society hungry for novelty. The stories presented in this article raise questions about the effects of such blurring: even if the *Mercure* describes them as neutral (Donneau de Visé dismisses any inaccuracies he may publish as 'of no consequence, good or bad'), they can be harmful for certain groups, as in the case of the Protestant monster birth story. On the other hand, as the analysis of some of the following stories about women's lives will demonstrate, the *Mercure*'s creation of an intermediate space between truth and fiction could also benefit certain readers. Fictional explorations that stage deviations from social and legal norms, according to Christian Biet, are characteristic of late seventeenth-century French literature, and they paved the way for real social evolution. The *Mercure galant*'s *nouvelles*, fiction masquerading as news, provided a vehicle for the exploration of scenarios of female empowerment.[22]

The terms 'hard' and 'soft' news, though relatively recent coinages, prove useful for a gender-based approach to the *Mercure*'s contents. Seventeenth-century readers used different words to express these concepts, but they thought in terms of these categories. While 'hard news' denotes timely and reliable reports of politically relevant events, 'soft news' by comparison lacks political relevance, and is less reliable: it tends to focus on the consequences of events for

[22] Christian Biet's concept of the 'réel stylisé' (stylized truth) of late seventeenth-century French literature is useful here; see his *Droit et littérature sous l'Ancien Régime: Le Jeu de la valeur et de la loi* (Paris, 2002), 282 and 298.

individuals rather than groups, and it may contain more opinion than fact.[23] These are fundamentally subjective and imprecise terms: what one reader deems important or relevant may be dismissed by another as gratuitous or frivolous, inconsequential or uninteresting. These categories were operative in the seventeenth century as well: the *Mercure*'s contemporary critics disapproved not only of the periodical's bias and inaccuracies, they also complained of content they deemed useless or not newsworthy — 'fake news' in the sense that it was not really news at all. For example. a 1691 satirical sonnet attributed to Eustache Le Noble asserts that one learns nothing by reading the *Mercure*, and that the publication is bloated with useless information.[24] The *Mercure*'s 'soft news' includes, on the one hand, items with high shock value: sensationalistic *faits divers*, reports of monstrous or multiple births, or of strange sightings, such as a September 1678 account of the appearance in provincial France of a green and yellow creature with a dog's head and a body that is half-frog, half-human child. On the other hand, this material also includes less dramatic human-interest stories or scenes from private life, such as a notice about a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary with fifty of their descendants (July 1684). Some readers may have found the minute details of opulent court

[23] These labels appear to have emerged in the 1970s in the United States. See Carsten Reinemann et al., 'Hard and soft news: A review of concepts, operationalizations, and key findings', *Journalism* 13: 2 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911427803. For a gender studies approach to these terms, see Paula Poindexter and Dustin Harp, 'The Softer Side of News', *Women, Men, and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape*, eds. Paula Poindexter, Sharon Meraz, and Amy Schmitz Weiss, (New York, London, 2008).

[24] The poem ends in a brief dialogue where the speaker asks the nymph Echo, 'Echo, divine Echo, Par ces galans ouvrages, / Dis-moy, que nous apprend ce rare historien ?' 'RIEN', answers Echo. Le Noble, 'Le Portrait de Mercure,' *La Fable du Baudet*, *Extraordinaire* de Juillet 1691, 14 (https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/_bregHrBulcC?hl=en&gbpv=1). Another poem, by Le Noble or one of his associates, condemns Donneau de Visé (under the name 'Pseudhermès,' a reference to the god for whom the publication is named) for publishing thick volumes filled with 'nothings' ('Pseud'hermès dont la froide verve/ Dans un volume épais n'entassoit que des riens', *Fable du rossignol et du coucou*, 14).

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celebrations or of military campaigns compelling, while for others such accounts may have seemed excessive or unedifying.[25] Edme Boursault, in his *La Comédie sans titre,* a 1683 satirical play about the *Mercure galant,* suggests that the names and works of undeserving individuals appear in the publication's pages only because those people paid to be mentioned; Gacon echoes this belief.[26]

As both 'fake' and 'soft' news, content both fictitious and frivolous, the *nouvelle* sins doubly against the utility standard. Despite the editor's claims to the contrary, these stories are most often not true and, even if they were, some readers would not consider them newsworthy, based as they are upon the private lives and loves of (usually) anonymous people. However, these stories are almost always presented as teaching moments, lessons pertinent to everyday life; introductory or concluding maxims lend gravity to the entertainment they offer. Despite the use of place names and references to current court cases to create a sense of authenticity, these tales bear the imprint of fiction: many closely resemble the pieces in the story collections Donneau de Visé published before launching *Le Mercure galant,* such as his *Nouvelles galantes, comiques et tragiques* (1669).

Stories for and about women

[25] As Christophe Schuwey remarks, among the readers likeliest to have appreciated these accounts were those named therein, whose reputations were enhanced by their association with the event in question (*Un entrepreneur*, 406).
[26] 'Should an insipid work arrive from the provinces,/ Even if it dishonors the deeds of our Alcaeus,/ If a shiny *écu* follows it, it is warmly received/ And prominently featured in the dull volume' ('Vient-il de la province un ouvrage insipide,/ Dût-il déshonorer les faits de notre Alcide,/Si l'écu neuf le suit, il trouve un doux accueil/ Et tiendra le haut bout dans le fade recueil'.) Qtd. in Hatin, *Histoire de la Presse*, i, 389.

The distinction between substantive, consequential ('hard') and frivolous or merely entertaining ('soft') news is an editorial preoccupation right from the *Mercure galant*'s founding, and from the start, these categories are tied to gender. Early issues (through 1677) feature fictional conversations among the publication's readers, framing texts where members of the public comment upon the *Mercure*'s content.[27] These commentators express the belief that men are more interested in military news and politics, while women readers are predisposed to *nouvelles* and fashion. One woman evokes the *ruelle* — the intimate social space next to or near a woman's bed, associated with salon women and *précieuses* who entertained visitors in their chambers — to explain why a 'general book' ('livre général') like the *Mercure*, covering many topics and genres, is a good idea. Here the feminine space of the *ruelle* stands metonymically for women readers: 'While *ruelles* want stories, there are melancholy sorts who call such pieces trifles': gloomy, serious-minded readers dismiss the entertaining stories that women readers enjoy.[28] In satirical verses published in contemporary poetry collections, an anonymous critic objected to the *Mercure*'s catering to women's tastes, and even associated the monthly

[27] These staged 'focus groups' are part of Donneau de Visé's marketing arsenal. Despite the apparent anachronism, Christophe Schuwey argues that the editor was a pioneer in the field of marketing: see his 'Loret's Marketing Revolution: Audience Representation as Positioning Strategy in Seventeenth-Century Newspapers'. *Mémoires du Livre, Studies in Book Culture* 12.1 (Spring 2021), https://doi.org/10.7202/1077802ar.

[28] 'Si les Ruelles veulent des Histoires, on trouve des Mélancoliques qui les traitent de bagatelles' (https://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1673-04#MG-1673-04_261), *MG* iv, Paris, 1673, 265 (repr. Geneva, 1982).

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publication with menstruation to disparage it and to mock its editors.[29] Gacon dismissed the *Mercure*'s fiction pieces as outmoded 'historiettes'.[30]

One of the most distinctive features of the *Mercure galant*, central to its conception and suggested in its title — the word 'galant' denoting the behavior of a refined man seeking to please and charm women[31] — is its consistent (though not exclusive) marketing to women readers. The format of the periodical is that of a long monthly letter to a fictional correspondent, a Parisian lady transplanted to the provinces, addressed simply as 'Madame'. While Jean Loret's *Lettre en vers* (*Letter in Verse*, 1652–65)[32], a playful gazette in verse dedicated to Mademoiselle de Longueville, and its continuation, Charles Robinet's *Lettres en vers à Madame* (1665–1674), were also written in the form of a letter to an aristocratic woman, the idea of appealing to women in general as an important and influential segment of the market for periodicals seems to have originated with Donneau de Visé. In an early issue of the *Mercure galant* (1673), he casts

[29] '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' ('Le sot livre qu'on voit dans les mains des bourgeois,/ Revenant à toutes les lunes !/ Serait-ce pas l'égout du Parnasse françois ?/ Non, mais c'est que, selon les lois/ Au sexe féminin communes,/ La Muse françoise a ses mois'). Cited in Hatin, *Histoire de la presse*, i, 388. Christophe Schuwey has identified a similar piece in two other poetry anthologies from the period (*Un entrepreneur*, 428n).

[30] '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…' ('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'), Hatin, *Histoire de la presse*, i, 389.

[31] 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, & particulièrement au beau sexe'). Two fundamental works on *galanterie* are Delphine Denis, *Le Parnasse galant: Institution d'une catégorie littéraire au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 2001) and Alain Viala, *La France galante* (Paris, 2008).

[32] Also published as *La Muse historique.* See https://dictionnaire-journalistes.gazettes18e.fr/journaliste/528-jean-loret.

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women as opinion-makers, at least in literary matters: he portrays a woman reader asserting that 'Since it is women who ensure a work's success, those who fail to find the secret of pleasing them will never succeed'.[33] He appears never to have wavered in this view throughout the nearly forty years that he served as editor of the *Mercure*.

Did Donneau de Visé succeed in his effort to cultivate a large female audience? In the absence of subscription data, it is difficult to estimate the size of the *Mercure*'s female readership (or of its total subscription base, for that matter).[34] However, one can cite the considerable number of women who submitted to the publication their answers to the riddles (*énigmes*) printed monthly: during the height of this trend, the *Mercure* published the names or pseudonyms of dozens of riddle-solvers in each issue, many of whom were women.[35] We also know that Mme de Sévigné read the periodical, for she refers to it multiple times in her letters. And while Geoffrey Turnovsky documents the identity of just one woman in his portraits of three *Mercure* readers, this reader's case is illustrative: she wrote to the editor in 1678 to praise the publication, and particularly to thank him for printing so many works by and for women.[36] Figure 2, a contemporary engraving depicting a lady engrossed in a volume of the *Mercure*, suggests that Donneau de Visé was indeed successful in attracting women readers.

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[33] 'Comme ce sont elles [les femmes] qui font réüssir les Ouvrages, ceux qui ne trouveront point le secret de leur plaire, ne réüssiront jamais', *MG* iv, 1673 (Geneva, 1982), 267.
[34] For more on the *Mercure*'s circulation, see Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur*, p. 340–341 and 364.
[35] See Sara Harvey, 'Les fins de l'obscurité dans les énigmes du *Mercure galant*', in Delphine Denis (ed.), *L'Obscurité : Langage herméneutique sous l'Ancien Régime* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2007).
[36] Geoffrey Turnovsky, 'Les lecteurs du *Mercure galant*: Trois aperçus', *XVIIe siècle*, vol. lxviii, n. 1 (2016). See also Monique Vincent, '*Le Mercure galant* et son public féminin', *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschicht*, iii (1979).

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As the imagined reader conversations inserted in the early volumes indicate, Donneau de Visé viewed the *nouvelles* as being of special interest to women. Unsurprisingly, these pieces tend to feature women as the central characters. In the second part of this article, I propose to examine a series of sensational stories about women from the *Mercure galant*, all of them 'fake news', fiction presented as current events. Many of these unbelievable stories depict women resisting traditional boundaries or strictures. The pieces include crime stories where women pursue or suffer from revenge, stories of bodily deformity congenital or self-inflicted, and stories of women soldiers disguised as men.

Fig. 2. Nicolas Arnoult (1650-1722), *Femme de qualité en déshabillé lisant* le Mercure galand (*Lady of quality in casual attire, reading* Le Mercure galant) (Department of Graphic Arts, Louvre Museum)

True crime: from *canards* to case studies

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While the *Mercure* publishes crime stories intermittently throughout the editorship of Donneau de Visé, they are more common during the periodical's early period, when the editor was experimenting with format, searching for the most appealing blend of content and genres. The story of a certain Lydiane, 'The woman who preferred to burn with her husband than to endure his infidelity' ('Celle qui aima mieux se brûler avec son mary, que de le voir infidèle') is one of a series of early *Mercure galant nouvelles* depicting shocking crimes.[37] As the title suggests, Lydiane takes revenge on her unfaithful husband by setting their bedroom on fire while they are locked inside; she and her husband perish together in the flames. While Lydiane's story is presented as true, the only proof the author furnishes that her extraordinary act of vengeance actually occurred is his assertion that he has rejected poetic license in his retelling, refusing to idealize his heroine's beauty:

> Perhaps you think that I will describe her to you like a heroine in a novel, and that I will tell you that she was the most beautiful woman in the world: but since I am telling a true story, I will leave the task of creating such pretty portraits to the clever inventors of those fine novels.[38]

The monotonous use of the adjective 'beau' in this declaration ('belles peintures,' 'beaux Romans,' 'beaux Esprits') highlights the narrator's rejection of stylistic adornment. But signs of

[37] Others include the story of the serial killer Viergette and 'Les Assassinats', a *nouvelle* about a lethal love triangle, both from 1673. Monique Vincent hypothesizes that these stories originated in published court proceedings: see her *Donneau de Visé*, 317.

[38] 'Vous croyez peut-estre que je vais vous la dépeindre comme une Heroïne de Roman, & que je vais vous dire qu'elle estoit la plus belle Personne du Monde : mais comme je raconte une Histoire veritable, je laisseray le soin de faire ces belles peintures aux Inventeurs ingénieux de ces beaux Romans, dont les plus beaux Esprits de France ont souvent diverty toute la Terre', *MG* i 1672, 92–93. Donneau de Visé expresses a similar idea in the preface to his *Nouvelles galantes, comiques, et tragiques*, where he claims that he is not a poet, but a historian : '…je ne suis pas poète dans cet ouvrage…je suis historien'. Cited in Schuwey, 'Lampadaires', 13.

fiction compete with the truth claims: for instance, the author implausibly conveys the final conversation between the couple as they are engulfed in flames. The chief sentiment expressed by the narrator is compassion for Lydiane, who finds herself unable to stop loving the husband who has betrayed and abused her.[39] Unlike the *canards* that Maurice Lever anthologizes in *Canards sanglants,* this *nouvelle* makes no mention of divine punishment for the murder-suicide (though the woman who enticed Lydiane's husband away from her, a minor character in the story, is said to have repented and entered a convent).

Another tale of murder, the 'Histoire tragique arrivée à Arles' (March 1680), like 'Celle qui aima mieux se brûler', aims to inspire both horror and compassion in the reader.[40] Instead of flames, this crime story features gushing blood ('bouillons de sang') in its graphic dénouement. This account, however, is based on an apparently true story, a case that Mme de Sévigné mentions in a letter to her daughter.[41] The *Mercure*'s introduction to the narrative begins by contrasting news reporting and fiction writing:

> If all the incidents I report to you were as talked about throughout the kingdom as the tragic story that took place a short time ago in Arles, your friends would not ask you if they were not made-up stories. One can only wish that what I am about to tell you were a

[39] 'Lydiane qui croyoit n'avoir plus tant d'amour pour son Mary, parce qu'elle n'avoit pas sujet de l'aimer, ne sentit d'abord ny toute sa douleur, ny tout son amour ; elle crût mesme qu'elle le haïssoit, parce qu'elle faisoit ses efforts pour le haïr. Quelque temps apres elle eust des retours de tendresse qui luy firent souffrir tout ce que la jalousie a de plus cruel, et elle entra enfin dans un desespoir si furieux, qu'il luy fit résoudre ce que vous allez apprendre', *MG* i, 1672 (Geneva, 1982), 92–93.

[40] For a contemporary examination of women's attraction to true crime narratives, see Rachel Monroe, *Savage Appetites: True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession* (New York, 2020).

[41] 'The crazed, jealous lover killing left and right in Arles sets a high bar for today's lovers; the diversity of love-objects dissipates too much, it diverts and diminishes passion' ('L'amant jaloux et furieux qui tue tout à Arles met le bouton bien haut à nos amants ; la diversité des objets dissipe trop, et détourne et diminue la passion').
https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5306k/f311.image 13 March 1680

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story of my own invention; but the sad details I am about to recount are only too true.[42]

Le Mercure galant's treatment of this murder-suicide said to have taken place in Arles in February 1680 involves embellishing and amplifying the bare facts of a true crime story, transforming it by combining a *fait divers* with elements of the popular genres of the *histoire tragique* and the *nouvelle galante*.[43] The narrator's presentation of his heroine contrasts with the approach taken in Lydiane's story: in the 'Histoire d'Arles', the narrator offers the kind of idealized depiction he had associated in the opening lines of 'Celle qui aima mieux' with 'the clever inventors of [those] fine novels' ('les Inventeurs ingénieux de ces beaux Romans') and the enjoyment (*divertissement*) they create. The two stories are thus in a chiasmatic relationship: the true story is rendered with novelistic embellishments, while the imagined story is presented as the unadorned truth. In the 'Histoire d'Arles', the narrator uses superlatives to describe the murder victim: she is young, beautiful, high-born, witty, and incomparably engaging.[44] As in Lydiane's story, the narrator professes at the outset his utmost respect for the truth. He considers this a duty the journalist owes to those close to the victims:

> Everyone tells the story in his own way, and since the incident has become too well-known for it to be covered up, and even the most discreet people always alter news they hear through the grapevine, even if it may hurt the parties concerned, it is to the advantage of those individuals that the truth be known. Thus I believe I am obliging them

[42] 'Si toutes les aventures dont je vous rends compte faisaient un aussi grand bruit qu'en fait pour tout le Royaume l'Histoire tragique arrivée depuis peu à Arles, vos amies ne vous demanderaient pas si ce ne sont point incidents faits à plaisir. Il serait à souhaiter que j'eusse inventé ce que j'ai à vous apprendre, mais les tristes particularités que je vous vais dire ne sont que trop vraies', *MG* March 1680, 251 (repr. in Vincent, *Anthologie,* 394).

[43] For an interesting study of Donneau de Visé's novelistic treatment of a different *fait divers* at an earlier point in his career, see Schuwey, 'Lampadaires.'

[44] 'La dame…était jeune, belle, spirituelle, et la plus engageante personne qui fut jamais', Vincent, *Anthologie*, 395.

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> by telling it to you. I base my account on such faithful reports that there is no possibility for error. [45]

The *Mercure galant*'s version of the story is a psychologically nuanced case study that seems intended to justify the woman, painting her in as positive a light as possible and, in deference to her family, correcting any defamatory rumors that might have been circulating about her conduct or character. While he does not hide her defects — her impetuous nature and her rash and sometimes cruel, vindictive behavior toward the lover who becomes her murderer — the author dwells on the series of events that led to the violent scene. He enters the characters' minds, adding details that could not be known by an eyewitness or even by the unidentified person who penned the 'faithful account' that inspired the *Mercure*'s version of the event. The author transforms the murderer, whom Mme de Sévigné describes rather one-dimensionally as 'that crazed, jealous lover killing left and right' ('cet amant jaloux et furieux qui tue tout'), into a sensitive scorned lover who had not intended to kill the woman he loved.[46] Furthermore, while Sévigné, in her succinct reference to the crime, mentions only the 'crazed lover' who killed his mistress and attacked his rival, the *Mercure*'s adaptation of the story centers on the woman who becomes his victim. As the narrator recounts her life story, unearthing the circumstances underlying the murder, he paints a sympathetic and vivid portrait of the woman. He explains that she had been forced at a young age to marry an unattractive and cantankerous older man whom

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[45] 'Chacun les conte à sa mode et comme la chose est devenue trop publique pour la pouvoir étouffer et que les plus retenus ont toujours chargé ce qui a passé de bouche en bouche, quelque chagrin qu'en reçoivent les intéressés, il est de leur avantage que la vérité en soit connue. Ainsi je crois leur faire plaisir en vous la disant. J'écris sur de si fidèles mémoires que je ne puis y être trompé' (*ibid*., 394).

[46] The narrator makes it clear that the murder was not premeditated: 'Apparently, the unexpected sight of his rival led him to abandon his prior resolve [to maintain a cold demeanor]' ('Apparemment, la vue inopinée de son rival lui fit perdre toutes les mesures qu'il avait prises'), *ibid*., 399.

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she could not love, and he suggests that she endured spousal abuse ('les mauvais traitements'); the storyteller notes that she eventually obtained a legal separation due to this mistreatment.[47] The demise of her marriage and her subsequent freedom led to the imprudent love affair that precipitated her murder at the hands of the possessive lover with whom she had signed a pact of fidelity. After revealing that the woman still loved her estranged lover enough to provide for him in a recently-revised will, the story ends with a perfunctory reference to the story's moral lesson: 'This example is frightening and not without utility, since it shows us how passionate attachments have dangerous consequences'.[48] But the underlying message in both the Arles account and the story of Lydiane — the former, truth fictionalized, and the latter, fiction presented as truth — is one of compassion for women who endure and ultimately reject domestic violence.

Monstrous birth: *canard* meets *nouvelle galante*

The two violent stories just examined blend the crime-of-passion *canard*, the *histoire tragique*, and the *nouvelle galante*. Likewise emerging from the world of the *canards*, this time the type that describes freaks of nature, is the story of a beautiful woman from Dijon born with the legs and feet of a goat. She appears in a November 1686 letter in which Monsieur Vignier, a frequent contributor to the *Mercure*, recounts the tale (presented by Vignier as a recent story) of the unfortunate hoofed woman and the unsuspecting gentleman who falls in love with her during

[47] For more on the prevalence of domestic violence during this period, see Julie Hardwick, 'Early Modern Perspectives on the Long History of Domestic Violence: The Case of Seventeenth-Century France', *Journal of Modern History* 78 (2006), and Arlette Farge and Cécile Dauphin (eds.), *De la violence et des femmes* (Paris, 1997).
[48] 'L'exemple est terrible et peut n'être pas sans utilité, puisqu'il nous fait voir combien les engagements de passion ont de suites dangereuses' (*ibid*.). This lesson resembles that of another *nouvelle* from the *Mercure* (March 1685) that begins, 'It is dangerous to force love to turn into mad passion' ('Il est dangereux de forcer l'amour à se tourner en fureur'). In this supposedly true story, it is the woman who murders her unfaithful lover.

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a chance encounter. As the editor introduces Vignier's letter, he guarantees its veracity, citing as proof both its author's willingness to sign his own name to the account, and the existence of a known court case involving the protagonists:

> You will find here a very singular story whose truth I can guarantee, since he [Vignier] wishes me to send it to you not only in his name, but also in the manner in which he wrote it. Even though there is nothing in the story that might shock anyone, and Nature alone is to blame, I would not send it to you if there were a chance that the proceedings of an audience before Parliament could remain secret for long.[49]

'Nature is to blame' in this curious case because the heroine's defect supposedly had its source in her mother's imagination: while pregnant, the mother had repeated contact with a nanny goat she used to nurse her older child. Now grown, the goat-footed woman does all she can, short of revealing her deformity, to dissuade her ardent suitor from marrying her. Finally, seeing that he is determined to become her husband, she tells him that she has a rather serious idiosyncrasy: she cannot stand the sight of bare feet. He agrees that, once married, they will always go to bed with their feet covered. After several years of conjugal happiness, the husband is wounded in a hunting accident; when his companions bring him home, his wife faints at the sight of his blood. To revive her, they decide to have her bled, and in the process, they discover her monstrous abnormality. The revolted husband bans her from his sight and demands that their marriage be dissolved. The affair comes before a judge. Then the husband has a sudden change of heart: after

[49] 'Vous y trouverez une Avanture fort singulière dont je vous puis garantir la vérité, puisqu'il veut bien que je vous l'envoye, non seulement sous son nom, mais encore de la manière qu'il l'a écrite. Quoi qu'il n'y ait rien dans cette Avanture qui puisse choquer personne, et que la Nature soit seule à blasmer, je ne vous l'envoyerais pas, si les choses qui ont esté plaidées à l'audience d'un Parlement, pouvoient ne pas devenir publiques', *MG* Nov. 1686, 39-40.

hearing his wife's lawyer speak touchingly on her behalf, he drops the suit and begs his wife to return to their home. The wife, however, refuses reconciliation. While the editor insists that the story is based on a recent court case, the reader perceives several distancing mechanisms that weaken the truth claim. First, the shared-letter format of this contribution: Vignier's letter is addressed not to the editor of the *Mercure*, but to a third party, a friend of his, a certain Mr le Baron de C…. We may thus consider it the epistolary equivalent of hearsay: with third-hand news, there is always room for error. While in this case, Donneau de Visé does 'guarantee' the story's veracity on Vignier's behalf, in general, as we saw with the 1683 Protestant monstrous birth story, the editor uses letters as a strategy for presenting extraordinary claims without taking direct responsibility for their accuracy.[50] At the same time, the inclusion of letters nourishes the fiction of a peer-to-peer relationship between the writer and the reader. In this case, Vignier's letter shares the story of 'that gentleman from Burgundy who recently tried to dissolve his marriage' in order to warn his friend the Baron to choose a wife prudently. The indeterminate degree of separation from the event — Vignier has learned of the story by word of mouth — further removes the account from any verifiable truth, as it may have been modified in the retelling (as the narrator warned in the prologue to the Arles murder story, even the most discreet people have trouble resisting this temptation). Finally, the facetious conclusion implies incredulity on the part of the narrator himself: Vignier recommends that all prospective husbands inspect the feet of the woman they plan to marry. The 'truth' of the story lies not in its details, which are objectively outlandish, but in the depiction of the characters' emotions: the

[50] For instance, as he presents a letter about a reported ghost sighting, he adds, 'Readers may draw the conclusions they wish' ('Chacun peut raisonner comme il luy plaira') about the report's details (*MG* April 1695, 280).

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gentleman's stubborn determination to marry the woman he desires, his revulsion upon learning her secret, and her dignified refusal to return to him after the mortifying court proceedings.

This is also a monster story: the husband seeks to end the marriage, 'alleging that he had married a monster rather than a woman'.[51] But the goat-footed woman is depicted less as an oddity of nature than as a sympathetic romantic heroine in a supposedly true (though certainly fictional) piece that blends *nouvelle galante* — the story of the couple's encounter and courtship — and courtroom drama: the story's climax comes in a scene where her lawyer brings those present at the hearing to tears as he pleads the lady's case.[52] I believe that this strange story is at its heart a critique of marriage, targeted to women readers: like the *Mercure*'s treatment of the Arles anecdote, it upholds women's dignity within marriage. Specifically, the Goatfoot story challenges the norm of a wife's repudiation by a husband who finds her physically or otherwise deficient. Stories like this — and there are others — participate in the ongoing *querelle des femmes* (the Quarrel about Women, or the 'Woman Question') as they advocate for women and criticize the prevailing double standard, a patriarchal system weighted in favor of men as the judges and arbiters of a woman's worth.[53] Donneau de Visé may be a servile propagandist, but he is also a proto-feminist who celebrated and published works by women writers, and a cultural

[51] 'alléguant qu'il avoit épousé un Monstre plûtost qu'une Femme', *MG* Nov. 1686, 51.
[52] Given the ties between Donneau de Visé and Charles Perrault, whose 'Sleeping Beauty' ('La belle au bois dormant') was first published in the *Mercure galant* (1696), it is pertinent to add that this heroine also resembles one of Perrault's enchanted princesses — Donkeyskin (Peau d'âne), for example — except that here, there is no magical transformation at the end, and the setting is decisively contemporary.
[53] See for example 'The Story of the False Hair' ('Histoire des faux cheveux', *MG* June 1678) and 'The Story of the False Teeth' ('Histoire des dents crues fausses', *MG* Sept. 1678). Like Molière's comedy *L'École des femmes* (*The School for Wives*, 1662), these stories mock the male fantasy of finding a perfect woman or wife.

figure aligned with the Moderns during the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns.[54] He is, moreover, the only seventeenth-century French dramatist known to have written plays about contemporary mature married women at milestones in their private lives: two comedies presented in 1667 by Molière's troupe, one about a woman giving birth (*L'Embarras de Godard ou l'Accouchée*), and another about a woman who has just become a widow (*La Veuve à la mode*). In refusing reconciliation with her husband, Goatfoot takes control of her own story, poised to determine herself its next chapter.

Christian soldiers and military maids

A 1685 report from Toulouse provides another example of a news story that blends genres — in this case, *canard* and hagiography — and challenges credulity. The brief article relates in excruciating detail the story of a very pious seventeen-year old who cuts off her breasts in order to avoid sin: 'As she had often heard sermons condemning women who do not take care to cover their breasts, she resolved to make it impossible to show her own'.[55] She suffered no pain or fever, and made a miraculous recovery: 'She protested that this bloody operation had been painless…I have seen a letter dated the sixth of this month, that reports that she had no fever, and that her life was not at all in danger'.[56] Her bloody deed is 'astonishing' and

[54] See Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de siècle*, (Chicago, 1997). DeJean writes at length about the *Mercure*'s role in the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns and emphasizes the periodical's 'pro-female bias' (66). For a recent examination of the relationship between the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns and the *querelle des femmes*, see Helena Taylor, 'Ancients, Moderns, Gender: Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's "Le Parnasse reconnaissant, ou, le Triomphe de Madame Deshoulières"', *French Studies*, lxxi (2016).
[55] 'Comme elle avoit souvent entendu prescher contre les femmes qui n'ont pas soin de cacher leur gorge, elle resolut de se mettre hors d'estat de montrer jamais la sienne' (*MG* June 1685, 274).
[56] 'Elle a protesté que cette sanglante opération ne luy avoit causé aucune douleur...J'ay veu une Lettre du 6. de ce mois, qui porte qu'elle n'avoit point de fièvre, et que sa vie ne couroit aucun danger' (*ibid*., 276–77).

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'inconceivable', yet the author insists that she was in complete control of her mind and her actions. Like the report of the Protestant monster baby and the tale of the goat-footed woman, this sensational story seems highly implausible, if not impossible. The *Mercure* documents the unbelievable story by citing the name of the girl's father, his profession, and the city where the event occurred. The narrator stresses the religious, even mystical dimension of the adolescent's self-mutilation, and warns the reader that it would be fruitless to examine too closely what led the girl to this astonishing act: 'From time to time things occur that are so extraordinary that it is difficult not to believe that they are inspired by secret impulses, whose mystery it would be useless to try to understand'.[57] The account evokes the legend of the virgin martyr Saint Agatha, whose torments included the excision of her breasts, and who was subsequently healed by St Peter.[58] This reference to the cult of saints and to miraculous healing, beliefs generally opposed by Protestants, is likely meant to reinforce the triumph of Catholicism at the height of Louis XIV's campaign against the Huguenots.[59] In fact, the account of the girl's deed appears in a string of religion-themed articles in this issue that evoke the King's success as defender of the Roman Catholic church. The issue's opening lines, trumpeting a refrain seen often in the *Mercure*, set the overall tone: 'Praise for the King is an inexhaustible subject'.[60] The article about the girl from Toulouse immediately follows an obituary extolling the virtue and wisdom of an exemplary abbess, Madame de Farmonstier, whose niece the King has just appointed to

[57] 'Il arrive de temps en temps des choses si extraordinaires, qu'il est difficile de ne pas croire qu'elles se font par des inspirations secrètes, dont nous tâcherions inutilement de pénétrer le mystère' (*ibid*., 273).
[58] Many thanks to Paul Scott for bringing the iconography of Saint Agatha to my attention.
[59] For more on the use of saints' legends during the Counterreformation, see Sylvie Steinberg, *La Confusion des sexes* (Paris, 2001), 69.
[60] 'L'éloge du Roi est une matière inépuisable', *MG* June 1685, 1.

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succeed her; the obituary in turn follows a series of accounts of the recent conversions of Protestant notables, carried out by prominent Catholic figures tied to the King.

The girl's deed evokes not only the iconography of Saint Agatha, but also the image of the Amazon warrior: according to legend, Amazons mutilated themselves in this way to improve their handling of bow and arrow. Indeed, the adolescent's self-mastectomy is compared to a heroic military endeavor: the issue's table of contents gives to the story the title 'extraordinary action' ('action extraordinaire'), an expression the *Mercure* often uses to describe military exploits in its battle accounts.[61] The girl is in fact portrayed as a steadfast soldier, 'firm in her resolve'.[62] This wording implies that young women, like men, can be heroes in the service of God and the King. [63]

The figure of the female soldier held great appeal for French readers during the seventeenth century. In the first half of the century, politically and militarily engaged noblewomen like Mme de Saint-Baslemont and the *Frondeuses* Mme de La Guette and the Duchess of Montpensier were depicted as modern-day Amazons. In the second half of the century, as Sylvie Steinberg and others have argued, the female soldier of popular fiction is associated with loyalty to the King during a period characterized by religious conflict and

[61] For example: 'Action remarquable d'un sergent de Piémont' (*MG* 1673, vol. ii); 'Action surprenante de M. de La Rablière', 'Action extraordinaire de M. de La Motte', 'Belle action de M. le comte de La Bourlie' (*MG* 1673, vol. v).
[62] 'ferme dans sa resolution', *ibid*., 275.
[63] According to the ARTFL database, consulted for the period 1650–1710, the word 'fermeté' ('firmness') is used by major authors most often to describe the following: Christ on the cross, good Christians' resignation as they approach death, brave soldiers in the midst of perilous battle—and women's breasts. This female Christian soldier's story brings together nearly all the term's semantic associations.

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frequent wars.[64] The literary vogue featuring cross-dressed female soldiers begins with Mme de Villedieu's *Vie d'Henriette-Sylvie de Molière* (1672–74); it continues with Jean Préchac's *L'Héroine mousquetaire* (1678), a novel based upon the life of the soldier Christine de Meyrac, who may or may not have existed.[65] Around the turn of the century, we find Paul-François Nodot's *La Rivale travestie* (1699) and two works of uncertain attribution, both about female soldiers associated with the legendary Chevalier Baltasar: *L'Héroïne travestie ou les Mémoires de la vie de Mademoiselle Delfosses ou le Chevalier Baltazard* (1695), and the pseudobiographical *Histoire de la dragone, contenant les actions militaires et les aventures de Geneviève Prémoy, sous le nom de Chevalier Balthazar* (1703). Joseph Harris and Margaret Wise have analyzed these works as literary entertainment, ascribing their appeal to transgression and titillation.[66]

Tapping into this trend early on, Donneau de Visé published in the *Mercure nouvelles* and accounts that deploy military heroines for multiple purposes. Five stories about cross-dressed female soldiers appear between 1672 and 1692; they highlight the military ideal in a manner designed to appeal to the *Mercure*'s female readership. The earliest example, 'Story of the Girl Soldier' ('Histoire de la fille soldat'), appeared in the *Mercure* in 1672.[67] With its comic

[64] See for example Sylvie Steinberg, *La Confusion des sexes*, Joan DeJean, 'Violent Women and Violence against Women: Representing the "Strong" Woman in Early Modern France', *Signs,* vol. xxix, n. 1 (2003), John A. Lynn II, *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge, 2008), and Florence Magnot, 'Le travesti et le roi: inscription de la chronique guerrière dans l'*Histoire de la dragone* (1703) et quelques autres textes autour de 1700', *Biblio 17*, vol. cliv (2004).
[65] See Lynn, *Women, Armies*, 170.
[66] See Joseph Harris, *Hidden Agendas: Cross-Dressing in Seventeenth-Century France* (Tübingen, Biblio 17, 2005), and Margaret Wise, 'Cross-Dressing Capital: Villedieu's Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière', *Romance Languages Annual* vii (1995), 180–184.
[67] Jennifer R. Perlmutter discusses this *nouvelle* in 'Sociopolitical Education', 66–67.

hyperbole and its description of a miser worthy of Molière, the first half of the story places us squarely in the realm of fiction; still, as we will see, the editor claims to have published this almost-certainly fictional story in order to combat fake news. As the tale begins, the miser is alarmed to learn that his wife is expecting a child. As he anticipates the expense that a new addition to the family will entail, he even calculates the cost of the food the child will consume while in utero. He determines that a daughter will be more expensive to raise than a son; when the child turns out to be a girl, he devises the burlesque scheme to bring her up as a boy to save money. The second half of the brief piece narrates what happens when this daughter, now grown, but ignorant of her sex, runs away and joins the army to escape mistreatment by her father. As a soldier, she distinguishes herself through exemplary valor and irreproachable morals. When the daughter of a family in whose home she is garrisoned falls in love with her and seeks a speedy marriage to cover an illegitimate pregnancy, the soldier ends up married to the young woman. Shortly after the wedding, a relative who enters their bedroom while the couple is asleep discovers that the soldier husband is in fact a woman. The narrator concludes by bringing an otherwise timeless story into the present day and using it to debunk a recent rumor claiming that one woman had impregnated another: 'And that is the origin of the tale that lately has caused a stir, prompting so many ignorant people to claim recently that a girl had gotten another girl pregnant'.[68] This implausible scenario is conventional by the genre's standards: for example, in the anonymous *Histoire de la dragone contenant les actions militaires et les avantures de Geneviève Prémoy, sous le nom du Chevalier Baltazar (*1703), the heroine repeatedly finds

[68] 'Voilà l'origine de l'aventure qui depuis peu a fait tant de bruit et pourquoi tant d'ignorants ont publié depuis quelques jours qu'une fille avait fait un enfant à une autre fille', *MG* i, Jan. 1672, 131.

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herself the object of amorous pursuit by other women; she marries more than one of them, and is suspected of fathering a child.

Before appearing in the 1703 novel, the legendary Chevalier Baltasar had already been brought to life in the pages of *Le Mercure galant*, in two stories from 1684 that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. The first, printed in the October issue, is presented as an excerpt of a letter from an anonymous 'trustworthy man' ('un homme digne de foi') about a woman who is imprisoned for unspecified reasons in Soissons, in the north of France. The framing text explicitly connects her story to those of cross-dressed women soldiers of popular novels by Marie-Catherine Desjardins and Jean de Préchac, respectively: 'One could find here [i.e., in this account] material for a story as extensive as that of Henriette-Sylvie de Molière, or of the Musketeer Heroine. What is surprising is that the story would be more truthful, though less plausible'.[69] This letter tells of the current predicament of an unnamed Dutch woman who, disguised as a man, had served the King in a series of regiments for nearly a decade. Condemned to death for killing a fellow soldier in a duel, the disguised soldier was pardoned once she revealed her sex. She had recently traveled to Soissons to convert to Catholicism but was detained for an unspecified reason; the reader is told only that her life is in danger and she needs protection. At the end of the excerpt, the editor expresses the hope that this exceptional person with such a singular life story ('une Personne dont la vie est si singuliere') will be treated with clemency.

[69] 'On y trouveroit dequoy fournir à une Histoire aussi étenduë qu'est celle de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière, ou de l'Héroïne mousquetaire. Ce qu'il y a de surprenant, c'est que ce seroit avec plus de vérité, quoy que ce fust avec moins de vraysemblance', *MG* Oct. 1684, 291.

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He changes his tune the following month, however, for in the intervening time he says he has learned that his correspondent was mistaken: the Soissons prisoner is an imposter who had appropriated the story of a 'real' heroine, the fabled Chevalier Baltasar:

> It is certain that everything contained in that excerpt [from the October letter] is very true, but these are actions that the supposed Dutch maiden dares to falsely claim for herself. They belong to a heroine who, having adopted male dress, has fought in various campaigns with much courage and valor, under the name Chevalier Baltasar.[70]

In the November update, the narrator outlines the imposter's life story. The Soissons prisoner, the reader discovers, is the daughter not of a distinguished Dutch colonel, as she had claimed, but of a lowly artisan from Valenciennes named La Fosse. Orphaned at a young age, she was raised in an institution for abandoned children, but expelled for unruly behavior. When exorcism failed, she was imprisoned; she escaped from prison to join the army. After that, she made her living by assuming a series of false identities and stealing from unsuspecting benefactors who sponsored her in a string of fraudulent conversions and rebaptisms: she posed in turn as an Anabaptist and as a Protestant in need of spiritual guidance. Presenting herself as Chevalier Baltasar, she gained access to court society for a time and, we are told, was even presented to the Queen. She entered a convent, stating that she wished to become a nun; then, after stealing from a resident, left in a

[70] 'Il est certain que tout ce qui est contenu dans cet Extrait est très-véritable, mais ce sont des actions que la prétenduë Demoiselle Hollandoise ose faussement s'attribuer. Elles sont d'une Héroïne, qui ayant pris l'habit de Garçon, a fait diverses campagnes avec beaucoup de courage et de bravoure, sous le nom du Chevalier Baltasar', *MG* Nov. 1684, 106–107. This legendary heroine resurfaces in 1695 and 1703 novels under two different names, Madeleine Delfosses and Geneviève Prémoy, respectively. The multiplication of figures bearing this *nom de guerre* is a problem addressed in *L'Héroine travestie*, a first-person narrative where the 'true' Baltasar confronts another cross-dressed female soldier who has adopted her title. See Benjamin Vanhouck, 'Henriette et Madeleine : jeux et enjeux de la réécriture au XVIIe siècle', *Dix-Septième Siècle,* vol. ccxiii, no. 4 (2001).

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violent fashion. She reappeared two years later in Paris, where she was recognized and imprisoned. Shen then managed to escape with the help of a fellow prisoner, whom she married and later betrayed, denouncing him to the Spanish as a spy. Only in Soissons, where she intended once again to profit from conversion, was she apprehended. As is the case in many of the *nouvelles* and accounts that appear in the *Mercure*, the prisoner's tale is presented as a developing story: at the article's conclusion, the Dutch woman is awaiting trial, and her fate has yet to be determined. Such open-endedness, gesturing to the world outside the text, adds a realistic touch to the *Mercure*'s stories; at the same time, it creates suspense, encouraging readers to purchase the next issue of the periodical.

What is most striking about the two articles dedicated to the Soissons prisoner is the narrator's seeming preference for fiction over fact; it is the legendary figure (the valiant Baltasar) whom he presents as 'true', and the real person (the immoral prisoner who has appropriated the literary heroine's story) who is condemned as 'false' or inauthentic. The *Mercure* piece may even have inspired the 1695 memoir-novel *L'Heroine travestie, ou les mémoires de la vie de Madeleine Delfosses*, which appears to have lifted almost word for word from the *Mercure* its description of the 'true' heroine's upbringing by a nurse with martial inclinations.[71] The confrontation of false and true versions of a fictional character serves as a good faith guarantee. Here the imposter carries an additional taint sure to inspire the indignation of a large portion of

[71] Compare the *Mercure*'s 'dès son enfance [elle] a eu les inclinations guerrières, les ayant sucées avec le lait de sa nourrice, qui a presque toujours porté les armes' (Oct. 1684, 292) to the 1695 novel's 'Je suçay avec le lait l'humeur martiale de cette femme [sa nourrice]' (*L'Héroïne travestie*, 5). The name of the novel's protagonist, 'Delfosses,' is remarkably similar to that of the prisoner profiled in the *Mercure*, 'La Fosse'. Though it seems possible that this person once existed, there is no proof that she did (nor is there any conclusive documentation of the deeds attributed to Chevalier Baltasar). See Lynn, *Women, Armies*, 171 and Steinberg, *La Confusion*, 79–82.

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the *Mercure*'s readership: posing as a non-Catholic wishing to convert, she has repeatedly exploited the kindness of Catholic benefactors eager to reclaim a lost soul. As in the 'Story of the Girl Soldier', the *Mercure* updates a timeless story — the topos of the cross-dressed heroine — with allusions to current news.

In a *nouvelle* from the April 1692 issue of the *Mercure*, the female soldier is a patriotic heroine who behaves with dignity and honor and inspires compassion.[72] This story contains a plot feature shared by many of the female soldier stories, where the woman liberates herself from an oppressive father or another abusive male figure. The unnamed protagonist is about to marry when her fiancé is tricked into enlisting in the army. The reluctant recruit remains a faceless sketch, a mere background character: he is fully eclipsed by his fiancée, a determined and resourceful young woman who attempts to secure his release by meeting with his commanding officer as soon as she learns of his predicament. This hard-hearted captain mocks her ardor and refuses to hand over her fiancé, even after the woman has offered to supply in his stead another, more suitable man. Outraged, she ambushes and slays the cruel captain, and then flees. To escape detection, she dresses as a man; shortly thereafter, she joins a regiment and becomes an accomplished soldier herself.

Over the years, she maintains her disguise and serves the King valiantly. At one point, in a plot feature common to these tales, she comes to the aid of a young girl whom one of her comrades intends to rape; the brave woman soldier gravely wounds the attacker. When at last she

[72] Similarly, an August 1685 story in the *Mercure* features an exemplary disguised female soldier; the narrator refers to her as 'the charming warrior' ('l'aimable Guerrière') and notes that her conduct of her duties surpassed that of her male comrades. She retires to a convent once her sex is discovered. See Perlmutter ('Sociopolitical Education', 67–68), who links this tale to the moral fervor of mid-1680s France.

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herself is wounded in battle, her sex is revealed, and she is arrested. As the piece ends, the woman soldier is awaiting a royal pardon, requested by Monsieur de la Neuville, the King's lieutenant. The city of Dunkerque, where she is being held, has already issued its verdict: the narrator tells us that 'The entire city considered her a heroine', and he concurs with this favorable judgment.[73]

While here the mention of proper names is most likely a device to add an air of authenticity to the *nouvelle*, cross-dressed female soldiers did exist: the historian Sylvie Steinberg has documented the cases of about forty seventeenth- and eighteenth-century female soldiers who managed to avoid detection for months or even years.[74] Most joined the army to escape adversity: poverty, unhappy or violent domestic situations, or forced marriages. But the *Mercure* enhances and idealizes these women, creating aspirational figures. These female soldiers' stories, which portray women not as mere bystanders, but as active participants in the King's military campaigns, are part of the *Mercure*'s editorial strategy of involving women readers in current affairs. At the same time, the stories have value as propaganda in the context of a society at war: these colorful women serve as diverting substitutes for the no doubt more familiar characters of bereaved wives and mothers--or again, of men forced to serve against their will, like the fiancé in the 1692 story.[75] In each of these stories, with the young woman's entry into military service, the bad father or father-figure is replaced by a good father, the supreme commander: the King. In this way, the *Mercure* intertwines narratives of female empowerment with the glorification of the monarch.

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[73] *MG* April 1692, 115.
[74] Steinberg, *Confusion*, 76.
[75] On commoners' hesitancy to serve, particularly after the institution of the *milice royale* in 1688, see François Bluche, *La vie quotidienne au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1984), 226.

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Conclusion: The uses of 'fake news'

As dissimilar as the two characters are, both the female soldier and the goat-footed woman illustrate a 'fake news' technique common in propaganda-infused journalism: the creation of personalities, mythologized figures perhaps based on real people, but enhanced to capture readers' imaginations and influence public opinion.[76] Shocking or grotesque stories — of women and especially women's bodies — were then and still are promoted by some media outlets in order, some might argue, to keep the public's minds off hard news or news prejudicial to those in power.[77] The *Mercure galant*'s stories of women soldiers, in which war is temporarily reduced to exotic backdrop, balance more sobering accounts of the realities of war, such as the *Mercure*'s own lists of war dead and wounded.

Outwardly aligned with power and orthodoxy, the *Mercure galant* has been described as a purveyor of 'cultural cement',[78] a publication exhibiting 'sometimes unbearable political conformism'.[79] Donneau de Visé never dared to question royal policies, whether military or religious. Instead, he conjured monster-babies to incite anti-Protestant sentiment and employed hyperbole to embellish lackluster French military campaigns. But Donneau de Visé's 'fake news' was not exclusively deployed in the service of the King. Donneau de Visé may have been,

[76] One twenty-first-century example of this process is Jessica Lynch, an American soldier who was gravely wounded in 2003 while serving in the Iraq War. This petite, pretty, and wholesome military supply clerk from rural West Virginia, who planned to become a kindergarten teacher after the war, emerged as one of the first American media heroes of the Iraq War. Reports of her fiercely fighting her Iraqi attackers during an ambush near Nasiriyah circulated widely. She later disavowed these stories. Lynch's promotion to female Rambo was seen by some critics as a strategy to encourage support for the war at a time when things were going badly for the US.
[77] This is Pierre Bourdieu's opinion regarding televised *faits divers*. See his *Sur la television* (Paris, 1996).
[78] Klaits, *Printed Propaganda*, 67.
[79] François Moureau, Le Mercure galant *de Dufresny ou le journalisme à la mode* (Oxford, 1982), 8.

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as Joseph Klaits asserts, a royal propagandist of 'meager ability',[80] but he was a creative and prolific storyteller. Many of the *nouvelles* published in the *Mercure* challenge normative discourse and social practices, particularly with regard to gender relations. Despite the fact that the majority of these tales were most likely not written by women, they function in ways that feminist critics today have ascribed to female-authored texts, contesting through their 'case studies of women's circumstances…misogynist generalities and maxims'.[81] This willingness to try to see the world through a woman's eyes may be what one (possibly fictional) woman reader of the *Mercure galant* had in mind when she expressed her wish that the *Mercure*'s author might one day become 'the women's historian' ('l'Historien des femmes').[82] The female soldiers' stories we have seen, like the crime stories and the tale of the goat-footed woman, reveal a willingness on Donneau de Visé's part to use fiction, disguised as authentic current events, to contest patriarchal norms. These hybrid tales, novel combinations of genres like the *canard*, the *histoire tragique* and the *nouvelle galante*, kindle readers' imaginations by depicting women attempting to take control of their own lives.

[80] Klaits, *Printed Propaganda*, 69.
[81] See Josephine Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726* (New York, 2013), 12.
[82] *Nouveau Mercure galant*, mai 1677, iii, 108–109, cited in Vincent, '*Le Mercure galant* et son public féminin', 78. This wish is conveyed by the secretary to an aristocratic lady; he writes to the editor to express his employer's satisfaction with the periodical.