

# Literary History Meets the History of Reading

## *The Case of La Princesse de Clèves and Its (Non)readers*

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**ABSTRACT** This article revisits the letters written by readers of the *Mercurie galant* who responded to the “gallant question,” posed by the periodical’s editor in an April 1678 issue, regarding a central plot twist of Madame de Lafayette’s novel *La Princesse de Clèves*. Highlighting the expansive, democratic, and participatory nature of this readership that connected with the unprecedented complexity of the novel’s characters, scholars have imputed to this public a modernity reflecting that of the novel itself, often considered “the first modern novel” in French. Closely analyzing the letters in light of their arguments and of the novel’s editorial history, this essay explores the implications of a disconnect between the work and the readers in question, who had perhaps not read the text and did not, in any case, empathize with its protagonist’s dilemma as presented by the *Mercurie*.

**KEYWORDS** readership, literary history, public, *La Princesse de Clèves*, typography

Régis Sauder’s 2010 film, *Nous, Princesses de Clèves*, opens on a teacher’s voice introducing a high school class to the 1678 work referenced in the film’s title. Against the sound of chalk on a blackboard and the bustle of students settling at their desks on the first day of class, the teacher presents the text in terms familiar to anyone who has taken or taught a survey of seventeenth-century French literature; it is the “first great modern novel in French literature.” “This is a difficult text,” she says, but continues, “I am convinced that we can study it here. I think this is a text that concerns you.”

The film will follow a group of Marseille *lycéens* over the course of a year as they grapple with the work’s meanings, recite lines by memory, play out scenes, and apply the work’s moral perspectives to their lives in conversation with an ever-silent interlocutor. The film thereby enacts an affirming symbiosis. It builds on the unstated but obvious assumption that nothing could be further

from the concerns of Marseille public school youths than the gallant adventures of Renaissance aristocrats. That they can nonetheless see in the protagonist's efforts to reconcile personal happiness with duty and social decorum a reflection of their own struggles—"I recognize myself in her a lot," says one student—elevates both text and its readers. The work fulfills its role as a "classic" that transcends time and place. "This is a novel that is still relevant to our lives, to life in 2009," declares the Bibliothèque Nationale de France conservator who hosts the students in the sanctum of the Salle de Réserve, where they are invited to behold the volumes of a first-edition copy. The students are also elevated. They defy our expectations not just as teenagers glued to their smartphones but, more meaningfully in the framework of twenty-first-century France, as underprivileged, ethnically mixed youths who, we presume, might not naturally be inclined to embrace the classic French literary curriculum as an opening toward self-actualization and a brighter future.

There is, of course, also the backdrop of French president Nicholas Sarkozy's attacks on the novel for its inclusion in public service exams, which symbolized in his eyes a French administrative tendency to favor well-heeled candidates rich in "general culture" over more technically qualified applicants.<sup>1</sup> This much-discussed *affaire* goes unmentioned in Sauder's film. Yet one can hardly fail to connect the students' dignified recitations with the anti-Sarkozy public readings that were contemporaneous with the film's 2009 events, and which invested Madame de Lafayette's work with a distinct political and moral charge as an oppositional rallying cry. In the event, they also gave the work renewed commercial value, as sales of the book reportedly soared.

Reading *La Princesse de Clèves* entails a certain performance of reading, driven by a belief in the text's moral power that is affirmed by its recognized status as a classic. Reading, here, enacts a defense of great French literature and literary education. Yet for assessing a work's original readership, such valuations present a distinct challenge. In the case of the *Princesse*, the consensus on its original reception generally confirms our present-day assumptions of its importance, positing that it was tremendously popular from its first appearance: "a considerable success," writes Hélène Merlin, echoing a commonplace about the initial response to the work found in many scholarly accounts.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, this assessment reprises numerous contemporary reports. When the *Mercurie galant* called the work to the public's attention in March 1678, it underscored "for how

1. *Le Figaro*, "Nous avons atteint les limites d'un élitisme stérile"; *Le Figaro*, "La culture générale chassée des concours administratifs." All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2. Merlin, *Public et littérature*, 307.

long and with such anticipation everyone was waiting for it.”<sup>3</sup> Jean-Baptiste-Henri de Valincour concurred in his famous September 1678 critique of the novel: “It is said that everyone is everywhere on the lookout for this work.”<sup>4</sup> These observations seem, in turn, to be validated by a collection of letters that *Mercure* readers sent to the journal’s creator and first editor, Jean Donneau de Visé, in response to a *question galante* inspired by the work’s central plot twist of the princess’s confession to her husband of her love for another, which Donneau de Visé included in an April 1678 supplement. Printed in subsequent volumes of both regular monthly issues and, primarily, quarterly supplements (called the *Extraordinaires du Mercure*), the answers he received bear witness to the work’s impact, both in its own right and as a powerful representative of a soon-to-be-dominant genre, the *nouvelle galante* or “novel.” They showed readers moved by the novel’s realism and psychological depth, buying up copies, debating its moral insights, and, like the students in Sauder’s documentary, applying its scenarios to their lives.<sup>5</sup>

I suspect, though, that when Valincour remarked how the book was awaited “everywhere,” he was not in fact imagining the far-off provincial towns where the debates triggered by the *Mercure galant*’s question are thought to have manifested the cultural “democratization” that we now link with the work’s thematic and generic modernity. Conversely, a closer look at the letters Donneau de Visé received reveals that the text was not really being talked about in the way we have come to imagine. Indeed, if any student from Sauder’s film most resembles the “average reader” of 1678 whose *Mercure* testimonials provide much of the evidence of the *Princesse*’s catalytic role in forming a new type of public by drawing readers into the arena of literary commentary and public discourse—with the scare quotes applying as much to “reader” as to “average”—it is a student named Sarah who exasperatingly says to the camera, in response to a question to which we are not privy but which we assume to be something about her feelings of connection to the work, “Nothing . . . nothing at all.”

Sarah’s indifference thematizes the disconnect this essay will probe. Literary-historical accounts of the *Princesse*’s first readers, building from a present-day assumption of the work’s overarching significance and modernity, tend to project an appreciation for these same qualities onto its early readers, who are then posited to have responded viscerally and energetically to them, forming in so doing a new kind of public around a new kind of work. But patterns of reader response, as these played out in the pages of the *Mercure* and as they can

3. *Mercure galant*, Mar. 1678, 379.

4. Valincour, *Lettres à Madame la Marquise*, 67.

5. Joan DeJean writes, “Parisian readers were evidently as quick to grab up copies of the new novel as the *Mercure Galant* was to proclaim its success” (“Lafayette’s Ellipses,” 888).

be corroborated by bibliographical evidence relating to the circulation of copies in the late seventeenth century, point to a different story. They suggest a new expansive public of readers, though one shaped not by a more relatable and “realistic” fiction but by a decidedly older gallant ethics, and by a typographical naïveté that would, in reality, impede any deep sense of connection with the modern literary text.

...

*La Princesse de Clèves* tells the story of young noblewoman who arrives at court, despite her mother’s fears. Her beauty and virtue captivate everyone, including the prince de Clèves, whom she will marry, and the duc de Nemours, a “*chef-d’oeuvre* of nature” whose incomparable valor and pleasing wit “placed him above all others,” with whom she falls in love. Terrified for her virtue, she makes, in the key scene, what she describes as a “confession that no wife has ever before made to her husband,” that she loves another (she does not say who) and hopes that the prince will then allow her to leave the court and Nemours’s presence. The prince, however, is consumed with jealousy and desperate to discover the identity of his wife’s beloved. He dies in anguish, and the princess, racked by guilt and continuing to refuse Nemours’s advances (now legitimate in his eyes since she is a widow), retires to a convent.<sup>6</sup>

It was, of course, the confession scene that inspired the April *Extraordinaire* question, which asked readers to weigh in on whether or not the avowal to her husband was advisable. Donneau de Visé printed a total of fourteen responses sent to him by his readership, most appearing in the *Extraordinaire* of July 1678.<sup>7</sup> This number may not seem especially high given some of the claims about the popularity of the *Princesse*, though it is about equal to the number of letters printed in response to the second question put to readers in the April supplement on the origin of *mouches* or beauty marks (twelve in the July *Extraordinaire*, one more in October). Both figures pale in comparison with the much larger number of answers to the enigmas from earlier issues. These famous riddles in verse remained the focus of readerly interaction with the *Mercure* and the ostensible motivation behind most of the five hundred to six hundred letters that Donneau de Visé claimed (surely hyperbolically) to receive per month.<sup>8</sup> The eleven letters addressing the question of the *aveu* in the July *Extraordinaire* count among thirty-four letters in total that were printed in the volume.

6. Lafayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, 333, 419.

7. Eleven letters appeared in the July *Extraordinaire*, two in the ordinary October 1678 issue, and one final response in the October *Extraordinaire*.

8. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, “Avis.”

Beyond the quantity of letters, however, it is their content that points to even more salient inconsistencies. First, belying an image of *Mercur*e readers absorbed by Lafayette's narrative, what is striking is the extent to which many answer the question with at most a passing reference, if any at all, to the work that inspired the question. In fact, it is easy to imagine that, of the fourteen total respondents to the dilemma of Madame de Clèves's *aveu*, as many as ten had no knowledge of the work beyond the basic elements mentioned in the question itself, as it appeared in the *Mercur*e. Three do not mention the title or any names of characters in their answers.<sup>9</sup> One of these, signed Bouchet from Grenoble, refers elliptically to "the Lady in question," and all three discuss the matter only generically in terms of a "Femme," her "Amant," and her "Mary." Three other letters mention Madame de Clèves or the princess de Clèves one time only in introducing answers to the question, often as the writer pivots from addressing other topics. But once the transition is made, they shift to the generic language of the earlier letters, suggesting that the proper name served, in these readers' minds, more to designate Donneau de Visé's question (as distinct from his question about *mouches* or an enigma) than Lafayette's work per se.<sup>10</sup> "To come to the Question that the Story of the Princesse de Clèves inspired [*a fait naistre*], & to get to the matter," writes one, who then discusses whether "a Wife who doubts a little her own strength, & who believes her virtue to be in danger in the presence of a gallant Man whom she loves, & whom she cannot avoid seeing," should consider carefully "the mood and temperament of her Husband, before making to him such a delicate declaration."<sup>11</sup>

A propensity for generic over concrete terms calls into question some of the readers' familiarity with the novel. So does the tendency to construct answers around scenarios and implications that are foreign and even contradictory to what is rendered in the text, and to do so, moreover, without any clear recognition of the divergence. "l'Insensible de Beauvais" describes the "Husband's" fear that his wife's love will increase with her absence from court (which her confession will allow), though Monsieur de Clèves voices no such concern in Lafayette's text.<sup>12</sup> A reader who signs "D'Abloville" imagines even more incongruously that the "overly sincere confession" might be received suspiciously by the husband, who will think it was offered only "to save appearances,

9. The three letters in question are numbers 26, 27, and 30 from the *Extraordinaire du Mercur*e, July 1678, 305–8, 320–25, 332–38. Maurice Laugaa notes that two letters make no mention of the text (*Lectures de Mme de Lafayette*, 32), though I believe that number is three. In any case, Laugaa is, despite the title of his book, one of the few scholars to remark on the lack of much direct engagement with the novel in these letters.

10. Letters 13, 24, and 33 from the *Extraordinaire du Mercur*e, July 1678, 170–78, 223–34, 378–84.

11. *Extraordinaire du Mercur*e, July 1678, 225.

12. *Extraordinaire du Mercur*e, July 1678, 323.

& to serve in turn to better deceive him.”<sup>13</sup> But in the novel, while the husband is angry that his wife will not identify her lover or that she cannot suppress her love for him, he never questions the sincerity of her desire to escape him.

These are, indeed, stark instances of a broader pattern, which is that, no matter how concretely or abstractly they refer to the work, they never acknowledge that in answering Donneau de Visé’s question—whether “this Wife . . . does better to confess her passion to this Husband or to hide it at the risk of the battles [i.e., within herself] that she will continually have to fight”—in the negative, they stand in opposition to Lafayette’s narrative choice. “I am leaning toward suppressing a confidence of this kind, rather than making it,” writes Le Celeste Allobroge, justifying the view with a rationale—“Retreat [from the court] might offer repose to a jealous man, but it cannot cure him”—that hardly seems cognizant of the dire effects on Monsieur de Clèves that the novel describes, who certainly did not see even momentary rest.<sup>14</sup> Readers would, or at least could, know that their views clashed with the arc of the narrative. The *Mercur*e’s question itself affirms that “Madame de Clèves reveals to her Husband the Passion that she feels for Monsieur le Duc de Nemours” and even highlights the “gesture [*trait*]” as “*singulier*.” But it seems that readers saw themselves to be more in dialogue with Donneau de Visé and his moral query than with Lafayette and the plotlines she develops. Joan DeJean describes Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle’s admiring analysis of the *Princesse*, which appeared as an anonymous letter in the May issue of the *Mercur*e, as “a model for the untrained responses to follow.”<sup>15</sup> But in his text Fontenelle, who “waited to judge the *Princesse de Cleves* until he had read it,” probed the ways in which the avowal, as a narrative device (described in the terms used by Donneau de Visé as “a new and singular gesture”), was “very well prepared” by prior events and by the consistency of Lafayette’s characterization of the princess as virtuous. In reality, though, the responses from readers could hardly seem more distant from Fontenelle’s careful craftsmanlike focus on literary technique and story development.

Fontenelle offers an apt pivot for considering a second key feature of this readership, which is its tendency toward not lively debate but self-conscious and celebrated consensus. Donneau de Visé again framed the phenomenon in a way that would influence historical perceptions of this public more than it would accurately reflect what his readers were reporting to him in their letters, writing that the confession “divides opinions. Some maintain that she should never

13. *Extraordinaire du Mercur*e, July 1678, 333.

14. *Extraordinaire du Mercur*e, July 1678, 27.

15. DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 61. Fontenelle’s letter appears in the *Mercur*e galant, May 1678, titled “Lettre sur la Princesse de Cleves” (109–28). Donneau notes that the letter had been sent to him from Guyenne, “without anyone explaining either who wrote it or to whom it was addressed” (109).

have made such a dangerous confession, & others admire the virtue which drives her to this.”<sup>16</sup> Yet in stark contrast with Fontenelle’s interpretation, not one of the fourteen letters expresses much admiration for the avowal. Ten are unambiguously and often forcefully opposed to it; one refuses to weigh in (“it is difficult to decide if she acted well or badly”);<sup>17</sup> and three others are generally against the confession though envision exceptional scenarios where it may be understandable. Thus De Grammont argues, “It is, without comparison, worse for a Wife, to make such a confession to her Husband, than to hide her passion at the risk of the battles she will have to endure,” but he allows that if the woman is sure to fail in her internal resistance to her illicit feelings, it is better to confess.<sup>18</sup>

This broad agreement, moreover, not only exists in fact. It is also central to the self-awareness of the readers *as readers*. That is, readers are not simply in agreement. They are, in addition, eager to convey their judgments as reflections of a consensus in which they participate, rather than as individualized views in counterpoint with the judgments of others. Those who famously described in their letters the group discussions to which the *Mercure*’s question gave rise almost invariably portrayed these exchanges as harmonious, not disputatious. Relaying the opinions of “the Shepherds” from the “Rives de Juine,” Stedroc gives no hint of the clashing of opinions described by Donneau de Visé. “They were in agreement,” he notes, “that it [the confession] was possible in an age when Husbands were not so delicate . . . ; but they maintain that if Madame de Clèves had as much intelligence as this Story gives her, she lacked it a little when she resolved to make this declaration.”<sup>19</sup> L’Insensible de Beauvais similarly affirms the unanimity behind his response: “Of five or six kind People who were there, there was not a single one who was of your opinion.”<sup>20</sup>

In the end, just one account really portrays disagreement. Significantly, it is related not by a reader but by Donneau de Visé himself in the ordinary October issue when he notes a “new conflict of opinions which this Question occasioned.” Donneau de Visé tells the story of a marriage—or at least the signing of marriage documents—that was interrupted when the *Extraordinaire* of April turned up in a mail delivery. The avid crowd rushes to read this latest issue and

16. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, Apr. 1678, 298.

17. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 156.

18. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 232–33. The caveat is of course pertinent to Lafayette’s narrative, which of course highlights her fear that she will fail to resist her feelings, but the fact that it is offered as almost an afterthought to his initial answer suggests that De Grammont is, in his mind, answering a question not about the novel (which there is little sign that he has read) but about ethics in the abstract.

19. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 40–41.

20. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 320. Donneau de Visé’s introduction to this letter presents it as “d’un Particulier à un Amy” (319). The *vous* here is an unnamed addressee who presumably defended the confession in a previous exchange.

quickly finds the *question galante*. “Great contestation at first,” writes Donneau de Visé, with answers diverging. The beloved’s views are consulted, and needless to say, “they discovered that they had opposed feelings,” which causes concern: “They were afraid that they were not so unified in Marriage.” Yet far from a substantive debate that might animate a new public of opinionated readers, the disagreement here instead thematizes older gallant conventions about marriage and sociability, particularly the *mondain* topos that construes marriage as the imperious constraining of a “modern” worldly young woman by an older man and his antiquated ethics and rules. The woman in the scene Donneau de Visé relates, a “kind Person who had a lively intelligence, and who recited Verse with great facility,” is against the *aveu* and has a youthful abbot, “to whom *la Belle* was perhaps not indifferent,” defend her view. The man, for his part, “who did not claim in any way to have the same [poetic] talent,” who is “older” and “of a type of frank and artless Man,” defends the princess’s adherence to moral rigor, turning for inspiration to no less than “Arnolphe from l’Ecole des Femmes” and his famous *Maximes de mariage*. Gallant verse from the woman and the abbot inevitably wins those gathered over to their position against the princess’s confession, and the husband-to-be, seeing his isolation, “yields.” He asks his fiancée to love him without loving another, and if that turns out not to be possible, “he beseeched her to keep it a secret” (thus repudiating the example of the *Princesse*). “Everybody” agrees, and the familiar language of unanimity and consensus quickly brings us to the socially cohesive conclusion of the anecdote, in which “all agreed” that the outcome of the princess’s *aveu* was the prince’s death. Despite Donneau de Visé’s initial emphasis on conflicting opinions, the story’s message is unequivocal: there is no debate. No modern, sophisticated, polished reader of the *Mercure* could be on the husband’s side. The dispute is farce, not honest disagreement between individuals, and as farce it is meant to distinguish a valorized ethical point of view to which all should subscribe from a ridiculous one.

This association of the *aveu* with the jealous husband and the devalued moral perspective he personifies in the courtly world of *galanterie* brings us to a third aspect of this readership, one on which I have touched in passing but that needs now to be underscored. That is, the readers are not merely unanimous; they are unanimously *against* the ethical code and moral vision that the princess represents, which they see at best as outdated and unrealistic and at worst as unreasonable and contrary to contemporary morals. Nobody connects with Madame de Clèves’s confession via the kind of affirmative personal identification illustrated by the Marseille students, and which we might consider today to be at the core of any appreciation of the novel as a literary classic. “I know that all across the Banks of the Juïne, where we are no more stupid and unpolished

[*beste*] than anywhere else, it will not be imitated by any Shepherdesses,” writes Stedroc.<sup>21</sup> Those who see virtue in her confession, as the novel seems to imply its readers should, do so not because they see in the gesture a viable model to emulate but insofar as they deem the *aveu* to express the moral perspectives of a distant past or of a heroic fictional universe, sharply distinct from—rather than assimilable to—the one the readers inhabit. Her confession was admirable, writes one reader, “in a time when Husbands were not as delicate and refined as today.”<sup>22</sup> Another named De Merville states, “The Princesse de Clèves is excusable, because she would not be the Heroine of a Romance if she did not have an extraordinary character.”<sup>23</sup>

By the same token, those who do not connect the “Femme” in the gallant question with ancient values or with the distant world of heroic romance, and instead refer its premises to a “femme du monde” of the present day, are especially unreceptive to the assertion that the *aveu* might stand as a moral example. An unsigned letter asks whether it could ever be “a great virtue to appeal to a Husband out of weakness,” conceding at most that it is “a virtue without prudence.”<sup>24</sup> More virtuous, the letter claims, would be to suffer in silence. Boucher rejects the princess’s choice in analogous terms: “There is nothing less gallant than the gesture of a Wife who confesses to her Husband her passion & that of her Lover, for no reason other than to maintain peace in her household,” he writes, adding, “But there is nothing more gallant and agreeable for her, to withstand deftly and with mystery a beautiful Passion.”<sup>25</sup> Boucher’s substitution of “galanterie” for “virtue” is most significant, for against the austerity and sacrifice of Lafayette’s protagonist, so much the basis for later views of the work’s *modern* psychological depth and for the princess’s timeless relatability to readers, those who opined in the pages of the *Mercure* adhered to a worldly and sociable ethics that had little room for Madame de Clèves’s “singular,” isolating moral rigor. Moreover, they associated the latter with a forgotten past, whereas it was the sociability virtuously rejected by the princess that, for them, represented a modern ethics insofar as it might be applicable to their lives in 1678.

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The disconnect between letters answering Donneau de Visé’s question and the work that inspired it was, to be sure, enabled by the *Mercure* editor’s formulation, which asked readers not to discuss the novel *per se* but to address, more

21. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 41.

22. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 40.

23. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 216.

24. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 176.

25. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1678, 308.

generally, the abstract moral quandary that its pivotal scene raised: “I ask whether a virtuous Wife . . . does better to confess her passion to this Husband, or to hide it.”<sup>26</sup> There was no need to have read the text to participate in the debate and clearly no expectation that the reader would have done so, since, as we have seen, Donneau de Visé printed numerous responses that did not take the details of Lafayette’s story into consideration at all. In fact, he almost certainly could not have anticipated anything else, despite the buzz—the *bruit*—that he highlights in association with the work, because an additional factor that should be considered in assessing the early readership of the *Princesse* is the limited access that Donneau de Visé’s dispersed provincial public would have had to the book. Key testimonials bear witness to the scarcity of copies outside the capital in the months after the work’s publication. Valincour describes his “mortification to be so far from Paris at the time it was published and to be among the last to receive” a copy.<sup>27</sup> Roger de Bussy-Rabutin’s correspondence throughout the spring of 1678 vents similar frustration at his inability to get his hands on the text (whose *achevé d’imprimer* was dated March 8) from his Burgundy estate, where he had been in exile since his disgrace in the mid-1660s: “I ask that it be sent to me,” he first writes to Madame de Sévigné on March 22. On April 28 he complains to Seneville, “I have not yet seen the *Princesse de Clèves*; I am dying to see it”; still on May 30 to Madeleine de Scudéry, “I’m still waiting for it every day”; until on June 26 or 27 he can tell Madame de Sévigné, “I have finally read the *Princesse de Clèves*.”<sup>28</sup>

Valincour and Bussy-Rabutin were well connected, and their difficulties procuring copies of the *Princesse* should give us pause before we assume too quickly that De Merville in Dieppe or Bouchet in Grenoble could have done so in time for their opinions to make the pages of the July *Extraordinaire* (which appeared in the fall of 1678).<sup>29</sup> To what extent was the *Princesse* available in the bookstores of Beauvais, Argentan, and the other towns identified by Donneau de Visé’s respondents in their letters? It is very hard to say. But we can, I believe, affirm that there were not a lot of copies of the text in circulation in the second half of 1678, when Donneau de Visé’s question reached *Mercur*e readers. And this scarcity probably extended all the way into the eighteenth century, given that there were few reeditions before 1700. Claude Barbin, who published the first edition, did not produce a second until 1689, and there appear to have been no more than two or perhaps three counterfeit printings around the original

26. *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, Apr. 1678, 298.

27. Valincour, *Lettres à Madame la Marquise*, 33.

28. Bussy, *Correspondance*, 4:66, 100, 115, 140–41.

29. Its *achevé d’imprimer* is dated October 15, 1678.

publication date, produced by either Elzevier or Abraham Wolfgang in the Netherlands, with some showing Barbin's falsified imprint on the title page, and some not showing it.<sup>30</sup> This is not necessarily to refute the success story touted by literary historians, since most books were never reedited or pirated at all. But as we set out to define the work's place in seventeenth-century French literary history and construct an image of its public as reflective of this place, we ought to bear in mind that the *Princesse's* editorial history is quite slender in comparison, for instance, with that of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*. We tend not to conceive of La Rochefoucauld's readership as a particularly expansive, modern or democratic one. Instead, we are more likely to think of the circumscribed *mondaine* network to which Madame de Sablé turned when she sought to gauge interest in a possible printing of the aphorisms he was collecting, a network that included Madame de Lafayette. However, Jean Marchand's bibliography lists seven editions of the *Reflexions morales* within two years of its initial 1665 publication: three by Barbin and four counterfeits. By the time the *Princesse* appeared in 1678, Barbin was on his fifth edition. By 1693 a full twenty-one were on the market, printed in Amsterdam, The Hague, Lyon, Toulouse, and Paris.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps an even more suggestive comparison is with Barbin's slightly later editions of Madeleine de Scudéry's moral writings, with text drawn from her 1640s and 1650s prose romances (*Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie, histoire romaine*), now readapted as nonnarrative "conversations" on proper social conduct and ethical understanding. Beginning with the 1680 *Conversations sur divers sujets*, Chantal Morlet Chantalat's bibliography counts five more editions between 1682 and 1692, including Barbin's fairly rapid follow-up, *Conversations nouvelles*, from 1684. In fact, a quick search through the catalog of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and in Google Books turns up at least five more editions from this ten-year interval, carrying Lyon, Amsterdam, and The Hague imprints, suggesting an even wider circulation than what Morlet Chantalat's enumeration already indicates was a quite successful publishing enterprise.<sup>32</sup> Both counterexamples show how publication history, as a window onto the

30. Avenir Tchémérzine identifies three counterfeit editions from 1678: a compressed edition he deems "extremely rare"; a "neatly printed" edition with the same collation as Barbin's and with Barbin's imprint, which he attributes to Pierre Elzevier in Utrecht; and a second Elzevier edition, more compressed, without the Barbin imprint, though one can find copies from this run with the imprint (e.g., Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon, Rés 813698) (*Bibliographie*, 356–57). Alphonse Willems contests the attribution of the latter counterfeit edition to Elzevier, ascribing it instead to Abraham Wolfgang, who then reproduced it in 1688 under his own imprint, a year before Barbin's second edition of the *Princesse*. Willems also makes no mention of the first counterfeit attributed by Tchémérzine to Elzevier (*Les Elzevier*, 519); see also Ashton, "Essai de bibliographie."

31. Marchand, *Bibliographie*, 112–81.

32. Morlet Chantalat, *Bibliographie*, 33–34. Editions not listed here include Lyon (1680), La Haye (1685), Amsterdam (1686), Amsterdam (1688), and The Hague (1692).

history of reading, can introduce a distinct and often contrary perspective on more established literary-historical paradigms. In the case of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, the work's commercial success across Europe forces us to rethink a tendency to see it only in light of the closed interpersonal dynamics of court culture. This tension is no less salient with respect to Scudéry's editions, which, going back to the midcentury romances, experienced similar marketplace traction (quick reeditions, counterfeits produced in a range of French and European cities), yet which have, if anything, been even more tightly associated with the restricted and concentrated social configuration of elite Parisian *mondanité*.

More significant for our purposes, though, is the fact that we seldom associate Scudéry with the 1680s. Her name marks the pinnacle of "salon culture" during the Fronde and post-Fronde years. The rise of Louis XIV and the cultural politics of his court has meant that, from a literary-historical viewpoint, Scudéry cedes her place by 1660 to Molière, Racine, and eventually, of course, Lafayette. No matter that Scudéry not only outlived all these writers but continued to produce after they were gone. Now dedicated to the king (whereas *Le Grand Cyrus* had allegorized the exploits of the frondeur Condé), Scudéry's late production is not well integrated into standard chronologies. And in turn, we tend to project her disappearance from these timelines onto the growing readership of the late seventeenth century, conflating the latter's modernity as a rapidly growing, heterogeneous, and commercially constituted public with our twenty-first-century sense of the aesthetic or literary modernity that would render Scudéry obsolete after 1678. How, indeed, could an emerging *modern* public be reading Scudéry at all, let alone prefer her to Lafayette?

The bibliographic evidence indicates, however, that the expanding market of the 1680s was markedly more likely to demand the fables and moral didacticism of *Cyrus* and *Clélie* over the nuanced character portraits of the *Princesse*, and that the *bruit* around Lafayette's work evoked by Donneau de Visé and Valincour was far less audible outside the elite cultural networks of Paris to which they belonged than we might believe. In fact, the publication record resonates with our analysis of letters from *Mercure* readers, who, aside from not appearing to have read the *Princesse*, did not connect with what we take to be the distinctively modern complexity of the work's suffering protagonist. On the contrary, her "depth," which manifests in her "virtuous" refusal of social, political, and gender norms, and which makes her seem "real" to us today, led her to make decisions that these readers universally condemned. They were ultimately not interested in the psychological distress and indecision symptomizing irresolvable conflicts between personal desires and the social order. They sought in their reading the very opposite: an unambiguous and easy-to-follow ethics of social integration. To this end, Scudéry's behavioral prescriptions and stylized

renderings of group harmony, so artificial and “unrealistic” to modern-day inclinations, were more to their liking and, indeed, spoke more directly and, indeed, “realistically” to their lives.

In this respect, the “modern” commercialized public of the late seventeenth century was built not on the forward-looking “realism” of Lafayette but on the seemingly antiquated cultural sensibilities that Lafayette’s realism, in literary-historical accounts, is supposed to have superseded. Daniel Mornet noted the paradox that, while the *Mercure* helped to usher in modern journalism, it did so as the vehicle for the revival of midcentury *préciosité*.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, satires of the *Mercure* and its readership from the 1680s by Edme Boursault and Pierre de Saint-Glas consistently highlighted the *Mercure* public’s tastes for outdated forms, such as enigmas and *bouts-rimés*. The latter were the products of a parlor game in which poems were improvised around a predetermined set of rhymes.<sup>34</sup> All the rage in 1650s salons, *bouts-rimés* had fallen out of fashion by the 1660s.<sup>35</sup> Yet they were resurgent in the pages of the *Mercure* two decades later. Mornet describes several contests on given rhymes; one, in 1682, elicited 160 submissions. Another, in 1683, for the best sonnet in praise of the king on the rhymes “Pan” and “Guenuche,” generated over four thousand sonnets, “si on l’en croit.”<sup>36</sup>

The *Mercure* is, of course, not the only instance where a temporal disconnect defines the relationship of a large, democratizing public to a corpus of outdated reading materials. William St. Clair’s analysis of the “romantic reading nation” in England describes a similar scenario. St. Clair emphasizes the role of new intellectual property laws that kept new works covered by exclusive copyright protections in artificially short supply. Only when the copyright term expired, decades later, could the works appear in a sufficient number of cheaper editions that a new public could form around them.<sup>37</sup> In the case of the *Princesse*, it is not nascent intellectual property law that defines the apparent paradox of a public expanding through consumption of not new but old and repurposed texts, but three factors that can help explain the dynamic and shed light

33. Mornet, “Comment étudier les écrivains,” 206.

34. Saint-Glas, *Les bouts-rimez*; and Boursault, *La comédie sans titre*. Boursault’s comedy was first performed in 1683 under the title *Le Mercure galant*.

35. Jean-François Sarasin’s satirical verse “Duloc, ou la défaite des bouts-rimés” from 1654 is considered to mark the moment when the form went out of style.

36. Mornet, “Comment étudier les écrivains,” 209–10.

37. St. Clair, *Reading Nation*. Roger Chartier also highlights the disconnect between an emerging “popular” readership and materials marketed to them in the *Bibliothèque Bleue*—the famous line of cheap, small-format books, often sold wrapped in blue paper covers and originally published in Troyes for a more popular readership. The *Bibliothèque Bleue* shaped a new, more inclusive public not by means of a new kind of reading material but by recycling from a “timeless” canon of well-known narratives and tales (“*Bibliothèque Bleue* and Popular Reading”).

on post-1650 commercialized readerships.<sup>38</sup> First, if we assume the fourteen respondents to reflect the broader public of the *Mercure*, as this can be ascertained from the names, locations, and occupations with which readers often signed their letters, it is not surprising that *Mercure* readers would be indifferent to Madame de Clèves's rejection of court politics and of the social benefits of marriage in favor of pious withdrawal. For those who answered the *question galante* would have been mostly drawn from the burgeoning world of provincial professions and officialdom.<sup>39</sup> They were doctors, teachers, or lawyers attached to regional presidial courts or local bailiwicks. They served the provincial intendancies and other royal agencies as subdelegates, or they were women and youths connected to this fast-growing, socially ascendant, urbanizing milieu through family or marriage. In this respect, these readers were mostly the products of a late seventeenth-century social fluidity resulting from the extension of the "absolutist" state and its fiscal and judicial bureaucracies into the growing towns of France. As such, their reading mobilized a set of literacy skills rooted in the desire for elevation and personal distinction fostered by developing professional fields, as well as in their unflinching attachment to the monarchy that furnished the opportunities for advancement.<sup>40</sup> Sure enough, in addition to outdatedness, the satires of Boursault and Saint-Glas emphasized the outsized socioprofessional aspirations of *Mercure*'s readers, invariably figured as bourgeois who turn to the periodical to promote and elevate their identities, presumptuously and deceptively claiming titles and honorifics, with no basis in the "traditional" social order.<sup>41</sup> It is hard to see how the princess's virtuous refusal

38. However, George Hoffmann has shown how the regulation of rights and *privilèges* impacted the form and availability of editions in sixteenth-century France ("Montaigne Monopoly"; *Montaigne's Career*, chap. 3 ["Wagering on Publication"]).

39. Janet Letts's survey of 2,330 respondents between 1680 and 1710 (drawn from sample years at five-year intervals) shows the prevalence of low- and midlevel officers among readers who wrote to (and had their letters printed in) the *Mercure*. Thirty percent of the respondents she counted were officers, of whom the vast majority (90–100 percent in the later years) were presidial judges, bailiffs, *prévôtés*, salt tax collectors, and other run-of-the-mill administrators, rather than full-fledged *parlementaires*. The 29 percent categorized as "other" included various professionals, such as doctors and pedagogues. Letts, "Responsive Readers," 218–20. In "Les lecteurs du *Mercure galant*" I develop a portrait of three readers from 1678, including a presidial lawyer in Bourg-en-Bresse, a subdelegate of the intendant of La Rochelle, and the daughter of an army officer in Brie-Comte-Robert.

40. Among the abundant sources describing the complex "expansion" of the state under Louis XIV, see Beik, *Absolutism and Society*; Collins, *State in Early Modern France*; and Cosandey and Descimon, *L'absolutisme en France*. William Beik's review essay, "The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration," is a useful survey of attempts to interpret absolutism as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than a pure imposition of centralized political power. The context of provincial engagement with the monarchy is central to Viala's analysis of "galanterie" as an "idéologie du mérite personnel" in *La France galante*, 180–84, 293.

41. Boursault's *Comédie sans titre* consists of a succession of satirical portraits of readers who stop by the office of the *Mercure*'s editor with ridiculous requests serving farcical exercises in self-promotion. The first visitor, a Monsieur Michaut, asks that the editor help him invent a noble background so that he can

to play the sociopolitical game of the court could have been fully appreciated by an audience that looked to their reading materials precisely for the keys to succeeding at this game.

Second, what helped connect a “modern” reading public to recycled content were the new forms in which the old material was (re)packaged. Alain Viala points to an innovation introduced by Scudéry herself when, with *Célinthe* in 1661, she abandoned the multivolume *romans à fleuve* for which she remains best known but in which she was, most likely, the least read. In their place, stories that would earlier have been intercalated into a longer narrative appeared as short, single-volume books, labeled on their title page “nouvelle.”<sup>42</sup> Better suited to a less elite readership with fewer resources for the ten-octavo tomes that constituted a single romance earlier in the century, the shorter, small-formatted, one-volume fictions were also, as Viala notes, better adapted to these consumers’ kinetic lifestyles. As striving professionals, they had less free time than the aristocratic audiences of *L’Astrée* and preferred a reading adapted to their mobility, in duodecimo and sextodecimo formats that they could carry in their pockets and peruse in the array of venues they frequented in the course of their busy days.<sup>43</sup> The even shorter narratives in each volume of the *Mercure* suited such daily routines even better.

Finally, a third factor defining the *Princesse*’s public is a particular transitional legibility that was characteristic of the early commercial printed book market. This readership rested, I would argue, on a set of bibliographic protocols that were, on the one hand, responsive to the “modern” social aspirations of individuals who sought in books content that they could usefully apply to their

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marry a “jeune Marquise” whose parents would not hear of a bourgeois suitor—“I have come to find you in order to ennoble my Race” (1.2). All of the characters fit the mold of bourgeois professionals—doctors, language teachers (of Norman), accountants—whose efforts at social advancement are the main topic of comedy. In Saint-Glas’s play, the *bouts-rimés* similarly represent an opening to claims to a more elevated self-image. The central character, Du Rimet, sponsors a contest for the best *bout-rimé*, the winner of which gets to marry his daughter. When his daughter chastises him for exposing her to the advances of “all kinds of people,” her father replies, “Whether he is a cobbler, a water carrier, a chimney sweep, you should know that the *bout-rimé* ennobles its creator. All are gentlemen on Parnassus” (scene 7).

42. Viala, *La France galante*, 259–62. See Scudéry, *Célinthe*. See also Grande, “Du long au court”; and Paige, *Before Fiction*, 55–61.

43. Viala, *La France galante*, 261–62. The themes of mobility and portability come up a number of times in a series of essays on reading in the *Mercure* in 1684, in response to a question Donneau de Visé put to readers in *Extraordinaire du Mercure*, July 1683, 334. An essay titled “Du bon et du mauvais usage de la lecture,” signed L.M.D.S.B, describes “certain Books, which require little or no concentration [*applications*]; these are the books I would recommend one reads during meals; that I would advise to take in a Coach, & on voyages, & which can entertain us on many occasions that are not worth spelling out” (*Extraordinaire du Mercure*, Jan. 1684, 12–13). Roland Racevskis explores “new temporalities of reading” evident in the letters to the *Mercure*, defined by impatience and anticipation as well as by an experience of interiority that allowed readers to contrast public and private rhythms (*Time and Ways of Knowing*, 151–53).

own lives. But on the other hand, these protocols remained predicated on an older relationship to typographic texts. Specifically, this legibility did not entail the absorptive identification with plots and characters, and the “willing suspension of disbelief” on which such identification depends, that we might today consider integral to a fulfilled reading experience (at least of fiction). The fans who famously poured their unbridled enthusiasm for *La nouvelle Héloïse* into letters addressed to Rousseau connected so powerfully with the novel’s characters as “real people” that they felt they could see and hear them. This is not to say that they naïvely believed that Julie and Saint-Preux truly existed as historical individuals.<sup>44</sup> It is instead to note that these fictional protagonists conjured for those who encountered them in books sufficiently compelling reflections of lived experience that they could relate these reflections to their own lives, fantasizing that they interacted personally with the characters as if they were intimate friends.

This type of reader response has tended historically to be viewed in terms of its “naïve” and credulous acceptance of the, to us, obviously false claims advanced in the prefaces and title pages of eighteenth-century fictional texts, that they were genuine documents, which the author, in the guise of an “editor,” had “found.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, such intense identification with characters, as representations of *real* people rather than as types or schematic examples of right or wrong moral conduct, rested on anything but a “naïve” relationship to the printed book. On the contrary, the synesthetic effects through which it could be experienced depended on a deeply ingrained facility with the printed word, one that, I suspect, the *Mercur*e respondents simply did not yet have. Inured to the typographic page to the point that they could “forget” that they were reading it as they read it—indeed, this “forgetting” would be fundamental to their reading experiences, as their letters attest<sup>46</sup>—Rousseau’s acolytes were, for instance, able spontaneously to overlook the printedness of the letters they perused in the epistolary novel in order to surrender to the authenticity and sincerity of the sentiments that the fictional letters claimed, as private documents handwritten from one individual to another, to express. The eighteenth-century readers were certainly helped in this by prefaces explaining how ostensibly real letters came to

44. See Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau”; and Paige’s critique in “Rousseau’s Readers Revisited.”

45. Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau.”

46. Lamenting the lack of archival sources on reading, Claude Labrosse, in a study of the readers of *La nouvelle Héloïse*, highlights forgetting as a key factor for this dearth: “Who better than the reader to speak of reading, of *his* or *her* reading, and who more than the reader refuses or neglects to do it. The subjects forget that they are reading” (*Lire au XVIIIe siècle*, 11). Labrosse does not acknowledge the historicity of this forgetting, which, I suspect, lies at the heart of modern print culture starting in the eighteenth century, under the influence of a new legibility in which reading was more solitary and absorptive.

be printed as well as by the impassioned language of the letters themselves. Rousseau pointed to their artless sentimentality as “proof” that the letters were real, despite being packaged in a printed book.<sup>47</sup> Yet the diminishing necessity of such textual and paratextual conceits, as noted by Vivienne Mylne, for instance,<sup>48</sup> and as illustrated by Rousseau’s own ambivalent, self-undermining editorial posturing, reflected perhaps a more critical factor: a growing ability among the mass of readers to abstract one’s reading from material forms (i.e., a commercially printed book) that sharply contradicted the rhetorical claims of the texts—“this is a private letter”—that these forms conveyed. The ability to ignore the book as a typographic artifact in order to immerse oneself in its textual arguments was rooted in a deepening familiarity with the printed book and in a growing mastery of its bibliographic protocols, to the point where its use could become automatic and go almost entirely unnoticed.

I suspect that typography was never so transparent for the readers of the 1670s and 1680s. For them, the printed page did not efface itself before visualizable scenes or convey before their mind’s eye, if not their actual eyes, flesh-and-blood people with whom they could imagine interacting. Their sheepish and markedly ironic provincial pride, which led them at the same time to highlight the unexpected *politesse* of their far-flung communities and to present themselves as country bumpkins needing the civilizing effects of the *Mercure*’s moral fables, suggests, in its awkward self-awareness, that they were indeed newcomers to commercialized typographic literacy—at least the kind called for by the *Mercure*—and its ethical payoffs.<sup>49</sup> And as newcomers, their accounts in letters to Donneau de Visé of their group-mediated readings bear witness to an ever-present awareness that the *book invariably was there*, a concretely objectified catalyst for ethically uplifting discussion and an instrument for socialization. This awareness of the book as object meant that it could not, however, function as a clear window onto an alternative but relatable reality. Donneau de Visé’s readers did not lose themselves in the stories the books conveyed. They were not transported into the worlds the texts described and out of their own, as would famously be the case for Madame Bovary; nor were they instilled, as

47. In the second preface Rousseau points to the letters’ mawkish style as proof that they were not penned by professional authors or meant for publication in print (*Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, 573).

48. Mylne, *Eighteenth-Century French Novel*.

49. To cite two among the many examples of each tendency: A letter signed “S.D.” from Le Mans affirms on behalf of “quelques Belles de nostre Ville” that they read the journal assiduously: “This will make you see, Monsieur, that Le Mans is not only commendable for its Capons and its beautiful Candles; . . . but that Wit and Gallantry reign here as much as in any city in France” (*Extraordinaire du Mercure*, Apr. 1678, 187–88). A lawyer from Châlons named Miconet praises the utility of the *Mercure* for refining provincials: “You would not believe how much reading this Book has improved and improves minds in the Provinces. One imperceptibly refines one’s taste by examining the beauty of the Selections that one finds in it, and Intelligence is made more subtle by the various exercises one must apply to find the Solution to the Enigma” (*Extraordinaire du Mercure*, Jan. 1678, 186).

Lynn Hunt argued for late eighteenth-century novel readers awakening to the idea of “universal human rights,” with powerful feelings of empathy for characters they took to be living and breathing individuals just like themselves.<sup>50</sup> Their reading instead gravitated to digestible lessons, appropriable formulas in gallant self-expression, and examples of elegant conduct and language to imitate. The legibility that shaped their expectations and experiences as they engaged the printed word was, in this sense, a didactic rather than an absorptive one, resting on a far more self-conscious relationship of printed text to lived reality, via the reading process, than may seem natural today, at least for a “literary” or fictional work.<sup>51</sup> This more equivocal and self-conscious relationship to print is, I would contend, one key way of interpreting the privileged role of group dynamics, and particularly its most influential configuration of the “salon,” in the literary, textual and reading culture of the seventeenth century.

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I suspect that the Marseille students from Sauder’s documentary identify with the princess de Clèves or the duc de Nemours not just because they recognize their own lives and feelings in the Renaissance courtly love triangle that Madame de Lafayette portrayed but also, and perhaps mainly, because as twenty-first-century students they know instinctively that this is what they are supposed to do as readers of a particular kind of text: canonical, “literary,” fictional, and necessarily printed. Most of what frames their reading pushes them inevitably toward such intersubjective communion with fictional characters whom they perceive not as generic models of conduct—as a “Femme” or a “Mary”—but as *people* whose specific circumstances and emotional responses they can, or should, “relate to” (Sarah is visibly embarrassed by her inability to do so). This includes, most immediately, the classroom presentation of the “texte exigeant qui [les] concerne” as well as the critical apparatus of the pedagogical editions—Classiques Larousse and other classroom mainstays—from which we see them reading. But this overdetermined framing of the work’s reception also includes a longer tradition of literacy dating back to the effusive readers of *La nouvelle Héloïse* for whom reading was instinctively the experience of deep, intimate connection with characters taken to be faithful renderings of

50. Hunt, “Torrents of Emotion.”

51. Monique Vincent’s work on the *Mercure* highlights how readers connected with the contemporary, recognizable scenarios described in the periodical’s *nouvelles*. This “identification” was the ability to appropriate and apply to one’s life the examples and lessons conveyed by the stories. Vincent does not address “identification” in terms of a readerly experience of absorption or of an emotional or psychological connection with characters. See *Le Mercure galant: Présentation*; and “*Le Mercure galant et son public féminin*.” On the *Mercure*’s didactic role for these readers as a source of codes and norms that were pertinent to their lives, see Steinberger, “*Le Mercure Galant and Its Student Body*.”

“real” individuals and not merely textual or rhetorical artifacts or the mouth-piece of a normative discourse. The students’ ability, from across a gaping historical and sociological divide, to follow this pattern reflects their inculcation as readers of print, even as they are also the children of the digital age.

*Mercur*e galant readers might have been at or near the beginnings of this longer tradition; they might indeed have been the agents of its coming triumph in the eighteenth century. But they were not yet, as readers, the products of it. They were, evidently, more elite than the Marseille students, despite constituting a relatively “general” public for the time, and thus, with their eye on professional and personal advancement in the context of absolute monarchy, one would think they would be more likely to connect with the princess and her dilemma than were the students. It was, though, the latter who saw themselves in Madame de Clèves, a paradox that makes more sense when we consider the two groups in light not of their social backgrounds or historical contexts but of the contrasting models of legibility that shaped each group’s expectations of the text. *Mercur*e readers were not formed as typographic readers in quite the way that the 2009 students were. In their experiences with it, the printed book mediated social exchanges and socialization, not a focused, private connection with another individual who was accessed textually and typographically but accepted by the reader, without a second’s hesitation, as a fully fledged person, as if the text and its typographic rendering were invisible, a transparent medium for human contact between a reader and an individual—a character or author—whose voice and image the text channeled.

Ultimately, of course, *Mercur*e readers failed to identify with Madame de Clèves because they likely did not have access to the book and thus had not read the account of her turmoil and decision, a fact that, in turn, reflects the limits of the book trade as shaped by their demand for a certain kind of reading to which the *Princesse* did not cater. What the *Mercur*e respondents did seek in books and, specifically, in the issues of the *Mercur*e galant, if not in the *Princesse*, was not “identification” but the chance to participate in a communal consensus over agreed-on norms of behavior and self-expression, and to demonstrate their own personal mastery of these norms. This is what the *Mercur*e repeatedly staged as reading, beginning with the ever-present model reader of the “Madame,” to whom each issue was notionally addressed, and whose enjoyment of the *Mercur*e was invariably shared with her “amies,” in stark contrast with the private, withdrawn one-on-one exchanges that the fan mail to Rousseau rehearsed. Both reading experiences elevated the individual who represented herself or himself in the act of reading, but the latter did so by removing the individual from society; the former, by integrating her or him into it. The book’s disappearance was integral to the first fantasy, in which the reader surrendered to the hallucination

of being in the physical presence of the characters or author. The literacy of the late seventeenth-century public was, by contrast, defined by the book's ritualized presence as an object around which, thematically (as a repository of rules and codes) and materially (in scenes of group readings and the collective rush to receive each long-awaited volume), a society took form, one in which the reader would find a meaningful place. If this latter public was modern in its commercialized expansiveness, it was not yet so in its heavy-handed and self-conscious relationship to the printed word.

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