Geoffrey Turnovsky, "Literary History Meets the History of Reading: The Case of La Princesse de Clèves and its (Non)readers"


This article revisits the letters written by readers of the Mercure galant responding 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 these readers as they connected with the unprecedented complexity of the novel’s characters, whose dilemmas they “identified” with, scholars have imputed to this 1670s public a modernity reflecting that of the novel itself, often considered “the first modern novel” in French. This essay analyzes the letters in light of their arguments as well as of the novel’s editorial history, exploring the implications of a disconnect existing between the work and the readers in question, who, in reality, did not generally empathize with its protagonist’s dilemma as presented by the Mercure, and moreover, who did not seem to have read the text. This disconnect highlights a number of realities that a “history of reading” approach to late 17th-century literary culture can bring out. One is that, in the summer of its publication, the work was perhaps not accessible in the provincial towns that produced the new readers of this modern public and who wrote in to the Mercure. Second, literary demand in the late 1670s, even as it was growing and touching new kinds of readers, expanded through a continuing interest in the didactic and romanesque genres of the 1630s-50s, rather than the “modern novel” of Lafayette. In the 1680s, excerpted texts from Scudéry’s early romances, condensed as guidebooks for ideal comportment and sociability, were published in numbers that far exceeded copies of the Princesse de Clèves in circulation; and ultimately, the Mercure galant of the 1670-80s specialized in the former literary stylings more than the latter.