

Profiting from Scandal: the Case of *La Devineresse*

by
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“Pourvu que la bourse vienne, il importe peu comment” (V, 4).¹ This is the reflection of Mme Jobin, the protagonist of Donneau de Visé and Thomas Corneille’s 1679 theatrical event, the five-act machine comedy *La Devineresse*. This character is based on the infamous La Voisin, a central figure in the *affaire des poisons*, whose trial and execution were contemporaneous with the play’s extremely successful first run. La Voisin was arrested in March 1679 and burned at the stake in February 1680 for furnishing clients with fatal poisons and for helping thousands of women terminate unwanted pregnancies (she disposed of the evidence in her backyard). We know that the play was first performed in November 1679 and published in February 1680. Strangely, however, in his 1710 obituary of his collaborator Thomas Corneille, Donneau de Visé claims that the play was conceived and written after the death of La Voisin. Though writing at a distance of thirty years, it still seems unlikely that Donneau de Visé had forgotten the chain of events leading to the conception of his most successful play. It is more probable that he was seeking to obscure the fact that, in a way all too familiar to us today, he and Corneille had transformed a sensational trial into entertainment, exploiting public interest in what Mme de Sévigné called a “scandal without precedent in a Christian court,”² and this at great profit to themselves: according to H.C. Lancaster, Corneille and Donneau de Visé earned for *La Devineresse* the largest sum ever paid for a seventeenth-century play.³

Thus the cynical words of the wily Mme Jobin - “Pourvu que la bourse vienne, il importe peu comment”- could also be attributed to the play’s authors. While it is of course not surprising that these authors hoped to profit from their production, the methods they used to promote and publicize their work raise interesting questions about the interplay between scandal, journalism, publicity and theater in late seventeenth-century France. This highly successful play, a dramatization of current events, bears the

mark of its authors' participation in the nascent field of journalism. Donneau de Visé, of course, was the editor in chief of the *Mercure Galant*, the most influential early French newspaper, which he founded in 1672; in 1677, Thomas Corneille became his partner in this endeavor.

The format of the monthly *Mercure Galant* is that of a long letter (between 350 and 400 pages in-12) written to a fictitious female reader, identified only as "Madame." The *Mercure* is a fascinating source of information on seventeenth-century life. Countless subjects are covered: science, music, military affairs, literary and theatrical news, court celebrations, the weddings, births and deaths of the elite. The publication included drawings of newly-minted medallions, of the latest fashions, of architectural marvels; *questions d'amour* and verse responses; madrigals, fables, enigmas and other puzzles; *nouvelles* submitted by readers and published anonymously. As editor in chief of the *Mercure Galant*, Donneau de Visé was fully aware of his power to influence public opinion. In fact, Donneau de Visé may be considered one of the first great publicists, a forefather of advertising. In February 1678 he invited merchants to contact him about their products, promising them they would not regret it: "ce que [l'auteur] en dira dans son livre ne leur pourra être qu'avantageux."⁴ Specific products were advertised by a not-so-subtle method of including "plugs" at the end of *nouvelles* designed specifically for that purpose. One example is the "Histoire des faux cheveux" (June 1678), an amusing tale about a woman whose husband is enraged to discover, shortly after their marriage, that his wife's striking blond tresses are not her own. The story's concluding lines supply readers with the name of an exceptionally good wigmaker: "La vérité est que ces cheveux blonds qui lui attireraient tant de regards n'étaient à elle que parce qu'elle les avait payés à Mme Le Tousé. Tout le monde connaît l'adresse de cette fameuse ouvrière qui a inventé les perruques au métier qui ne pèsent que deux onces . . . On les tire [les cheveux], on les regarde de près et il n'y a personne qui ne croie que c'est sur la tête même qu'ils sont appliqués"⁵

One of Donneau de Visé's most noteworthy contributions to the field of marketing and promotion was his use of reader

participation: he was adept at creating *affaires* and debates, and invited readers to voice their opinions in the pages of the *Mercure*. For instance, the *Mercure Galant* had an important role in promoting *La Princesse de Clèves*, publishing *questions* based on the novel, to which readers were invited to respond. In the case of the “Histoire des faux cheveux,” a lively debate, lasting several months, followed the *nouvelle*’s publication. In subsequent issues of the *Mercure Galant*, Donneau de Visé printed responses to this story. One article defended the husband, another the wife; this second article (published in the *Extraordinaire du Mercure Galant*, July 1678) furthermore examined scientific and historical evidence to determine whether it was a good or bad thing to have abundant hair. With these follow-up articles, Donneau de Visé succeeded in generating interest among his readership, while glossing over the commercial aspect of the original story. After 1678, however, such unsubtle marketing ploys were abandoned, and the only articles of an explicitly promotional or commercial nature were the book catalogues and reviews he printed without financial compensation (Vincent 212).

But Donneau de Visé gave himself a bit more leeway when it came to advertising his own products -and he was adept at self-promotion. In the *Mercure Galant* of April 1678 he printed a letter from a reader who thanked him in the most effusive terms for his wonderful publication: “. . . c’est un tableau qui nous fait voir la diversité des beaux Génies dont la France abonde, c’est un superbe palais où les Muses s’assemblent de toutes parts. . .” (86). This letter is signed “Desnos” -perhaps a clue that Donneau de Visé himself or a member of his editorial board composed the laudatory letter. The figure of the disinterested reader would soon appear again, in the publicity campaign for *La Devineresse*. Here is how the campaign was waged. First, Donneau de Visé prepared the terrain for his new comedy -and capitalized on his readers’ interest in the unfolding *affaire des poisons* -by publishing articles in April and May 1679 on the origin of the term *chambre ardente* and on the history of poison. He then made use of a popular literary form, the *nouvelle*, to whet audiences’ appetites for *La Devineresse*. In the August 1679 issue of the *Mercure Galant*, Donneau de Visé published a *nouvelle* with the same title as the play (*La*

Devineresse ou les Faux enchantements). This story has all the elements of an episode from the Twilight Zone. It begins, “Il y a tout lieu de croire qu’il y ait [de l’enchantement] dans ce qui est arrivé à un cavalier qui tient un rang très considérable, dans une des premières villes du royaume.” The piece goes on to relate that this distinguished gentleman, an exceptionally curious individual, had made a trip to Italy, seeking occult or mysterious phenomena. The tale takes place in Genoa, the last stop on this traveler’s itinerary. There he is quickly befriended by an Italian gentleman who offers to show him that city’s most noteworthy sights. His last evening in town begins innocently enough: the friend takes him to the home of a wealthy and gracious lady who treats the traveler to a private viewing of remarkable paintings, bronze and marble statues, and dazzling collections of jewels and of gold and silver medals. He is shown harpsichords that play by themselves, and that can produce the sounds of organs or flutes. But the Frenchman is not impressed until a seemingly enchanted rooster, capable of lighting and extinguishing fires, leads him to a couple of half-decomposed cadavers lying on velvet cushions in two of the lady’s armoires. These frightening creatures then begin to move and, their eyes aglow, approach the terrified gentleman, finally pushing him out the door! He scurries back to his lodging, tremendously agitated.

He suspects his Genoan acquaintance of having somehow set up this spectacle in order to test his mettle. However, when he goes to the Genoan’s home to take his revenge the next day, he finds no trace of the man or his valet. The person who occupies the residence tells him that no such gentleman has ever lived there. Sword drawn, the cavalier enters to conduct a search, and finds that what had been the night before a luxurious home is now a dilapidated dwelling. He returns to France “honteux,” “troublé” and “surpris” -and he vows “de n’être plus curieux.” The story ends: “Quoiqu’il ne puisse comprendre ce qu’il a vu, il croit toujours que ce n’a été qu’un tour d’adresse et que, s’il eût eu la fermeté qu’il s’était promise, il eût découvert la tromperie.”

With no transition, the text continues: “La troupe du Roi annonce une comédie nouvelle sous le titre *La Devineresse ou les*

Faux Enchantements. Je ne sais pas bien encore ce que c'est, mais de la manière qu'on [*sic*] m'en a parlé le spectacle de cette pièce approche fort des choses surprenantes que je viens de conter. Si cela est, il vaudra bien les machines ordinaires. Il aura du moins une nouveauté qu'elles ne peuvent plus avoir. Nous en saurons davantage avec le temps." This story warning of the dangers of excessive curiosity is thus really designed to inspire this emotion in readers. There is an obvious attempt to create suspense ("Je ne sais pas bien encore ce que c'est," "Nous en saurons davantage avec le temps"). Furthermore, there is an apparent contradiction between the *nouvelle's* opening lines, which affirm "il y a tout lieu de croire qu'il y ait de l'enchantement," and the gentleman's conclusion that his extraordinary and macabre experience must have some rational explanation.

A similar ambivalence underlies the central confrontation of the play *La Devineresse*, the one between Mme Jobin and the Marquis, a man who refuses to believe in her powers and finally succeeds in exposing her for the charlatan she is. The *devineresse* Mme Jobin (who is nowhere near as dangerous or threatening as her prototype, La Voisin) lures clients to her home with promises of fearsome sights and revealed secrets. The play consists of a series of visits to her home by clients anxious to glimpse the future or to change their physical, moral or marital status. The production featured numerous special effects, including thunder and lightning, a talking head, a devil who passes through a wall, and a dismembered body which puts itself back together, only to disappear suddenly. In this illustration, taken from the play's original edition, we see the play's climax: the Marquis threatens Mme Jobin's "devil" and succeeds in unmasking him.

While the rational, levelheaded Marquis is the play's hero, he is also a spoilsport who puts an end to the marvelous special effects which were at the heart of the play's appeal. As the promotional notice shows, Donneau de Visé and Thomas Corneille were well aware that their play's machines were its main attraction. In their preface to *La Devineresse*, the authors are careful to remark that these spectacular effects, far from being mere "ornaments" or attention-getters, constitute in fact an

indispensable public service: “Quant au spectacle, il n’y a point esté mis pour faire paroistre des ornements, mais comme absolument nécessaire, la plupart des devineresses s’estant servies de . . . choses de cette nature pour abuser le public.” The play’s utility is mentioned often in the *Mercure Galant*. In November 1679, for example, we read, “Les Desinteressez. . . ne se sont pas seulement divertis aux scenes plaisantes dont [la pièce] est remplie, mais ils ont dit hautement que la représentation n’en pouvoit estre que fort utile, puis qu’elle détrompe les faibles.” These early journalists thus depict themselves as investigative reporters who provide useful information by revealing the tricks of the charlatan’s trade. In fact, the February 1680 issue of the *Mercure* declares that the play’s realism is one of its chief virtues: “On croit voir une vérité au lieu d’une comédie.” As in the *Mercure’s nouvelles*, entertaining stories presented as human interest news articles, the line between fact and fiction is blurred. *La Devineresse* shows us a fin de siècle fascinated by mystery and the occult, yet also receptive to scientific enlightenment; let us not forget that Fontenelle was an active member of the *Mercure’s* editorial staff. The recurrence of titles like “Les faux enchantements” (August 1679) “Les faux cheveux” (June 1678) and “Les fausses dents” (September 1678) in the *Mercure Galant* show us a man and an institution preoccupied with revealing the truth, yet still willing and able to cater to the baroque fascination with illusion.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas Corneille and Donneau de Visé, *La Devineresse*, ed. P.J. Yarrow (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1971). All quotations from the play are drawn from this edition.

² Letter of 31 January 1680, cited by Yarrow in his introduction to *La Devineresse* (xv).

³ Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*, Part 4, vol. 2 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1940) 920.

⁴ Monique Vincent, *Donneau de Visé et le Mercure Galant* (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1987) I: 210.

⁵ Quotations from the *Mercure Galant* are taken from the microform copy of the original edition (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale). The “Histoire des faux cheveux,” the *nouvelle* version of “La Devineresse,” and numerous other *nouvelles* can also be found in Monique Vincent’s recent critical edition, *Anthologie des nouvelles du Mercure Galant* (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1996).

