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Christophe Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur des lettres au XVIIIe siècle. Donneau de Visé, de Molière au Mercure galant*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020. 552 pp. Figures, notes and index. 58 €. ISBN 978-2-406-09570-5.

Review Essay by Ann Blair, Harvard University

This book is bursting with powerful insights for book historians as well as for cultural and literary historians of the second half of the *Grand siècle*. From his study of the abundant publications of Donneau de Visé (1638-1710, hereafter referred to as Donneau), Schuwey emphasizes that many early modern books (and most of Donneau's) were composite texts, comprising a succession of smaller units brought together to be marketed as a single physical object. Donneau's remarkable success, which warranted him reputation and income in his day although he has received little attention since then, hinged on his savvy as a "literary entrepreneur." He leveraged the work of others and his own to publish innovative textual products exquisitely designed to appeal to a large buying (and gossiping and reading) public of *gens du monde*. He responded to the latest trends, created and traded buzz around his works and those of contemporaries, including Molière, and devised legal and technical maneuvers to create a readily identifiable brand. Donneau's numerous composite works—his *Nouvelles nouvelles* (1663), *Nouvelles galantes* (1669) and *Amour échappé* (1669), each in three volumes—and the quarterly volumes of the *Mercure galant* (1672-74) and *Nouveau Mercure galant* (1677-1724) also had a lasting impact in preserving and transmitting countless short pieces of writing in various genres which would otherwise never have been printed. Schuwey argues that Louis XIV himself as well as the many high-ranking contributors to the *Mercure galant* saw the periodical as a place where their achievements could benefit from the dual impacts of printing which both diffused information rapidly and recorded it for the long term.

The book unfolds in four parts, organized roughly chronologically, starting in 1660 with *La cocue imaginaire*, one of some twenty plays that Donneau published, this one a spin-off designed to profit from and enhance the success of Molière. After Molière blocked the attempts by Donneau and his publisher Jean Ribou to get a privilege to reprint *Les précieuses ridicules*, the two instead piggy-backed on *Le cocu imaginaire* (1660), which proved to be the most frequently performed of Molière's plays in his lifetime. They published an edition of that play augmented with notes that described the staging, presumably for readers who did not attend a performance. Two years later *La cocue* offered a variation from a female perspective on a theme which had clearly captured the attention of the *mondain* public; the play opened two weeks after a *conférence académique* of Richesource had debated whether the passions of women were more violent than those of men. Donneau devoted more attention than most to publicity, using the usual techniques of the time: flyers and posters, public readings and *querelles* (a tactic also dear to Molière), and commercial tie-ins, such as almanacs and fire screens decorated with a memorable scene. Interest was further sustained when plays were reviewed in collections of verse such as the *Lettres en vers* published by Charles Robinet from 1665 until Donneau's *Mercure* absorbed his business. Schuwey offers a salutary reminder that the canonical plays of this period are but a small subset of what

contemporaries experienced and were often not the ones most performed. He also calls on critics who seek to assess a play's initial popularity to take account of the amount of publicity deployed for that play, since this could help determine its success (p. 135).

Just as Donneau's methods of writing and promoting plays were typical of his era, Schuwey argues, so too was the composite form of his prose works. Typically, Donneau used a narrative frame (e.g. a conversation among *nouvellistes*, or a dinner party among friends) to string together dozens of separate short texts of many kinds, including debates, satires, or encomia. Donneau was called by his detractors the "*fripier du Parnasse*" for sewing together disparate scraps of writing and enhancing their look with trendy terms and themes. Schuwey emphasizes the savvy craft involved in Donneau's activity. He collected gossip and anecdotes that were circulating orally or in manuscript, and added paratextual and textual elements to suit the tastes of the day. Donneau was acutely attuned to the latest topics of *mondain* discussion and skilled at framing and adjusting his compiled texts to address what was in vogue without seeming trite. He had to work fast, given the volatility of fashionable topics, and generated epitexts to help. For example, the verbal portraits of contemporaries in his *Amour echappé* left readers guessing who the models were, and a key published separately with pseudonyms didn't solve the riddle but fueled more speculation—forming another good sales tactic. Schuwey notes that the composite form was common to other genres of the period, such as the collective works of poetry of the 1650s and 1660s or the long novels (e.g. by Madeleine de Scudéry) which were peppered with set pieces such as poems or orations or parlor games.

Following his completion of three composite works, each in three volumes, Donneau launched a proper periodical in 1672, the *Mercure galant*, which appeared as a quarterly volume of 300 pages. Donneau took the composite form to new heights, using each issue as a "cart" (a term used by Charles Sorel) in which to load the writings of a new kind of amateur writers. Each issue was framed as a prose letter addressed to a provincial lady into which articles were inserted, many of which were contributed by readers. Donneau boasted that by the diversity of its contents each volume offered something to please every reader (p. 334). Donneau explicitly solicited contributions from readers, promising to publish what they sent him and apparently doing so. Some pieces were signed, others anonymous. Donneau provided instructions for those wishing to submit images, and he also welcomed aDonneau ertisements from merchants selling their products. Starting in 1677, the *Mercure* featured an enigma; readers submitted their solutions, which were printed in the next issue along with the correct answer. Each issue was produced on a tight schedule to maximize efficiency and profit ("en flux tendu," p. 193). Donneau and his publisher also protected their formula, obtaining privileges that forbade reprinting any item from the book and even binding the volumes together that were published separately (p. 363). The *Mercure* was also published in Lyon whence copies were exported to other countries. As a deterrent to pirated editions (which were produced nonetheless) the printer Claude Blageart commissioned special decorative letter fonts used on the title page and the headings and aDonneau ised readers to look there for confirmation of authenticity. Either the *Mercure* set a trend or it responded to an existing interest in decorative fonts; either way, I was struck by the parallels between the *Mercure* and the decorative lettering that a teenage student at the Academy of Geneva used in the notes he took in an ethics course sometime between 1686 and 1713 (see images 1-3).[1]

Schuwey emphasizes the significance of the *Mercure* for publishing the occasional writings of its readership, which would otherwise not have been printed. Printing a text in a book that would be bound and stored in a library was widely understood as the best way to ensure its transmission; indeed, by contrast the many occasional texts printed on loose sheets in the early-modern period have rarely survived. Donneau explicitly claimed that one of its goals was to preserve a record not so much of the news, which was the domain of the *Gazette de France*, but of the circumstances surrounding the news. In particular the *Mercure* printed accounts of the military successes of Louis XIV in addition to reader submissions of panegyrics to the king or reports of the exploits of individual noblemen and much else besides. The success of the enigma in each issue after 1677, for example, owed a great deal to the fact that one of the peers of the realm, the Duc de Saint-Aignan, contributed one of them, offering thus a chance to any reader to “interact” with him by sending in their guess for the answer (p. 439). Schuwey portrays Donneau as a powerful broker of information and culture. The contents of each issue would circulate among the *mondains*, sustaining their conversation, gossip, and written contributions from which Donneau would stock his next issue. I was surprised to see no mention of conflict or controversy surrounding that role. Can it be that Donneau really published everything sent to him without intervention? If so, how did the *Mercure* avoid factional disputes? I could imagine that these would have posed a challenge to Donneau who had no significant social standing of his own but relied on the reputation and gatekeeping power he acquired through his entrepreneurship in *lettres*. If Donneau did edit or select the contributions, how did he manage the contributors unhappy about his interventions? This world shared many conventions including high standards of politeness, but I expect it was also subject to competition and rivalries as soon as desirables were at stake, such as being named in print or gaining reputation for making a witty contribution.

Schuwey notes that the tradition of the composite book extended back to medieval manuscripts and Renaissance printed books (citing the work of Anne Réach-Ngô for example). Indeed, I found myself wondering what exactly was distinctive about Donneau’s methods as opposed to those deployed by the compilers of major reference works in the sixteenth century. Sixteenth-century compilers of quotables or of anecdotes also highlighted the diversity of their collections, promising that the book contained something for everyone, just as in a garden with herbs for each taste. Conrad Gessner (1516-65) puffed future publications he was planning and even invited readers to send him contributions for them. He included a very explicit solicitation, complete with instructions about how to send him a message via merchants, in his natural history of birds printed in 1555 in preparation for the volume on fish which appeared three years later. Sadly, Gessner did not identify in that book which elements had been contributed by whom; indeed, we cannot know whether anyone replied to that particular appeal, although Gessner printed three lists of learned men whom he thanked for their help. Gessner’s natural historical publications appeared so regularly that they formed a series akin to the multivolume sets of Donneau.[2]

To what extent were Donneau and his publishers aware of these techniques of some 100 years before which may also have been sustained in seventeenth-century Latin works of compilation and collaboration? The passage to the vernacular, a *sine qua non* for Donneau’s operations, made a huge difference in the quantity and nature of the readers and contributors to Donneau’s projects. Whereas Gessner sought input from readers in distant regions (he mentions especially Spain and Northern Europe), precisely because he knew no one and had little information from there, Donneau was collecting writings to publish from the immediate community in which he and many

of his readers lived in close proximity to one another. The international Latin Republic of Letters was a network of mostly remote interactions, sustained by the exchange of letters and occasional travel; Gessner corresponded with some 160 scholars and his books ended up in libraries throughout the learned world. By contrast the milieu of the court and salons in late seventeenth-century Paris that generated Donneau's content was intensely face to face, while the passive audience for the volumes was much larger (readers of the Lyon edition of the *Mercure* were advised to send their contributions to the publisher there, p. 353). The *Mercure* inspired a Dutch fake and copies of it ended up in German, Dutch, and British libraries (p. 341, p. 369). In short, neither compilation nor input solicited from readers were wholly new, but Donneau practiced them on a scale and with a level of explicitness that were both unprecedented.

Donneau was absolutely right that his *Mercure* would preserve a rich record of that world, not as it really was but as the elite contributors to the *Mercure* wished it to be remembered. It gave various ephemera of his day the standing and longevity of a publication in book form. In Schuwey's skillful hands Donneau's prolific output also offers insights into the many tricks of his trade—from generating buzz around publications to enticing contributions from readers—which predated his time and endure beyond it, as Schuwey's occasional comparisons with social media highlight (p. 117, p. 445). Schuwey shows how much can be reconstructed from careful attention to printed sources on which his study is principally based (his manuscript and archival sources fit on two pages, while his printed ones require twenty-nine pages). We gain a new perspective on Molière and his contemporaries, but also watch in fascinating detail the methods by which what is now called literature was promoted and orchestrated by the energetic impresario of print Donneau de Visé.

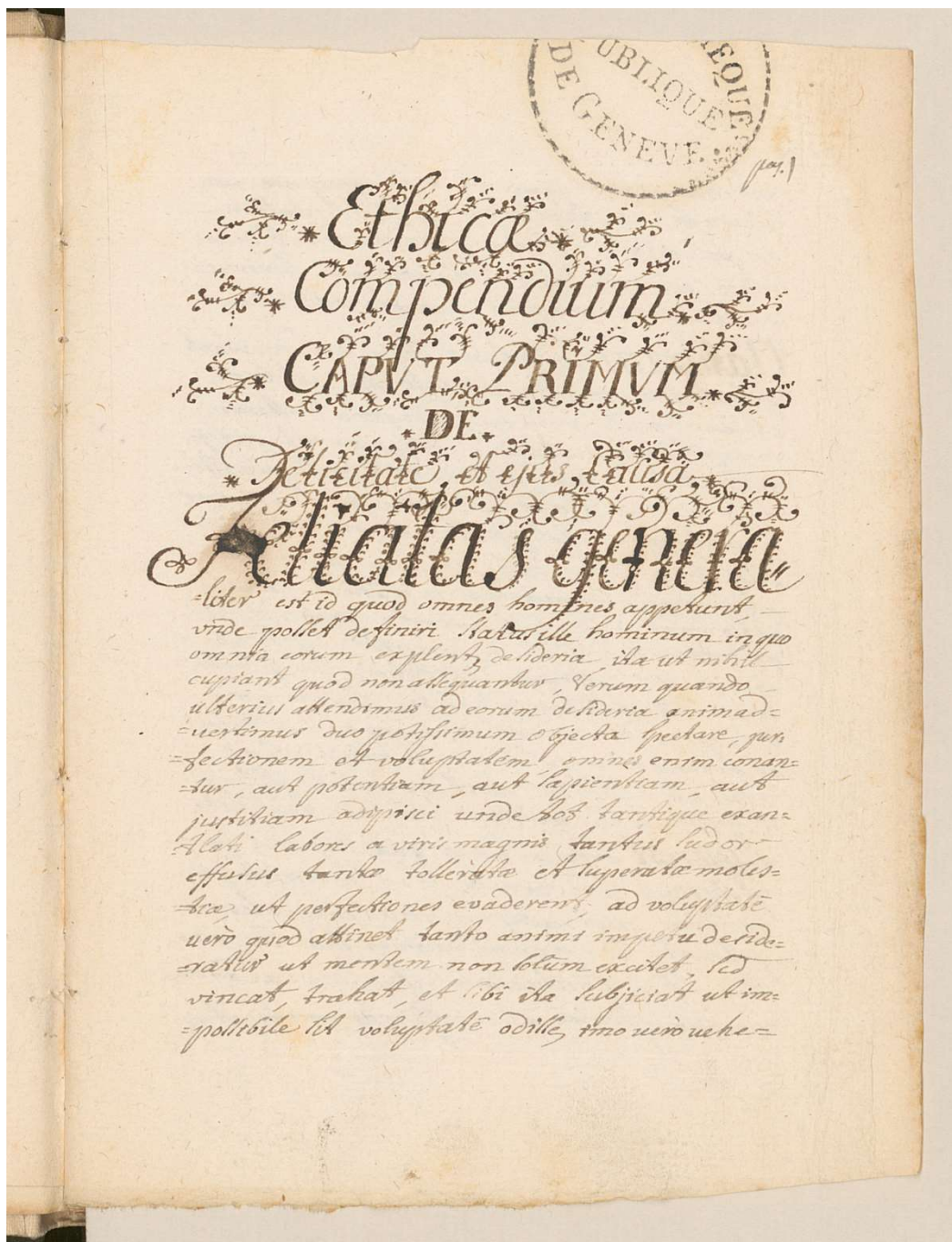


Image 1: First page of a student manuscript of an ethics course by Antoine Léger who taught philosophy at the Academy of Geneva 1686-1713. The manuscript is undated and the student note-taker is unidentified. The title reads: “Ethicae compendium. Caput Primum, De felicitate et eius causa” (“Summary of Ethics. Chapter One, On Happiness and its Cause”). The flowery manuscript title is akin to the decorative fonts in the *Mercure galant*. This may be due to the direct influence of that periodical or to a more general fashion for decorative titles at the time. Source: Genève, Bibliothèque de Genève, Ms Lat 225, f. 1r; see Isabelle Jeger, *Catalogue des manuscrits latins 1-376* (Geneva: Bibliothèque de Genève, 2016), pp. 947-48.



Images 2-3: Title page and first page of text of the *Mercure galant*, June 1697. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

NOTES

[1] For more discussion of this and other student manuscripts from the Academy of Geneva during this period, see Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing, “Manuscripts as pedagogical tools in the philosophy teaching of Jean-Robert Chouet (1642-1731),” in *Teaching Philosophy in Early Modern Europe: Text and Image*, ed. Susanna Berger and Daniel Garber, forthcoming Springer.

[2] As I discuss in more detail in my “Conrad Gessner et la publicité. Un humaniste au carrefour des voies de circulation du savoir,” in *L’Annonce faite au lecteur*, ed. Annie Charon, Sabine Juratic, and Isabelle Pantin, Collection L’Atelier d’Erasmus (Louvain: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2017), pp. 21-55, and “Printing and Humanism in the Work of Conrad Gessner,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, 70:1 (2017): 1-43.

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