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# The Ambiguities of Contempt for the *Folliculaires* in Eighteenth-Century France

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## ABSTRACT

The *feuilles volantes* were a type of periodical publication that emerged and developed in eighteenth-century France. Literally ‘flying leaves’, or ‘loose sheets’, they were short publications of a few dozen pages published at intervals whose name served as a constant reminder of their own fleeting materiality. If the format of the *feuille volante* contributed to the unity of this journalistic ensemble, it was also mocked, despised, and even vehemently attacked by contemporary authors such as Voltaire and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. Voltaire even coined the neologism *folliculaire*, which became a generic term in his writings to denigrate mediocre and greedy journalists for whom the *feuilles volantes* were a way to eke out a living. As this article shows, however, the fantasies and obsessions to which these periodicals gave rise appear to be very ambiguous: they are, in fact, proof of a fascination, and perhaps a fear of a medium whose expansion seemed already irreversible.

## KEYWORDS

eighteenth century, France, *feuilles volantes*, *folliculaires*, Voltaire, Louis-Sébastien Mercier

THE AMBIGUITIES OF CONTEMPT FOR THE *FOLLICULAIRES* IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

From its very beginning, the written press in France has been associated with specific formats.<sup>1</sup> The three ‘great reviews’ which appeared in the seventeenth century and covered different areas of news each presented a distinct material aspect, tailored to appeal to their target readership. Like most newspapers of the same type, *La Gazette*, founded in 1631, was published in quarto format, with a deliberately tight script. *Le Journal des savants*, launched in 1665, chose a similar format, yet its elegant and airy page arrangement aimed to please a more erudite readership. Seven years later, *Le Mercure galant* was created with a new style that was very different from its predecessors: each issue of this monthly periodical, which was destined to a more worldly and predominantly female public, came out as a small duodecimo volume of several hundred pages.

The importance of the medium, and the link between materiality, content, and target readership was confirmed a century later with the appearance of the first periodical papers, which were published in octavo or duodecimo format. As censorship was a little less severe, publications of irregular periodicity, in the form of short brochures of a few dozen pages, came out as early as the first years of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> When the press industry became a more professional business, some of these papers were published at closer and more regular intervals. This journalistic phenomenon remained very consistent until the revolutionary years: in spite of their diversity, these periodicals continued to share both a confirmed subjectivity and a similar format. As proof of the importance they attached to the material appearance of their writings, the editors of these periodicals constantly referred to the medium of the paper: they often called them *feuilles volantes* (literally ‘flying leaves’, or ‘loose sheets’), and deliberately used expressions such as ‘auteur à feuilles’ [‘leaves author’] and ‘à feuillet’ [‘leaf author’] to describe their activity.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to show, however, that if the format of the *feuille volante*, or loose sheet, contributed to the unity of this journalistic ensemble, it was also mocked, despised, and even vehemently attacked. Literary review papers, especially, were the object of genuine detestation, and the accusations of their detractors focused foremost on their apparent fragility. Considered too ephemeral to be worthy of respect, the periodical even gave rise to the construction of a particularly negative imagery in the works of Voltaire and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. But the fantasies and obsessions to which these periodicals gave rise appear to be very ambiguous: they are, in fact, proof of a fascination, and perhaps a fear of a medium whose expansion seemed already irreversible.

- 1 This article originally appeared in French as ‘Les ambiguïtés du mépris pour “les folliculaires” au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*, 121.3 (2021), 559–71, and was translated for the *Journal of European Periodical Studies* by Eloïse Forestier.
- 2 The first of these are undoubtedly the ‘périodiques à huit sols’ [‘eight-sol periodicals’, i.e. periodicals selling cheaply at eight sol per issue] identified by François Moureau, which appeared in the years 1702–03. See his article ‘Journaux moraux et journalistes au début du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Marivaux et le libertinage rocaille’, in *Études sur les Journaux de Marivaux*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk and François Moureau (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 2001), pp. 25–45. The practice increased from the 1720s with the advent of the ‘Spectators’, or worldly correspondences inspired by the *Lettres persanes* and periodicals of literary criticism written in the first person. See the study by the Collectif de Grenoble (Michel Gilot, Robert Grandroute, Denise Koszul, Jean Sgard), ‘Le journaliste masqué: Personnages et formes personnelles’, in *Le Journalisme d’Ancien Régime. Questions et propositions*, ed. by Pierre Rétat and Henri Duranton (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1982), pp. 285–313. See also my book *Les Journaux de Marivaux et le monde des ‘spectateurs’* (Paris: PUPS, 2007), particularly chapter four, ‘La consécration d’un nouveau type de journal’.
- 3 See Marianne Couperus, ‘La terminologie appliquée aux périodiques et aux journalistes’, in *L’Étude des périodiques anciens* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1972), pp. 59–63.

## Contempt for the Ephemeral

Periodical papers were denigrated from the moment they came into existence, and straight away many of their critics reduced them to their material vulnerability. The idea that such fragile forms could only contain futile and superficial writings was thus formulated very early in their history. As early as 1723, François-Denis Camusat, who was committed to impersonal journalism, inspired by the rigorous method of the *Journal des savants* judged, for example, that the success of this set of periodicals, which he already referred to as *feuilles volantes* would only be temporary. Admittedly Camusat declared that ‘these scanty writings are very popular in coffee shops, [...] they delight the people [and] amuse the women’, but according to him they merely ‘fill[ed] idle moments’ and ‘satisf[ied] the malice of a certain type of readers.’<sup>4</sup> The periodical papers founded in the first third of the century were often fragile and short-lived attempts, conceived by amateur journalists and launched by small booksellers. But the following decades also saw the birth of solid press companies whose publications were able to survive in the long term. Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines and later Élie-Catherine Fréron found favour with the public by creating periodicals of literary criticism published in a sustained and regular manner.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless this did not prevent detractors from continuing to criticize such writings for their fleeting and ephemeral character. The Encyclopedists themselves often gave a negative image of journalism in general, and periodicals in particular: they repeatedly presented the reading of these pamphlets as a brief, superficial or even completely empty pastime. In the article ‘Encyclopédie’, Diderot opposes, for example, the usefulness of ‘a universal and reasoned dictionary [...] intended for the general and permanent instruction of the human species’ to the futility of ‘periodical writings’ intended for ‘the momentary satisfaction of a few idlers’ curiosity.’<sup>6</sup> The entry on ‘hebdomadaire’ [‘weekly’], barely a few lines long, concisely frames its even stronger contempt for these ‘papiers’ [‘papers’]:

They are pieces of news, gazettes which are distributed every week. All these papers are the food of the ignorant, the resource of those who want to speak and judge without reading, and the plague and disgust of those who work. They never made a good mind produce a good line; nor prevented a bad author from doing bad work.<sup>7</sup>

4 ‘ces petits écrits font fortune dans les cafés, [...] deviennent les délices du peuple [et] font l’amusement des femmes’; ‘remplir l’oisiveté’; ‘contenter la malice d’un certain étage de lecteurs’. [François-Denis Camusat], ‘Réponse à une Brochure’, *Bibliothèque française ou Histoire littéraire de la France*, 3.1 (1723), p. 175.

5 Desfontaines successively created and wrote three periodicals published on a weekly basis: *Le Nouvelliste du Parnasse* (1731–32), *Observations sur les écrits modernes* (1735–43), and finally *Jugements sur quelques ouvrages nouveaux* (1744–46). These three periodicals were immensely enjoyed and the publication of the first two was only interrupted because their privilege had been removed. In the case of *Jugements sur quelques ouvrages nouveaux*, the journal ceased to exist only with the illness and death of Desfontaines. After having worked alongside Desfontaines, and having published *Les Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps* between 1749 and 1754, Fréron founded *L’Année littéraire* in 1754 and directed it with great success until his death in 1776. This newspaper, published at the rate of one issue every ten days, was then taken over by his son Louis Stanislas until the revolutionary period.

6 ‘Un dictionnaire universel & raisonné est destiné à l’instruction générale & permanente de l’espèce humaine; les écrits périodiques, à la satisfaction momentanée de la curiosité de quelques oisifs.’ Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, eds, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 28 vols (Paris, 1751–80), v, p. 645.

7 ‘Ce sont des nouvelles, des gazettes qui se distribuent toutes les semaines. Tous ces papiers sont la pâture des ignorants, la ressource de ceux qui veulent parler et juger sans lire, et le fléau et le dégoût de ceux qui travaillent. Ils n’ont jamais fait produire une bonne ligne à un bon esprit; ni empêché un mauvais auteur de faire un mauvais ouvrage.’ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 75.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF CONTEMPT FOR THE *FOLLICULAIRES* IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

When he evokes periodical papers, Rousseau does it in similar terms. He also readily associates the content with the container, as if a medium as fragile as the brochure could only accommodate texts devoid of interest. In 1755, in a letter to his friend Jacob Vernes, who had just launched a literary journal in Geneva, he thus gave a particularly disdainful definition of the 'livre périodique' ['periodical book']:

What is a periodical book? It is an ephemeral work, with neither merit nor utility, the reading of which, neglected and despised by educated people, only serves to give women and fools vanity with no instruction, and whose fate, fresh and dazzling during the morning toilet, shrivels and fades the same evening as wastepaper in the wardrobe.<sup>8</sup>

Even more explicitly than under the pen of Diderot, Rousseau reduces the newspaper to the realm of the ephemeral, since the life of a periodical is not intended, according to him, to exceed the duration of a day. This also implies that the periodical space is essentially feminine, as if to further reinforce the idea of the frivolity of the periodical paper.<sup>9</sup>

Rousseau, however, speaks of a 'periodical book', an expression which one may consider vague, and which could apply to many newspapers. In his literary work and in his correspondence, Voltaire is much more precise and inventive in the way he describes periodical papers and their authors. He uses many terms, but almost all of them have in common that they refer to the materiality of these texts. He especially coined the neologism *folliculaire*, which became a generic term in his writings to denigrate mediocre and greedy journalists. Despite uncertain etymological origins, the word overtly refers to the medium of the sheet or *feuille*, and quickly established itself in the French language.<sup>10</sup> Other nouns created by Voltaire did not share the same happy fortune but reflect a similar desire to confront authors of periodicals with the fragility of their writings. When he would mention one of the two consecutive enemies that were for him Desfontaines and Fréron, Voltaire kept on referring to this medium. He called them, for example, 'feuillistes' and 'faiseurs de feuilles' ['sheet makers'] or 'écrivains de feuilles' ['sheet writers'], and sometimes chose formulations that suggested even more explicitly the periodic nature of their productions.<sup>11</sup> In *La Pucelle*, Fréron is referred to as 'l'homme aux semaines' ['the man of the weeks'], and his papers, like those of Desfontaines, were mentioned in his correspondence with names such as 'impertinences hebdomadaires'

8 'Qu'est-ce qu'un livre périodique? C'est un ouvrage éphémère, sans mérite et sans utilité dont la lecture négligée et méprisée par les gens lettrés ne sert qu'à donner aux femmes et aux sots de la vanité sans instruction et dont le sort, après avoir brillé le matin sur la toilette, est de mourir le soir dans la garde-robe.' Letter to Jacob Vernes, Paris, 2 April 1755, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettres de Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1728–1778)*, ed. by Marcel Raymond (Lausanne: La Guilde du livre, 1959), p. 79.

9 For a more general study on the association between brochures and the feminine sphere, see the chapter by Jean-Alexandre Perras, 'Poétiques du papillotage: modes et brochures au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Sociopoétique du costume*, ed. by Carine Barbaferi and Alain Montandon (Paris: Hermann, 2015), pp. 99–125.

10 The word is most certainly coined from the noun *folium* (leaf), but *folliculus* is the Latin diminutive for *foliis* (purse, bag, pocket). As early as 1787, Féraud's *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* recorded the following definition: 'Nom que des auteurs, le plus souvent justement critiqués, ont donné aux faiseurs de feuilles, journaux ou autres ouvrages périodiques.' ['Name, most often justly criticized, given by authors to makers of sheets, newspapers, or other periodical works.'] (II, p. 265). The word also entered the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* from its fifth edition, in 1835.

11 These expressions appear in *L'Envoieux*, a comedy written between 1736 and 1738, in which he stages a character inspired by Desfontaines, then in 1760 in *L'Écossaise*, a play almost entirely aimed at Fréron.

['weekly impertinences'], 'méchancetés hebdomadaires' ['weekly wickedness'], or even by the neologism 'malsemaines' ['malweeklies'].<sup>12</sup>

To justify his contempt for periodical papers, Voltaire therefore almost systematically referred to their perishable format. Like Rousseau, he implied that these newspapers were doomed to be thrown away as soon as they were read. The same scorn for the authors of these periodical brochures runs through the entire work of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who uses a vocabulary strongly influenced by that of Voltaire. His hostility to literary criticism papers appeared in 1773, in his essay entitled *Du théâtre*, where he attacks those 'folliculaires, consumed with burning bile, which seek to bring down monuments and befoul the slightest praise'.<sup>13</sup> Giving advice to a young poet on how to welcome criticism, he encourages him never to seek the approval of journalists, whose writings are, according to him, destined to follow the same fate as autumn leaves:

Do not seek the approval of the journalist, it would be shameful; let them all speak and contradict each other. Do not read their articles: make it a rule, at all times, never to cast your eyes on those leaves of paper, which, similar to those of autumn, turn yellow overnight, fall of their own accord and are trampled under feet.<sup>14</sup>

The proximity between the vocabulary used by Voltaire and that of Mercier also appears in the way in which both resort to the metaphor of the insect. In his letters, Voltaire summons this image on numerous occasions to emphasize the toxicity of periodical papers at the same time as their fleeting duration. In August 1735, for example, he expresses his contempt for 'ces petits ouvrages hebdomadaires, ces insectes d'une semaine' ['these small weekly works, these one-week insects'] and he mocks, a few weeks later, these 'petits insectes d'un jour [qui] piquent un moment et disparaissent pour jamais' ['little one-day insects [which] sting on the moment then disappear forever'].<sup>15</sup> Mercier uses very similar terms to emphasize that the *folliculaires* and their writings can only have an ephemeral existence: in the article 'Journaux, le vrai journaliste' ['Journals, the Real Journalist'] published in *Tableau de Paris*, he compares authors of periodical papers to 'winged insects, which swirl around a torch [...] until they crush under the blow of a snuffer'.<sup>16</sup>

12 Voltaire, *La Pucelle d'Orléans*, ed. by Jérôme Vercruyse, in Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 205 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968–2022), vii (1970), p. 538. The expression 'impertinences hebdomadaires' appears in a letter to Thieriot on 24 September 1735 (Voltaire, *Correspondance*, ed. by Théodore Besterman, 13 vols [Paris: Gallimard, 1977–92], 1, p. 636: D918). The expression 'méchancetés hebdomadaires' is used on 11 March 1764 in a letter to the Count and Countess d'Argental (Ibid., vii, p. 610: D11761). The word 'malsemaines' appears for example in a letter to the abbé d'Olivet on 4 October 1735 (Ibid., 1, p. 640: D923) and in a letter to Thieriot on 22 March 1738 (Ibid., p. 1107: D1471).

13 'folliculaires, dévorés d'une bile ardente, qui veulent abattre toute statue et flétrir le moindre laurier.' Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (Amsterdam: E. van Harrevelt, 1773), p. 346.

14 'N'allez point solliciter le suffrage du journaliste, ce serait une démarche honteuse ; laissez-les tous parler et se contredire. Ne lisez point leurs extraits: vous devez vous faire une loi en tout temps, de ne jamais jeter les yeux sur ces feuilles, qui semblables à celles de l'automne, jaunissent du jour au lendemain, tombent d'elles-mêmes et sont foulées aux pieds.' Ibid., pp. 346–47.

15 Letter to the Marquis de Caumont, 24 August 1735 (Voltaire, *Correspondance*, 1, pp. 625–26: D905); Letter to Berger, 4 October 1735 (Ibid., p. 656).

16 'insecte ailé, qui tourbillonne autour d'un flambeau [...] et qui finit par être écrasé d'un coup de mouchette.' Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bonnet, 2 vols (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), ii, p. 282.

## The Worst Medium for the Worst Profession

According to their eighteenth-century detractors, periodical papers should disappear as soon as they have been written, doomed to the pitiful fate of insects that die at nightfall, or autumn leaves that dwindle and fall. However, a contradiction appeared in this recurring condemnation. The enemies of these *folliculaires* presented them at the same time as an undeniable danger, and recognized in them a genuine capacity to harm the talented authors who were the prime target of their criticisms. Voltaire especially passed a paradoxical judgment on these *feuilles volantes* by constantly mocking their insignificance, while showing a genuine fascination with them. He also tended to reduce journalism to this type of periodical, as indicated by the entry on ‘gazette’ he wrote for *L’Encyclopédie*: although the subject of this notice should have focused, above all, on the political press, it mentions at length the journals of Desfontaines and more generally the ‘gazettes littéraires’ [‘literary gazettes’] ‘faites uniquement pour gagner de l’argent’ [‘made solely to earn money’] whose ‘malignité [a fait] le débit’ [‘malignity (made) the flow’].<sup>17</sup>

We know to what extent these literary reviews occupy an essential place in the work of Voltaire. Jean Sgard rightly spoke of ‘la passion du journalisme’ [‘the passion for journalism’] in connection with this paradoxical attitude: it led Voltaire to feign the most perfect indifference towards the journals of Desfontaines and Fréron while covertly asking his Parisian correspondents to send him all the issues he had missed.<sup>18</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier behaved in a similar way, since journalism in general and literary papers in particular are obsessively present in his work, even as he criticizes them almost constantly. Like Voltaire, he presents *folliculaires* as a set of hacks devoid of any talent, whose job consists of destroying, at little cost, the productions of true authors. In *Tableau de Paris*, he even uses warlike vocabulary to describe the practices of these journalists:

Then come the master journalists, sheet-makers, *folliculaires*, companions, satirical apprentices, who do not write until someone else has written, else their pen would be forever idle. They forge this heap of periodic nonsense we are inundated with in the arsenals of hate, ignorance, and envy.<sup>19</sup>

For Mercier as much as for Voltaire, the constant reference to the fragile medium of the *feuille* is therefore undoubtedly a means of belittling and even humiliating these *folliculaires*, whose potential for nuisance they knew. Both made an analogy, not only between materiality and content, but between the evanescent character of these paper sheets and the very profession of journalist. The modest-looking brochures, intended for the waste bin, thus reflect, under their pen, a vile, abject, dishonourable profession, which should, to their minds, be universally condemned. Voltaire especially, constantly represented journalism as a degrading activity, relegated to the lowest level of social hierarchy, by associating the ignominy of the sheet medium and the indignity of the

17 Diderot and d’Alembert, VII, p. 580.

18 See Jean Sgard, ‘Voltaire et la passion du journalisme’, in *Le Siècle de Voltaire: Hommage à René Pomeau*, ed. by Christiane Mervaud and Sylvain Menant, 2 vols (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1987), II, pp. 847–54. See also my chapter ‘Voltaire et les “oiseaux de nuit” du journalisme: l’impossible secret’, in *Éthique, poétique et esthétique du secret de l’Ancien Régime à l’époque contemporaine*, ed. by Françoise Gevrey, Alexis Lévrier, and Bernard Teyssandier (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2016), pp. 201–16.

19 ‘Ensuite viennent les maîtres journalistes, feuellistes, folliculaires, compagnons, apprentis satiriques, qui attendent pour écrire qu’un autre ait écrit, sans quoi leur plume serait à jamais oisive. Ils forgent ce tas d’inepties périodiques dont nous sommes inondés dans les arsenaux de la haine, de l’ignorance et de l’envie.’ (Mercier, I, pp. 335–36).

profession of *folliculaire*.<sup>20</sup> In the best of cases he made them appear as paupers living by their wits, but he also regularly depicted journalism as a professional world of vice, robbery, theft, and corruption. In *Commentaire historique*, he goes so far as to present Desfontaines and his ilk as criminals: ‘These are the people with whom M. de Voltaire had to deal, and whom he called the rabble of literature. They live, he said, on pamphlets and crimes.’<sup>21</sup>

The imagery of journalism that Voltaire built is of course very far from reality. Certainly, at a time when many *feuilles volantes* were unsuccessful attempts, numerous journalists struggled to make a living from their pen. Yet profitable press companies began to crop up with the professionalization and specialization of the press in the second half of the century.<sup>22</sup> Above all, as we have seen, the main enemies of Voltaire were precisely those journalists who, in the long run, succeeded in seducing the public. This gigantic gap between imagination and reality culminates in the texts that Voltaire devoted to Fréron: as Jean Balcou has shown, the author of *L'Année littéraire* earned a considerable income with his periodical, and was able to lead a sumptuous existence in the heart of Paris at the very time when Voltaire was exiled from it.<sup>23</sup> This does not prevent the latter from representing him in *L'Écossaise* as a greedy and spurned journalist, whose only living space was the café, where he spent his days. It did not prevent him either, in the weeks after he wrote the play, to imagine Fréron a publicly scorned, poor wretch, condemned to wander the streets of Paris. In a letter to Marmontel on 13 August 1760, he pushes the analogy between the materiality of the diary and the profession of *folliculaire* very far, assuming that Fréron's *feuilles* are the last refuge left to him: ‘Is it still possible to find someone who receives Fréron at home? Can this publicly spanked dog find any other asylum than the one he has built with his papers?’<sup>24</sup>

Although he did not single out journalists in the same recurring attacks as Voltaire, Mercier also represented the world of the press as despicably ugly. Deliberately forgetting the authors of successful periodicals, he depicts journalists as a swarming multitude of writers condemned to live and work in pitiful places: cellars, lofts, or the street itself. Pointing to the proliferation of newspapers as a rampant plague, he claims on several occasions, in the *Tableau de Paris* and in *Le Nouveau Paris*, that journalists occupy the garrets of every house in Paris.<sup>25</sup> In the same way, Mercier states that when the journalist thinks he has reached the pinnacle of power, by penetrating ‘even the

20 In the entry on ‘auteurs’ [‘authors’] of *Questions sur L'Encyclopédie*, he even claims that the *folliculaires* are seen by the police ‘après les filles de joie, qui ne les regardant pas, parce qu’elles savent bien que ce sont de mauvaises pratiques’ [‘after the prostitutes, who do not look at them, because they know of their bad practices’]. Voltaire, *Questions sur L'Encyclopédie*, 9 vols ([Genève]: [Cramer], 1770), II, p. 377.

21 ‘Voilà les gens à qui M. de Voltaire avait affaire, et qu’il appelait la canaille de la littérature. Ils vivent, disait-il, de brochures et de crimes.’ Voltaire, *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l’auteur de La Henriade*, in *Écrits autobiographiques*, ed. by J. Goldzink (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2006), p. 119.

22 On this gap between fiction and reality in journalism, see the study by Jean Sgard, ‘Le journaliste famélique’, in *Le Pauvre Diable: Destinies of the Man of Letters in the 18th Century*, ed. by Henri Duranton (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’université de Saint-Étienne, 2006), pp. 57–66.

23 See Jean Balcou, ‘Fréron dans l’intimité (1763–1768)’, *Dix-huitième siècle*, 11 (1979), 372–74.

24 ‘Est-il possible qu’il y ait encore quelqu’un qui reçoive Fréron chez lui? Ce chien, fessé dans la rue, peut-il trouver d’autre asile que celui qu’il s’est bâti avec ses feuilles?’ Voltaire, *Correspondance*, v, p. 1062: D9142.

25 See for example the article ‘Imprimeries’ in *Le Nouveau Paris*: ‘Il n’y a pas de maison à Paris, pour ainsi dire, où il n’y ait aujourd’hui une presse, soit à la cave, soit au grenier; et dans les mansardes, deux ou trois journalistes.’ [‘There is not a house in Paris, so to speak, where there is not a printing press today, either in the cellar or in the attic; and in the garrets, one or two journalists.’] (Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bonnet [Paris: Mercure de France, 1994], p. 690). He uses very similar terms in the article ‘Caricatures, folies’ to denounce the uncontrolled abundance of newspapers: ‘Il n’y a pas de rues où il n’y ait l’imprimerie d’un journal, et trois journalistes dans les mansardes.’ [‘There is no street where there is not a newspaper printing press, and three journalists in the garrets.’] (Ibid., p. 400).



THE AMBIGUITIES OF CONTEMPT FOR THE *FOLLICULAIRES* IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

halls of the legislative body', he, in reality, does not fool a single soul: he appears as 'the legislator of the streets, whose decrees are published and dispersed on crossroads, and litter the streams'.<sup>26</sup>

The contemptible medium of the *feuille volante* is therefore, for Mercier as for Voltaire, the clearest and most immediate reflection of the unworthy and dishonourable characteristics of journalistic activity. Logically, the disgust that these two authors felt for periodical papers led them to consider destroying them, or failing that, to reserve them for the most humiliating uses. Thus, Voltaire suggests to several of his correspondents to use newspapers as 'torche-culs' ['arse-wipes'].<sup>27</sup> Even more explicitly, Mercier sometimes imagines the possibility of reducing newspapers to nothingness by annihilating them, in a process of collective purification. In the article 'Gens de lettres' ['Men of Letters'] in *Le Nouveau Paris*, he rejoices in the telling of the fate reserved for the *feuilles* of a 'journalillon' ['journal of little importance'] which had recently made an unfair criticism of a play appreciated by all the spectators: 'The public, sitting in court, had the author's papers brought, and sentenced them to be lacerated in the open theatre; and the sentence was executed then and there.'<sup>28</sup>

This rejection of the sheet medium, and the analogy established with the profession of journalist led Louis-Sébastien Mercier to sketch dreams of *auto-da-fé*. In some of his letters, Voltaire had already advised that periodicals be thrown into the fire before or after reading them.<sup>29</sup> But Mercier goes much further in some chapters of *Tableau de Paris*, and even more so in the anticipatory novel *L'An 2440*.<sup>30</sup> In the utopian world he imagines, libraries are purged of a considerable number of books now considered useless. This acknowledged violence against books is presented as the condition for the birth of a fairer society.<sup>31</sup> The King's librarian tells the narrator that in the case of many authors, they have sorted what is important from what is not, kept only a part of their books, or compiled summaries taking only the most essential elements of their works. As far as the press is concerned, it does not seem necessary to distinguish big and small journalists, nor even the good from the bad periodicals. At the top of the pyre, the men of the year 2440 place newspapers, presented as a jumble of paper:

By unanimous consent, we gathered in a vast clearing all the books that we deemed either frivolous or useless or dangerous; they formed a pyramid which resembled

26 'jusque dans la salle du corps législatif'; 'le législateur des rues, dont les décrets se publient dans les carrefours, et se promènent le long des ruisseaux.' Ibid., p. 690.

27 He mentions for example the 'torche-culs de Fréron' ['Fréron's arse-wipes'] in a letter to Thieriot on 19 December 1754. In a letter to Berger, on 25 February 1765, he describes the same use for these papers in a more allusive way: 'Vous m'apprenez, monsieur, que l'auteur de *L'Année littéraire*, a fait usage de ces lettres, vous ne me dites pas quel usage, et si c'est celui qu'on fait ordinairement de ses feuilles. Tout ce que je peux vous répondre, c'est que je n'ai jamais lu *L'Année littéraire*, et que je suis trop propre pour en faire usage.' ['You tell me, Sir, that the author of *L'Année littéraire* has made use of these letters, you do not tell me what use, and if it is the one that is usually made of his *feuilles*. All I can answer you is that I have never read *L'Année littéraire*, and that I am too clean to use it.'] (Voltaire, *Correspondance*, VII, p. 1055: D12413).

28 'le public, séant en son tribunal, fit apporter les feuilles de l'auteur, et les condamna à être lacérées en plein théâtre; et la sentence y fut exécutée.' Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, p. 890.

29 This is the case for example in a letter 'à un premier commis' ['to a head clerk'] dated 20 June 1733.

30 He claims, for example, in the article 'Journaux, le vrai journaliste': 'Il n'y a qu'une bonne poétique, c'est celle qui enseigne à jeter au feu toutes ces feuilles où des juges transcendants et des législateurs suprêmes, s'érigeant en hommes de goût par excellence, vous disent à Paris ce qu'il faut penser de tout ouvrage littéraire composé chez les nations voisines, dont ils n'entendent seulement pas la langue.' ['There is only one good poetics, it is the one that teaches to throw into the fire all these sheets where pre-eminent judges and supreme legislators, setting themselves up as men of taste par excellence, tell you in Paris what to think of any literary work composed in the neighbouring nations, whose language they do not even understand.'] (Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, p. 282).

31 See the study by Florence Boulerie, 'Violence du juste en utopie: le pouvoir éclairé selon Louis-Sébastien Mercier', *Eidolon*, 73 (2006), 209–20.

in height and size an enormous tower: it was assuredly a new tower of Babel. The newspapers crowned this bizarre edifice, which was flanked on all sides by pastoral letters from bishops, remonstrances from parliaments, indictments, and funeral orations.<sup>32</sup>

### Stakes and Reasons for a Rejection

With hardly any equivalent in the literature of the time, Voltaire and Mercier wrote profusely on journalism and the disgust inspired by the *folliculaires*. Yet this negative image of the press in general, and of periodicals in particular, was widely shared in eighteenth-century literature, and, to some extent, by the journalists themselves. Since the appearance at the beginning of the century of *feuilles volantes* written in the first person, many authors of these newspapers tried to counterbalance the use of the periodical form by resorting to publication in volumes. Addison, in the *Spectator*, or Marivaux, in *Le Spectateur français*, amused themselves on several occasions by making fun of this distrust of the sheet medium, by staging the prejudices of the public and the authors with regard to these newspapers.<sup>33</sup> A truly provocative example was *L'Indigent philosophe*, since the pages of the original edition were published on poor quality paper, with bad printing, and a sloppy general presentation. There was thus an obvious metonymic relationship between the appearance of this periodical and the fictitious character supposed to be its author, a pauper who claimed to deliver in his *feuilles* 'des lambeaux sans ordre' ['random shreds'] of his life.<sup>34</sup> Such a choice was however very rare, and many authors of periodical papers were tempted to do the opposite; they understated the periodic nature of their writings by presenting the successive issues of their journals as so many fragments of a volume to come.

The censure of periodicals throughout the eighteenth century must, however, be nuanced, as the attitude of their most obstinate opponents appears to be ambiguous. The Encyclopedists were particularly critical of the press, yet most of them wrote for newspapers, some of them with enthusiastic persistence. Diderot and Rousseau, for example, conceived the draft of a periodical project together in 1749, the title of which should have been *Le Persifleur*. This journal never came into existence, yet we know that its first issue was sketched by Rousseau, and that this weekly periodical would have followed the tradition of the 'Spectators'. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau even presents this attempt as a 'projet (de) feuille périodique' ['project (for) a periodical paper'], precisely the frail and transient journalistic form that Diderot and he later vigorously condemned.<sup>35</sup> Voltaire, on the other hand, not only secretly read all the newspapers of his *folliculaires* enemies, he also wrote for some periodicals, such as Pierre Rousseau's

32 'D'un consentement unanime, nous avons rassemblé dans une vaste plaine tous les livres que nous avons jugés ou frivoles ou inutiles ou dangereux; nous en avons formé une pyramide qui ressemblait en hauteur et en grosseur à une tour énorme: c'était assurément une nouvelle tour de Babel. Les journaux couronnaient ce bizarre édifice, et il était flanqué de toutes parts de mandements d'évêques, de remonstrances de parlements, de réquisitoires et d'oraisons funèbres.' Louis Sébastien Mercier, *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: rêve s'il en fut jamais*, ed. by Raymond Trousson (Bordeaux: Ducros, 1971), pp. 249–50.

33 See issue 529 of *Le Spectateur* ([Joseph Addison], 'L. Discours', *Le Spectateur ou le Socrate moderne*, 5.50 (1723), 311–15 [pp. 311–12]) and the sixth sheet of *Le Spectateur français* (Marivaux, *Journaux et œuvres diverses*, ed. by Frédéric Deloffre and Michel Gilot [Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1969; revised edn 1988], pp. 137–39).

34 Marivaux, p. 277. See my article 'Les "lambeaux sans ordre" de *L'Indigent philosophe*, ou le pari de la radicalité', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 112.3 (2012), 578–92.

35 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, ed. by Alain Grosrichard, 2 vols (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2002), II, p. 88.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF CONTEMPT FOR THE *FOLLICULAIRES* IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

*Journal encyclopédique* and François Arnaud and Jean-Baptiste Suard's *Gazette littéraire de l'Europe*.

The paradox is even more striking in the case of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, whose journalistic work began in the 1760s, and increased considerably throughout the last quarter of the century. Admittedly, his journalistic contributions are difficult to list, because not all of them are signed. But it is certain that from his arrival at the head of the *Journal des dames* in 1774, until the end of the century, Mercier collaborated with more and more colleagues, and often worked for several periodicals at the same time. His contributions to newspapers became even more sustained during the revolutionary period, especially between 1797 and 1800. According to Annie Cloutier, he wrote about two hundred articles during those four years for the *Journal de Paris*, *Le Censeur des journaux*, *Le Bien informé*, and *La Clef du cabinet des souverains*.<sup>36</sup> Before it suddenly stopped in 1800, Mercier's journalistic activity was therefore extremely abundant. Mercier's work for the press and his literary writings also became interchangeable, since, as Shelly Charles notes, a journalistic report could become a chapter in the *Tableau de Paris* or the *Nouveau Paris*.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, this did not prevent Mercier from constantly addressing the most hostile comments to the periodical press: he was, therefore, for twenty-five years, one of the *folliculaires* which he never ceased to condemn.

Many reasons can explain such a paradox. For Mercier, as for Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, to contribute to newspapers could be a trial run, a means of pre-publishing literary texts, or a way to take part in public debate. Whatever the reasons were, these journalistic contributions point to the growing power of the press: even its detractors recognized it as a medium that was in full swing. In all likelihood, this also explains the fantasies that Mercier or Voltaire imagined around the *folliculaires* and their destructive impulses in response to periodical papers. Such persistent wishes to harm these journals, to the point of describing the worst uses for them, or dreaming of burning them, show how disturbing they were. Moreover they indicate the fascinating and disconcerting speculations that could be made on their future development.

At the same time, Mercier and Voltaire both praised periodicals, by highlighting qualities that were precisely linked to the fleeting and ephemeral nature of these publications. Even though he repeatedly attacked the volatility of Desfontaines' or Fréron's papers, Voltaire showed a growing taste for portable writings, and often resorted to hurriedly written and easily distributed short texts. Of course, he often used disparaging names for these small writings, since he liked to call them 'rogatons' ['scraps'] or 'petits pâtés' ['little pies']. Yet in a letter to Madame du Deffand dated 6 August 1760, while reproaching the Marquise for her taste for Fréron's papers, he boasts of the speed with which his portable texts reached his Parisian enemies: 'It is rather pleasant to send, from the foot of the Alps to Paris, flying rockets which explode on the heads of fools.'<sup>38</sup> Thus, Voltaire's contempt for the *feuilles volantes*, or 'flying' papers, of his opponents did not prevent him from rejoicing in the speed with which his own 'flying rockets' circulated.

In a fairly similar way, in the middle of his condemnations of the press, Mercier sometimes slipped emphatic praise which testifies to a particularly fine understanding of the resources specific to journalistic writing. He developed a genuine plea in favour of *Le Journal de Paris* in a chapter of *Tableau de Paris*. Mercier had indeed contributed

36 Annie Cloutier, 'Entre préjugé et pratique: Louis Sébastien Mercier, homme de lettres et journaliste', *Études littéraires*, 40.3 (2009), 15–28 (p. 17).

37 Shelly Charles, 'L'écrivain journaliste', in *Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814): un hérétique en littérature*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1995), p. 105.

38 'Il est assez plaisant d'envoyer, du pied des Alpes à Paris, des fusées volantes qui crèvent sur la tête des sots.' Voltaire, *Correspondance*, v, p. 1039: D9121.

for some time to this journal, but this high praise remains very surprising. *Le Journal de Paris*, launched in 1777, was the first French daily: its appearance therefore marked a new stage towards an acceleration of media time and towards a proliferation of newspapers that Mercier denounced in almost all of his work. However, the very promises offered by this instantaneousness of information met his full approval. He emphasizes, that ‘in the space of a moment, the whole of Paris is either enlightened or disillusioned on what needs to be known’.<sup>39</sup> He praises, in particular, the social usefulness of this periodical, which, according to him, allowed rumours to be denied before they had time to spread.<sup>40</sup> He also believes that ‘cette feuille [...] est devenue le véhicule de la charité universelle’ [‘this paper (...) has become the vehicle of universal charity’] because it allowed good deeds to be brought to light quickly and could therefore serve as an example to society in general.<sup>41</sup> *Le Journal de Paris* was useful because it made it possible to praise virtue, and was just as useful, according to him, because of its ability to condemn vice. Mercier believed this periodical could, on a day-to-day basis, educate the entire population by bringing to its attention the most morally reprehensible acts:

It would be good if we could find in there a faithful account of all the accidents that happen on the streets of the capital. People with carriages might even blush, when they read that such and such a man perished under the wheels of their vehicle; or, that to gain three minutes of their evening entertainment, they ran over an infantryman who was carrying a heavy burden for the benefit of society.<sup>42</sup>

The periodicals that flourished in eighteenth-century France were despised and rejected by authors who especially criticized the sheet medium, as one which was destined to rapidly disappear. This contempt for the medium, which appeared at the beginning of the century, continued until the revolutionary period and went along with the representation of the journalist as a corrupt and mercenary individual, condemned to live in shame. Yet, as the examples of Voltaire or Louis-Sébastien Mercier have shown, even the greatest opponents of the press contributed to newspapers. While they reviled the work of *folliculaires* they understood all the possibilities offered by periodic writing and by the flexibility of the medium of the *feuille volante*. Mercier and Voltaire thus had in common a dream of destroying periodicals, but also an enthusiastic anticipation of the advent of a world dominated by speed, mobility, and the incessant renewal of information.

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39 ‘en un instant, tout Paris est instruit ou désabusé sur ce qui lui importe de savoir au juste.’ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, II, p. 309.

40 Referring to the gossip that could arise from a hunting injury to Louis XVI, he believes that the daily can restore the truth almost immediately: ‘Il y a mille circonstances qui intéressent le public; il pourrait se tromper dangereusement, il est redressé tout à coup par la vérité des faits.’ [‘There are a thousand circumstances that interest the public; it could be dangerously mistaken, it is suddenly corrected by the truth of the facts.’] (Ibid.)

41 Ibid., p. 310.

42 ‘Il serait bon qu’on y trouvât le récit fidèle de tous les accidents qui arrivent sur le pavé de la capitale. Les gens à équipages rougiraient peut-être, en lisant que tel et tel homme a péri sous les roues de leur char; et que, pour gagner trois minutes au spectacle, ils ont écrasé un fantassin surchargé d’un fardeau qu’il voiturait pour l’intérêt de la société.’ Ibid., p. 310.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF CONTEMPT FOR THE *FOLLICULAIRES* IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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