

## Between fictionality and reality: The “novels” in the *Gentleman’s Journal*\*

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### ABSTRACT

The *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692–1694), generally acknowledged as the first literary English magazine, included in each issue short narratives presented as “novels.” Published by using a fictive letter written from London to a gentleman in the country to keep him both informed and entertained, the use of this letter format brings together a number of elements that will result in the confrontation of fictionality and reality. This paper will discuss the way in which format and content constantly subvert each other throughout the thirty-two issues of the journal, especially in relation to the nature, titles, and content of the “novels.”

**KEYWORDS:** Restoration prose fiction; early English periodicals; *Gentleman’s Journal*; fictionality and reality; letter writing.

**Entre ficcionalidad y realidad: las  
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**RESUMEN:** El *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692–1694), que ha sido reconocida de manera abrumadora como la primera revista literaria inglesa, incluía en cada número narrativas cortas que se presentaban como “novelas.” Publicada en forma de una carta ficticia escrita desde Londres a un caballero de provincias para mantenerlo informado y entretenido, la utilización de la carta como formato aún una serie de elementos que resultarán en la confrontación de ficcionalidad y realidad. Este artículo debate la manera en que formato y contenido continuamente se subvierten el uno al otro a lo largo de los treinta y dos números de la revista,

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**RESUMO:** *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692–1694), geralmente reconhecido como a primeira revista literária inglesa, incluía em cada número narrativas curtas apresentadas como “romances” (*novels*). Estas narrativas adotavam a forma de uma carta ficcional escrita a partir de Londres e endereçada a um cavalheiro da província com o propósito de o informar e entreter; o uso deste formato epistolar reúne uma série de elementos que irão resultar no confronto entre ficcionalidade e realidade. Este ensaio discute o modo como formato e conteúdo se subvertem mutuamente e de forma constante ao longo dos trinta e dois números da re-

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especialmente en relación con la naturaleza, títulos y contenido de las “novelas.”

PALABRAS CLAVE: ficción en prosa de la Restauración; primeros periódicos ingleses; *Gentleman's Journal*; ficcionalidad y realidad; escritura de cartas.

vista, com especial atenção para a natureza, títulos e conteúdo dos “romances.”

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: prosa ficcional da Restauração; primeiros periódicos ingleses; *Gentleman's Journal*; ficcionalidade e realidade; escrita epistolar.

In Jenny DiPlacidi's opinion (2018, 264), the contribution of fiction published in magazines to the development of prose fiction has been greatly neglected or disparaged as unoriginal, amateur, and ephemeral, whereas, she argues, this fiction was innovative and original and played a crucial role in the development of the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Although her contention refers to eighteenth-century publications such as the *Lady's Magazine* (1770–1832), this can easily be applied to previous periodicals which had started to publish pieces of prose fiction in the late seventeenth century. One of these was the *Gentleman's Journal* which, in its thirty-two issues, published between 1692 and 1694 some thirty-six short prose fictions, including a couple of fables. Indistinctly referred to with some of the various names used at the time as a novel, story, history, adventure or merely account, these narratives are framed by a made-up letter whose main function was to hold together the diverse pieces of which the journal was comprised, while giving special significance to the prose fiction genre. My argument is that this format enhanced the fictionality of the “novels” and also reinforced their condition of true stories. I will start by briefly assessing the social role periodicals had in the seventeenth century, and then give some examples of how periodicals might have helped in the propagation and development of prose fiction. After presenting the *Gentleman's Journal* and the “novels” it contains, I will discuss the ways in which fictionality and reality are subverted.

### Periodicals as social instruments

The first English periodical news publication is assumed to have been Nathaniel Butter's *The Courant, or Weekly News from Foreign Parts* (1621), actually a translation from the Dutch as a result of James I's prohibition of the importation of foreign newsbooks in 1621 (Davis

1996, 72). The publication of periodicals, mostly defending partisan political interests, had greatly increased during the Civil War, but figures were much reduced in the Commonwealth period to rise again immediately after Oliver Cromwell's death in 1658. However, the 1662 Licensing Act brought a new period of repression for the press under the reigns of Charles II and James II, and it was not until 1688 that periodicals started to proliferate again (Sutherland 1969, 233–239; Sutherland 1986, 1–43; Raven 2007, 91). Richmond P. Bond (1957, 3) has estimated that between 1620 and 1700 seven hundred titles, including both newspapers and periodicals, were published although most of them were very short-lived. Despite the specific political circumstances just described, the emergence of periodical publications in the seventeenth century was not something specific to Britain and a similar phenomenon was taking place in many other European countries including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Italy and Spain (Bond 1957, 13).<sup>1</sup>

It has been argued that this emergence was a middle class and an urban phenomenon. Many of the political events taking place throughout the seventeenth century in England were brought about by and resulted in the increasing strength that the varied members of the middle classes had long been gathering at the economic and social levels, and they did not hesitate to use journalism in general and some specific publications in particular to both channel and reflect their interests (Sutherland 1969, 242). Taking John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* (1691–1697) as an example,<sup>2</sup> Gerd Bayer (2016, 67) explains that by offering supposedly expert advice of scientific, literary, philosophical or miscellaneous interest to the questions submitted by its readers the journal offered a tool for social advancement and responded to the readers' desire to improve their social standing.

Helen Berry has aptly remarked that periodicals were part of "a new form of urban sociability that emerged in late-seventeenth century England" (2003, 6), especially through clubs and coffeehouses, where the latest news could be heard and any topic might be discussed, and papers of all kinds were easily available for general reading, either individually or aloud for a group. Even if periodical culture was genuinely urban by nature and the centers

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of periodicals in Spain, see Ettinghausen (1995, 1996, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The first issue was published as *The Athenian Gazette*.

of production of these publications were in cities, most especially London, periodicals circulated widely in other parts of the country thanks to an improved and reliable mail service (Batchelor and Powell 2018, 2). Another aspect to be considered is that despite the long-held stereotype of a mostly male periodical reader in the public sphere, periodicals were also present in the private life of the home as part of the family entertainment and were widely read by women (Shevelov 1989, 26; Batchelor and Powell 2018, 2). In the words of Shawn Lisa Maurer, “[f]rom the literary periodical’s inception in the last decade of the seventeenth century, women readers –and attention to female behaviour, experiences, and concerns– formed an integral part of the development and considerable popular success of this new and increasingly influential genre” (2010, 156). At that time, the number of female authors was remarkably low compared to male ones, even if they were increasingly courted by periodical editors as contributors. Nonetheless, women had been closely involved in the printing business for many years in selling and composing and printing.<sup>3</sup> Women were very much acknowledged as a significant consumer group by editors and publishers, hence their frequent promises that they were providing material that could be of interest to women (Shevelov 1989, 36).<sup>4</sup>

Some of the best-known periodicals of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century stressed their intention of targeting the female audience. John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* (1691–1697) soon specified on its title page that questions were expected to come from clever people “of Either Sex,” and in 1691 and 1692 he dedicated with increasing frequency (first monthly, then fortnightly, and eventually weekly) special “Ladies Issues” answering questions about love, sex, and conjugal relations (Stearns 1933; Maurer 2010, 156). The *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692–1694) also stated in its inaugural issue that

The fair Sex need never fear to be exposed to the Blush, when they honour this with a Reading; ‘tis partly writ for them, and I am too

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<sup>3</sup> Maureen Bell (2002, 440) reports that over three hundred women have been identified as related to the printing trades between 1557 and 1700.

<sup>4</sup> Shawn Lisa Maurer (2010, 158) emphasizes the association of the periodical genre with women as an apolitical space in which to discuss social issues unlike newspapers, which were associated with men and the partisan world of politics.

much their Votary to be guilty of such a Crime [...] this is no less the *Ladies Journal* than the *Gentlemens*. (Jan. 1692, 1)<sup>5</sup>

In relation to this journal, Alison Adburgham (1977, 31) has argued that its content, peppered with anecdotes and gossipy paragraphs, as well as some useful information about the fashionable world of town, was clearly aimed at pleasing ladies. Isaac Bickerstaff, the editorial persona of Richard Steele's essay-periodical the *Tatler* (1709–1711), also announced his intention "to have something which may be of Entertainment to the Fair Sex, in Honour of whom I have invented the Title of this Paper" (11). In turn, in the *Spectator*, edited by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison in 1711–1712 and 1714, Mr. Spectator, its editorial persona, claimed that he would "dedicate a considerable Share of these my Speculations to [women's] Service, and [...] lead the young through all the becoming Duties of Virginity, Marriage, and Widowhood" (21). Some of these periodicals also had their version for women, although not necessarily launched by the original editors. In 1693, Dunton brought out the *Ladies' Mercury*, the first publication specifically addressed to women, but the experiment only lasted four weeks. Motteux also devoted the October 1693 issue of the *Gentleman's Journal* entirely to his female readership and, just before the introductory letter, retitled it "The Lady's Journal, or the Monthly Miscellany" (Oct. 1693, 323). First a Mrs Crackenthorpe and then a "Society of Ladies" edited the *Female Tatler* (1709–1710) for a few months. Decades later, Eliza Haywood started editing – although anonymously – her popular *Female Spectator* (1744–1746), a collection of essays allegedly inspired by the letters of her readers.

### Periodicals and the propagation of prose fiction

One of the ways in which periodicals contributed to the spread of prose fiction was by advertising or reviewing these works. For a long time, printers and publishers had at times included lists of other publications they had produced on the occasional spare page of individual literary works. However, according to Christine Ferdinand (1998, 165), advertising in periodicals of all kinds became

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<sup>5</sup> All subsequent references to the *Gentleman's Journal* will be given indicating the month and year of publication and the page number according to the copy in the British Library (P.P. 5255).

an important marketing tool starting in the end of the seventeenth century and through most of the eighteenth. She also claims that advertising books in periodicals contributed to developing the craving for reading and publishers could not afford to ignore them (1998, 172; 166). The *Monthly Review* (1749–1845) and the *Critical Review* (1756–1817), considered the first review journals in Britain, would not come into existence until the mid-eighteenth century, however, prior to their appearance, a number of periodicals had become important bibliographical instruments revealing the tastes of the time when they were published (Bond 1957, 36). Starting with the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* (1665), which is still published, many other periodical publications followed: the *Mercurius Librarius* (1668–1709), also known as the *Term Catalogue* and considered by Walter Graham as “the first literary periodical published in England” (1926, 6); Jean de la Crose's *Universal Historical Bibliothecae* (1686–1690), credited with establishing the English reviewing or abstracting journal (Bond 1957, 32), and *Works of the Learned* (1691–1692); and John Dunton's *Compleat Library* (1692–1694), among others.<sup>6</sup>

As observed by Bond (1957, 7), periodicals and newspapers had become a convenient media for the publication of creative as well as critical works provided they were not too long. For this reason, poetry was the genre most likely to be included and a large number of either original or reprinted poems were published in these outlets. However, short pieces of fiction were also excellent candidates and very much sought after by their readers. Even if the heyday of nineteenth-century magazines publishing full-length novels serially was still to come, the publication of fiction in periodicals started in the last decades of the seventeenth century. James Sutherland (1969, 240) claims that different kinds of fiction were published in a number of periodicals in the Restoration period escaping the eye of the licenser even during the most difficult times of government repression. Most of them were satirical, like *News from the Land of Chivalry* (1681), or collections of bawdy anecdotes and picaresque narratives.<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Mayo (1962, 6) names Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* (1691–1697)

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<sup>6</sup> See Graham (1926, 1–35) and Bond (1957, 3–48) for a more detailed account.

<sup>7</sup> As mentioned by Sutherland (1969, 240), one example would be the “Poor Robin” series started in 1676–1677 with *Poor Robin's Intelligence* and coming to an end with *Poor Robin's Intelligence, Or News from City and Country*, published in 1691.

as the first periodical to include narrative accounts on its pages, although he admits that what was presented there was not “formal fiction” but “representative cases” used to illustrate the answers given to their readers and mostly invented, that is, fictional (1962, 17). Almost contemporary of the *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692–1694) was Edward Ward’s *London Spy* (1698–1700), with a country scholar as the protagonist and narrator who rambles about London shedding light on its darker corners. In the following decades and well into the eighteenth century, many other periodicals would turn the publication of fiction into a core part of their content, as was the case of the long-running *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1731–1907), the *Universal Magazine* (1747–1815), the *European Magazine* (1782–1826) or the more women-oriented *Lady’s Magazine* (1770–1832) and *Lady’s Monthly Museum* (1798–1828) (Hughes 2015, 461–462).

Mayo explains that even though “the English novel was unquestionably the creature of the middle-classes [...] for more than a century it was considered an unwelcome intruder by powerful spokesmen in the same circles” (1962, 14) and had been viewed with suspicion by readers among the bourgeoisie. However, the role played by some of the new periodicals and more specifically by the *Athenian Mercury* and the *Gentleman’s Journal* helped to break down the prejudice against poetry (Cunningham 1933, 13) and fiction (Graham 1926, 46) by changing the reading habits of the contemporary audience.

### **The *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692–1694)**

*The Gentleman’s Journal: Or, The Monthly Miscellany* (1692–1694) has been considered by general consensus the first English literary magazine (Foster 1917, 22; Graham 1926, 46; Bond 1957, 21; Sutherland 1969, 243; Cannan 2006, 145). This prodigy was the creation of Peter Anthony Motteux (1660–1718),<sup>8</sup> a French Huguenot born in Normandy who fled to England at the age of twenty-two after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. He soon became an active member of English literary society and proved to be a skilled man of letters: he translated Rabelais and Cervantes into English, wrote prologues and epilogues for the plays of several well-known contemporary playwrights, and

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<sup>8</sup> For a full account of his biography see Cunningham (1933).



authored plays himself.<sup>9</sup> He was also considerably knowledgeable about music and besides working as an opera librettist and writing song lyrics, he promoted the use of music to accompany spoken drama (Tadié 2013, 149). Walter Graham (1926, 44) remarks how important it was that, for the first time, a periodical of this kind was in the hands of a professional writer rather than a scholar or a politician.

As stated in the dedication to William, Earl of Devonshire in the first issue (Jan. 1692), the journal aimed to entertain:<sup>10</sup> “My Journals aspire no higher, than to attend your Lordship when you enter into your Closet, to disengage your Thoughts from the daily pressure of Business; or when you retire to that New Wonder of the Peak, your beautiful Seat.” Dorothy Foster (1917, 58) imagines this journal as a pleasant pastime residing in the drawing rooms ready for an idle hour, in which readers could find a speck of gallantry, light literature and science, a bit of fashion, enigmas to be solved, songs to be performed in company, and a varied list of contributors. For Kathryn Shevelow (1989, 35), women were thus provided with a kind of entertainment that was respectable at the same time as it was educational and filled empty female leisure time.

Thirty-two issues were published monthly between January 1692 and November 1694,<sup>11</sup> containing thirty-six quarto pages,<sup>12</sup> including the title page and a table of contents. The full title of the publication was *The Gentleman's Journal: Or, The Monthly Miscellany. By Way of a Letter*<sup>13</sup> to a Gentleman in the Country. Consisting of News, History, Philosophy, Poetry, Musick, Translations, &c. This kind of journal with a wide variety of content—the miscellany journal—was relevant for its role in the making of the “magazine” in the following century (Bond 1957, 21). The *Gentleman's Journal* has also been praised for its

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<sup>9</sup> Proof of his ability as a versatile man of letters is that he single-handedly authored two complete issues of the *Gentleman's Journal* (September 1692 and July 1693) covering all kinds of genres (Cannan 2006, 152).

<sup>10</sup> Walter Graham in his study of early literary periodicals (1926) classifies them into the “Learned Periodical” and the “Periodical of Amusement,” placing the *Gentleman's Journal* in the second group (1926, 44–46).

<sup>11</sup> In 1694 three of the issues covered two months: January–February, August–September, and October–November. This last issue, as was usual in all the others in 1694, promised on its title page “To be continued monthly.”

<sup>12</sup> Although in the first issue page numbers run up to 64, it actually had forty-four pages.

<sup>13</sup> Starting in January 1693, it read “In a Letter.”



modernness and its resemblance in content to a twentieth-century literary magazine (Foster 1917, 22; Graham 1926, 83; Ezell 1992, 323). The idea of using the format of a letter, among other reasons that will be discussed later, came from the French periodical *Le Mercure Galant* (1672–1714): “The French have had a Letter of this nature, called, *Mercure Gallant*, every Month for many Years” (Jan. 1692, 1). Founded by the writer Jean Donneau de Vizé, each number was written in the form of a letter to a lady who had left Paris for the provinces but wished to be informed of the latest news in town. The *Mercure Galant* included light literature of a gallant kind, songs and illustrations and it was addressed to the fashionable people in Paris, with its success most probably due to the prominence it gave to court news and gossip (Foster 1917, 23). The *Gentleman’s Journal* always started with a brief introduction addressing the author’s correspondent, which might be followed by news, original poetry or translations (mostly of classic authors), a popular scientific article, an essay or discussion of a topic, enigmas for readers to solve, information about books or plays being staged, and one or two “novels,” maybe a fable. And, after the closing of the letter proper, two or three songs with their scores and lyrics were also included. No wonder, then, that the journal has been considered a compendium of the Restoration’s literary taste (Foster 1917, 58).

### The “novels” in the *Gentleman’s Journal*

Probably one of the most striking features of the *Gentleman’s Journal* for its time is the inclusion of a series of short narratives—two to seven pages long—that its editor often explicitly called “a novel.” Of the thirty-six narratives included in all the issues, twenty-seven are referred to as “novels,” mostly in the table of contents, sometimes also in the heading of the story itself. One has the word “adventure” in its title and another is identified as “a late Adventure,” there is a “story” and “a True History,” and there are two “fables.”<sup>14</sup> Two of the narratives have no specific category attributed to them. At the same time, either as part of the brief editorial commentaries to introduce the narratives or to move on to another piece or as a way to start or

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<sup>14</sup> Rose A. Zimbaro (1986, 8–9) underscores the fact that Motteux makes a clear difference between novels and fables and romances, as the former are accounts of actual events.

finish the fictional narratives, some are referred to as “an adventure” (five times), “a history” (twice), “a true story” (once), and “a poetical fiction” (once). And on one occasion the following combination can also be found: “Now, for a Novel. I am sometimes much put to it, to discover Adventures worth relating: Take that which follows for a Fable if you please; however, I am credibly inform’d, that most of the Particulars are true” (June 1693, 181). This variety but also indecision in the choice of word would be the “interchangeability” regarding the use of the terms “romance,” “history,” and “novel” that Michael McKeon (2002, 25) refers to, or the “heterogeneity” Bayer talks about when dealing with the Restoration novel and explaining that both catalogs and booksellers indistinctly “refer to histories, romances or intrigues, mostly avoiding the term novel” (2016, 145).

Regardless of the names these short narratives may be given, they had a few of the characteristics that would qualify them as novels – or, at least, as miniature novels – starting with Congreve’s contention in the preface to *Incognita* (1692) that

Novels are of a more familiar nature; Come near us, and represent to us Intrigues in practice, delight us with Accidents and odd Events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unrepresented, such which not being so distant from our Belief bring also the pleasure nearer us.

Dorothy Foster claims that the “novels” in the *Gentleman’s Journal* “portray contemporary types, contemporary manners” (1917, 45), and Charles C. Mish concurs with her when he says that they “involve some depiction of manners and realistic viewpoint” (1969, 314). In turn, Rose A. Zimbardo also insists on the idea that the novel of the 1690s aims to imitate reality and give “an accurate account of real events and people” (1986, 8), and so do these narratives. The setting is definitely contemporary and even if some of the locations where the action takes place are left unnamed or are imprecise (somewhere in Albion, the Wells, Town, the City, the Country), they are associated with people and activities recognizable as contemporary at that time. And, on many other occasions, specific places in or around London are also referred to (the Strand, Hay market, Westminster). With few exceptions, the characters are mostly members of the gentry and the upper middle class, whose category is measured by the gentlemen’s estates and the ladies’ beauty, virtue, and wit. And, as Bayer (2016, 174) contends in relation to Restoration fiction characters, they are

usually stock types with a prevailing humor reflected in their names, when given (e.g., Sir Frolick Wanton, Sir Wilding Freelove, and Tom Goodstead in “The Friendly Cheat,” Feb. 1692, 10–16; Viperly, Kindman, Constantia, Heartly and Richmore in “The Treacherous Guardian,” April 1693, 115–120); otherwise, they are identified by their professional activity, their position in society or their role in the story (e.g., a stone-cutter in “The Noble Statuary,” Jan. 1692, 23–29; a Gentleman, a young Lady, a She-Friend, a young Sister, a Spouse, and a Gallant in “The Adventure of the Night-Cap,” April 1692, 9–12; an Officer, a Lawyer, a Husband, a Wife, a Lady in “The Picture: Or, Jealousy without a Cause,” Dec. 1692, 7–12). Elizabeth Fowler (2003, 2) argues that literary characters represent social types who resemble “familiar concepts of social beings” so that readers and writers can jointly construct characters as they share common knowledge of social realities and the way they work. This would be in line with the idea that playwrights such as Congreve, Southerne, and Vanbrugh wrote their plays for the same kind of audience that read the *Gentleman’s Journal* (Zimbaro 1986, 142).

Not only the characters but also many of the situations in the tales of the *Gentleman’s Journal* were drawn from contemporary comedy (Foster 1917, 46; Zimbaro 1986, 9; Bayer and Jasenowski 2019, 24). A relevant number of the plots<sup>15</sup> in the *Journal* could easily be identified with familiar situations on the stage with witty women and debauched men, jealous husbands being taught a lesson, and where some victories are obtained by means of trickery or duping someone.<sup>16</sup> As argued by Bayer (2016, 18), the Restoration stage became increasingly interested in a more direct and faithful representation of life on the stage, and once this realistic tide started there, it easily moved into other genres, especially prose fiction.

These narratives present some other elements that create the kind of familiarity that Congreve mentioned in his preface to *Incognita* in relation to the novel as a genre. Precisely because the journal is

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<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Foster (1917, 47–56) divides the narratives in the *Gentleman’s Journal* into two groups: those frequently coarse and immoral and those of a romantic character. In turn, Robert D. Mayo (1962, 22) organizes them in three groups: “satirical adventure stories, amorous histories, and tales of intrigue and gallantry in keeping with fashionable taste in the last years of the seventeenth century.”

<sup>16</sup> Some of these plots would be the result of either French and Italian adaptations or translations (Mayo 1962, 20; Hughes 2015, 262; Bayer 2016, 68).

written in the format of a letter, the tone used by the narrator is often that of someone telling his intended reader(s) anecdotes that he has overheard and wants to share with a friend, and leaves the end open to future gossip. This is the case of “Hypocrisy Out-done: Or, The Imperfect Widow,” when we are told “How it fares with Pretty Madam *Læda* I can’t imagin” (June 1693, 185), or with “The Female Husband,” when he says, “as I understand, they were married, and left the other to get a better Property when she can” (June 1694, 152).

In some of the narratives, the realism is also enhanced by giving detailed information about a specific activity or event. In “The Vain-Glorious Citt: or, The Stock-Jobber,” the protagonist’s trade is fully described, and we learn about risky investments and money easily won and lost (Jan. 1692, 8–9). In “The Widow by Chance,” we are informed about how the law works specifically in the case of how a husband could force his wife to live with him in the same house despite their disagreements (Jan. 1693, 8). And in “Patience Rewarded,” it is plainly explained to readers that the reason of the female protagonist’s “infertility” is her husband’s “incapacity,” “having in a Duel receiv’d a severe wound in one of the most obliging parts, so that he was only outwardly accomplished for a Husband” (Dec. 1693, 200).<sup>17</sup>

### **Subverting fictionality and reality**

As described above, Motteux chose the format of a letter written to a gentleman living in the country in which information about diverse aspects of contemporary life as well as some entertainment was provided to give shape to his miscellany journal. My argument is that this format enhanced the fictionality of these “novels” while reinforcing their condition of true stories, an essential element for the concept of the novel at the time.<sup>18</sup> However, as will be discussed, this is not a straightforward relationship and both concepts – fictionality and reality – will constantly be subverted throughout the issues of the *Gentleman’s Journal*.

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<sup>17</sup> This page is wrongly numbered in the original and should read 400.

<sup>18</sup> A case in point, as highlighted by Sonia Villegas López (2020, 120), is Aphra Behn’s Preface to *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688), in which Behn claims the story is true by suggesting she was an eyewitness to the events narrated.

In the seventeenth century, the letter was quite popular both as a private form of communication and in its public, as well as commercial, version in the print media (Bayer and Jasenowski 2019, 16). One example of the latter was John Dunton's popular *Athenian Mercury* (1691–1697). Dunton started a model later widely imitated by other periodicals, which was based on the questions asked by readers through letters they sent and the answers given by the editor and members of the staff. Letters to the editor also appeared in many other periodicals and newspapers, and occasionally they could be invented (be fictional) and on other occasions they might include a narrative of sorts. That is the reason why Robert Adams Day (1966, 267) draws attention to what he considers a kind of fiction, sometimes also miniature letter novels, which contributed to the development of epistolary fiction and a taste for it.

Throughout the seventeenth century, manuscript news letters had circulated quite freely in the country. Such was the popularity of these letters and the confidence in what they conveyed that from 1696 and well into the following century *Dawks's News-Letter*—founded by Ichabod Dawks—used a special script type that resembled handwriting<sup>19</sup> and began by addressing an imagined gentleman, “Sr,” with the intention of suggesting a personal approach (Sutherland 1986, 29–30). As explained by Bond (1957, 43), letters with current news had long been an important source for many papers and some of them showed this in their masthead (e.g., *Packet of Letters*, 1646, or *Miscellaneous Letters*, 1694–1696). Dorothy Foster also concurs that the epistolary model “was a favorite form of the day” (1917, 25) and despite the increasing popularity of newspapers, news letters, either printed or in manuscript, could be found for sale in London for country correspondence. As she explains, some space was left both at the beginning and the end for a personal address or information and an empty fourth page to be used as the envelope. In the seventeenth century, letters were also popular for a quite different kind of transaction: the exchange of—mostly—poetry among the members of

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<sup>19</sup> Although this does not seem to be the case here, as periodicals were aimed at an educated audience, it is worth noting Margaret J. M. Ezell's argument that in the seventeenth century there were different levels of literacy and some readers could understand the black letter type used in the cheaper publications, but not the italic, and whereas some could read print, they could not read handwriting (2018, 360).

the literary coteries of the period (Ezell 1992, 325–326). By means of letters, Restoration courtiers and also ladies, such as Anne Killigrew, circulated manuscript copies of their work among their literary acquaintances, sometimes eventually gathered together in manuscript collections. Finally, a third reason why letters were popular in the seventeenth century is that letter writing was used as a means to teach literacy skills to the rising middle classes. They needed to write letters for both business and personal reasons, and letter writing instruction also seems to have been a practical means of teaching grammar and composition skills, more effective than mere composition (Mitchell 2012, 229–230), and, according to some accounts, it was a usual practice specially among women (Hughes 2015, 466).

Joad Raymond has asserted that the “early modern British public had a nearly pathological interest in reading and hearing news” (1998, 109), something confirmed by contemporary literary critics and historians. Lennard J. Davis, in his study about the origin of the English novel, remarks on the use of the word “novel” for an array of different kinds of narratives. In the sixteenth century, this term was used to refer to printed news ballads and tales (1996, 45), but the early prose narratives of this century like criminal tales, jokes and love intrigues were also called “novels” (1996, 46). The most popular ballads would be printed frequently and over a period of years, no longer being new/news and actually turning into folk tales (1996, 49). Newsbooks were variably called “corantos,” “nouvelles,” “novels,” and “newes,” but the three latter words were also used for fictional tales (1996, 51). Consequently, Davis argues, there is a “news/novels discourse [...] characterized by a disinclination to distinguish between fact and fiction as a signifier of genre” (1996, 51), while the novel genre still claims to give true accounts.

In the case of the *Gentleman’s Journal* – according to the title page, a space for the dissemination of news along with other content –, each issue keeps up the fiction of a letter being written to a correspondent. It is true that, as has been generally agreed (Bond 1957, 21; Bayer 2016, 149), the letter fulfils the purpose of a framework to hold together a collection of unrelated material thereby offering some kind of unity. Bayer (2016, 189–90) argues that during the English Restoration the relationship between literature and reality acquired a new dimension due to the increasing number of ballads, news sheets, pamphlets,

and private letters, in which for many readers reality was equated with printed material. In other words, textuality was trusted. This is the reason why when novelists wished to prove that what they had written was true, they claimed to merely be editing a found document, framing their narrative within it (Davis 1996, 35). However, if we interpret this made-up letter format as a paratext—the introduction starting with the greeting to the unnamed gentleman could be equivalent to a preface—and accept Bayer’s belief that “paratexts played a significant role in creating [...] readerly expectations” (2016, 18), the letter, instead of making the content truer, would be making it more fictional.

Starting with the first issue, it was always Motteux’s intention to count on the generous collaboration of other people to obtain material for the journal (Jan. 1692, 1):

I grant that from *London*, the Heart of the Nation, all things circulating to the other parts, such News or new Things as are sent me, may be conveyed every where, being inserted in my Letter. Indeed it were to be wish’d, that the Friends of those brave Men who venture their Lives for safety of their King and Country, would acquaint us with their Actions; and that the Authors of the Learned, witty and diverting things, which are made every day, would oblige the World with them. And you tell me, that ‘tis to be hop’d that I shall have enough sent me to make the Undertaking easier to me.

Although he often resorted to acquaintances and friends in the literary world, and succeeded in getting them to write for him, he still depended on spontaneous collaborations. That is the reason why, in subsequent issues, there are frequent calls for contributions, as well as laments about not getting enough pieces for the journal. Almost in each issue, starting in May 1692, but especially from January 1693 onwards, he inserted an “Advertisement” at the end of the contents page encouraging the “Ingenious,” as he referred to his readers and would-be contributors, to send “Pieces in verse or Prose.” Prior to this, in the March 1692 issue, he had already written “An Epistle to the Ingenious,” in which he made a long—over four page—direct appeal to his unknown readers to submit writing. And in several of his “introductions” (July 1692, 1; August 1692, 1; August 1693, 251) renewed requests for contributions can be found. Margaret J.M. Ezell relates these amateur contributions to the seventeenth-century tradition of literary coteries (1992, 328–340) and emphasizes how by



addressing a whole group with the label “the Ingenious” Motteux creates and reinforces a literary community (1992, 335).

The reading audience of the *Gentleman’s Journal* has generally been considered to have come from the middle classes (Ezell 1992, 323, 334, 340), as was the case for most literary periodicals of the time, although some discrepancies can be found in this regard. Due to the treatment given to the protagonists of “The Vain glorius Citt: Or, the Stock-Jobber” (Jan. 1692, 7-11), in which a presumptuous citizen is humiliated, and “The Quakers Gambols” (Nov. 1693, 370-374), where a couple of non-conformists are referred to sarcastically, Robert D. Mayo (1962, 22) contends that Motteux could not possibly be addressing the dissenting and commercial classes. In turn, Roger Phillip McCutcheon, guided by the selection of books recommended by Motteux and some comments on style, argues that the author wrote for “gentlemen of leisure” (1923, 260). Likewise, Bayer asserts that Motteux’s target readers had already “reached a position of distinction” (2016, 67). Motteux, as mentioned above, once again in his opening letter for the January 1692 issue, specifically states that, despite its name “this is no less the *Ladies Journal* than the *Gentlemens*.” And he is clearly thinking of a female readership when he explains his decision to make short narratives an integral part of his journal by saying, “[as] for Novels, I need not Apologize for them otherwise than by saying that the Ladies desire them” (Feb. 1693, 38). Nonetheless, Charles C. Mish contends that since the narratives included are “sex-stories rather than love-stories,” they “seem intended more for a masculine than a feminine audience” (1969, 314). And, even if produced from London and allegedly written by people there, the journal is explicitly “a Letter to a Gentleman in the Country,” someone who lived far away from the metropolis and was “in need of a constant flow of information so as not to lose touch with the ongoing political, social, scientific, and aesthetic developments at the capital” (Bayer 2016, 67).

Despite these contradictions regarding the reading audience of the journal, the existence of a literary community, with a strong, even intimate, bond between reader and author has been frequently highlighted (Ezell 1992, 335; Maurer 2010, 156; Bayer 2016, 205). Shevelov has offered one of the most inspiring analyses of the idea that the periodicals’ practice of encouraging audience engagement with the text was “an attempt to establish a continuity between

readers' lives and the medium of print" (1989, 43), between reality and fiction. This sense of engagement was nurtured by periodicals by including their contributors' pieces, and seemingly establishing a dialogue between the editor and his readers, and even among the readers themselves (1989, 44). Thus, we move a step further from the literary community to the "textually-based community of readers" (1989, 49). She also draws on Davis's "news/novels discourse" in which, she remarks, one of the main attributes is the blurring of fact and fiction, and one of the chief characteristics the high degree of audience involvement, decreasing the distance between reader and text (1989, 43).

Finally, despite the frequent claims across the "novels" that these stories themselves are true—"the Relation of an uncommon, tho very true Adventure" ("The Platonic Lovers," April 1692, 4); "I need not tell you that this is a very true Story" ("A Love Story," June 1692, 8); "most of the Particulars are true" ("Hypocrisy Out-done, or the Imperfect Widow," June 1693, 181); "Patience Rewarded, a True History" (Dec. 1693, 394, 397)—, their subject matter is full of deception, falseness, cheating, disguise, and cross-dressing in the titles themselves, as well as in the plots: "The Friendly Cheat" (Feb. 1692, 10-16), "The False Friend, or The Fatherless Couple" (May 1692, 3-7), "The Treacherous Guardian" (April 1693, 115-120), "The Adventure of the Night-Cap" (April 1692, 9-12), "The Female Husband" (June, 1694, 149-152), "The Female Beaux" (August-Sep. 1694, 223-226), "The Winter Quarters, or like Master like Man" (Oct.-Nov. 1694, 259-262). Once more, the truth the "novels" declare to adhere to seems to have been undermined.

## Conclusions

Needless to say, at the end of the seventeenth century the novel was very much a genre in the making whose name, "novel," was under scrutiny and permanent debate, not to mention the controversies and blurred lines regarding other narrative genres. By few to no standards the narratives published in the *Gentleman's Journal* could be considered novels, especially regarding their length. If we look at the stories told most of them should be deemed mere anecdotes, and just a few achieve the complexity of presenting a developed plot. However, if we accept Davis's list of distinctive traits of the novel when compared

to romance (that is, that a novel is defined by having a contemporary and national setting, is modeled on history and journalism, is middle class in scope, is not episodic but compact, focuses on illegal doings and forbidden passions, denies they are fictional, and records life as it is) (1996, 40), we would see that the *Gentleman's Journal's* "novels" do indeed comply with all of them. Paul Salzman, in his catalog of English prose fiction between 1558 and 1700, places them under the heading of "Restoration Novel" (1985, 376), in the very same group as Aphra Behn's works.

I have argued, though, that by using a fictive letter as the framework for the journal's "novels," several contradictory issues come into play. On the one hand, we are led to think these are first-hand stories, told in the intimacy of a letter to a friend, and there are also countless references to the truth of the narratives presented; on the other, there is the illusion of telling something invented, something fictional. These contradictions should be considered as yet another facet of the seventeenth century process of shaping the novel into a genre in its own right. The "novels" in the *Gentleman's Journal* have characteristics coming from narratives written in other European countries – mainly France and Italy – as well as from the Restoration stage, and they are also the source for many a plot, character and situation present in longer narratives of the period as well as in those found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thus playing a crucial role in the development of the incipient genre of the novel.

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