PROJECT: ”The Echo Chamber of Reading: Comparative Literature and Cultural Resonance”

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**ABSTRACT**

The Voice of Mercury in Early European Press

When journalism first appeared in print in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe, it was common to name the newspapers after the Roman god Mercury, frequently with a national label added to the title: *Le Mercure françois*, *Mercurius Britanicus*, *Merkuriusz Polski Ordy-naryjny*, *Der Teutsche Merkur* etc. It is relevant to ask why the upgrowing journalistic news-distribution, representing an early stage of modern commercial mass communication, tried to gain social legitimation by invoking a god from premodern mythology. This apparent paradox could be approached with support of a general historiografic idea: that the early modern epoch was marked by a tension between on the one hand a premodern way of thinking, in its bonds to authorities and traditions strengthened by the revitalized interest in antiquity and Latinity, on the other hand a modern way of thinking, characterized by a questioning of established cultural patterns and by an ambition, based on a positive interpretation of the concept *curiositas*, to find and diffuse new knowledge.

The proposed article makes a comparative investigation of the use of the Mercury myth in three European newspapers: the Polish *Merkuriusz Polski Ordynaryjny* (1661), the Danish *Den danske Mercurius* (1666–91), and the Swedish *Swenska Mercurius* (1674–78, 1681–85). In all three newspapers, the fiction of Mercury, in classical mythology the gods’ messenger as well as the patron of trade, was developed rhetorically, metaphorically, and narratively in a whole series of textual and graphical discourses besides the titles: mottos, editorial comments, separate Mercury anecdotes, letters from readers, emblems, vignettes etc. The article gives special attention to the functions of the voice of Mercury, in classical sources (i.e. Horace, *Odes* I:10) praised for his eloquence. The transformation of an oral master of Roman speech into a vernacular intermediator of printed news stands out both as a common denominator of the three newspapers and as a reflection of an epochal rupture: the simultaneous dependence on and emancipation from the legacy of antiquity.

As far as comparative methodology is concerned, the article makes a cross-cultural reading of the treatment of the Mercury myth within three national cultures, all of which experienced a dynamic phase of nation building during the seventeenth century and, moreover, were in constant war with one another. Each of the three newspapers will be viewed as an echo chamber, in which the voice of Mercury creates a discursive polyphony at the same time as it generates a narrative plot, uniting the stream of heterogeneous issues.