

**Verse and Versatility: The Poetry of Antoinette
Deshoulières**
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Verse and Versatility:
The Poetry of Antoinette Deshoulières

From the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, Antoinette du Ligier de la Garde, dame Deshoulières (pronounced *dézoulière*), was France's best-known and most widely published woman poet. Not only were her collected verses constantly reedited, and extensive excerpts included in standard poetry anthologies; her prominence was also reflected in general reference works. The *Encyclopédie* discussed several of her poems and cited her to illustrate that the word *auteur* could be applied to women as well as men: "Mesdames Dacier & Deshoulières tiennent rang parmi les bons *auteurs*." In 1798, she made her way into the dictionary of the Académie Française, whose fifth edition clarified the usage of *poète* and *poétesse* by referring to Sappho and Deshoulières. In the sixth edition (1835), she was again cited as example: "*Madame Deshoulières était un poète aimable*"; the same sentence appeared in the subsequent editions, as well as in the Littré dictionary. Both Batteux's *Cours de belles-lettres* and La Harpe's equally influential *Lycée, ou Cours de littérature ancienne et moderne*, though generally dismissive of the female literary tradition, contained rather detailed and not entirely negative critiques of Deshoulières's poems, especially her famous idylls, which had achieved canonical status as models of French pastoral poetry.

In the course of the nineteenth century, however, Deshoulières's reputation underwent a dramatic reversal, leading from quasi-classical exemplarity to equivocal notoriety and, finally, almost utter obscurity. In 1839, Sainte-Beuve attributed her recent fall from favor to "un goût plus nouveau et dédaigneux" and undertook a nuanced reassessment of her case: "Elle vaut, elle valait beaucoup mieux que sa réputation aujourd'hui."¹ Eight years later, Flaubert referred to "le talent si décrié et

¹ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, "Une ruelle poétique sous Louis XIV," in *Œuvres*, ed. Maxime Leroy (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), vol. 2, p. 1310.

si peu connu de cette poète”². By the 1880s, only one of her poems – the melodious and melancholy “Vers allégoriques” to her children – had apparently survived in public memory, prompting one editor to rebut “ce triage sommaire et quelque peu brutal” through a new edition of selected works, the first to appear in over fifty years.³ Yet the situation remained essentially unchanged throughout the twentieth century, with Deshoulières being granted at most a few pages in various anthologies and manuals. No new edition appeared after 1924, when Frédéric Lachèvre included twenty-five of her poems in *Les Derniers Libertins*.⁴ The only comprehensive historical and critical study was George Borglum’s unpublished Yale dissertation, completed in 1939. Whereas an ever-growing number of prerevolutionary women writers were progressively “resurrected,” original scholarship on Deshoulières remained surprisingly sparse and yielded no more than a few scattered articles.⁵

The opportunity to pay renewed attention to this vanished *bon auteur* has thus been left almost entirely to the twenty-first century. Some progress was made in 2002, with Perry Gethner’s edition of Deshoulières’s tragedy *Genséric* (in the second volume of his *Femmes dramaturges*) and John J. Conley’s discussion of her “naturalist creed” in *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*.⁶ While the dramatist and the “philosopher” were highlighted in America,

² Gustave Flaubert, *Par les champs et par les grèves*, ed. Adrienne J. Tooke (Geneva: Droz, 1987), p. 119.

³ Mathurin de Lescure, “Madame des Houllières: Sa vie et ses ouvrages,” in *Œuvres choisies de Mme Des Houllières* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1882), p. ii.

⁴ *Les Derniers Libertins*, ed. Frédéric Lachèvre (Paris: Champion, 1924).

⁵ Wendy Perkins, “Mme Deshoulières: One of the ‘Derniers Libertins’?,” *Newsletter of the Society for Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 5 (1983), p. 125-133 and “Le libertinage de quelques poètes épicuriens à la fin du XVIIe siècle,” in *Laclos et le libertinage* (Paris: PUF, 1983), p. 21-46; Renate Kroll, “La chanson des femmes poètes au XVIIe siècle: Mme de La Suze et Mme Deshoulières,” in *La Chanson française et son histoire*, ed. Dietmar Rieger (Tübingen: Narr, 1988), p. 27-45; Alain Génétiot, “L’épître en vers mondaine de Voiture à Mme Deshoulières,” *Littératures classiques* 18 (1993), p. 103-114. – On Deshoulières’s fortune in eighteenth-century Germany and Russia, see Katherine R. Goodman, “Klein Paris and Women’s Writing: Luise Gottsched’s Unknown Complaints,” *Daphnis* 25 (1996), p. 695-711, and Joachim Klein, “Französische Gedichte in russischen Übersetzungen der 1760er Jahre (mit einem Seitenblick auf die russische Rousseau-Rezeption),” *Semiosis: Semiotics and the History of Culture* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1984), p. 359-375.

⁶ *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750): Pièces choisies*, ed. Perry Gethner, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Narr, 2002); John J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

the poet and lyricist caught the ear of the French singer-songwriter Jean-Louis Murat, who produced a CD featuring Isabelle Huppert as the voice of Antoinette, along with an attractive anthology and a (now defunct) website.⁷ In 2005, perhaps alerted by Murat's *coup de cœur*, the Parisian publishing house Bartillat issued a semischolarly edition of Deshoulières's *Poésies complètes*: this 770-page volume (which includes the poems by her daughter Antoinette-Thérèse) presents much valuable historical material but is marred by countless textual errors and should be handled with caution.⁸ A more thorough critical edition of Deshoulières's poetry, prepared by Sophie Tonolo, is forthcoming from Classiques Garnier; in the meantime, many of the earlier editions are easily accessible, in both print and digital form.

Today, after two centuries dominated by disdainful neglect and summary dismissal, teaching Deshoulières is once again a viable and worthwhile option. Over the past years, I have included selections from her poetry in undergraduate and graduate courses on French seventeenth-century women writers, where Deshoulières can be beneficially inserted in the vicinity of contemporaries such as Scudéry, Sablé, or Sévigné. But her work also lends itself to a variety of other teaching contexts, from poetry surveys and courses on classical *moralistes* to seminars on epistolarity or the representation of animals in literature and philosophy, among other possibilities.

To pursue this option successfully, we first need to confront the ingrained idea that French poetry went into hibernation at the end of the baroque era and that, with the sole exception of La Fontaine, no "true" poet survived the onset of classicism. More than any other woman writer of her time, Deshoulières compels us to reconsider the place and functions of poetry in the literary culture of the ancien régime, for her authorship and authority rested exclusively on her verse. She did attempt to conquer the stage, but *Genséric* was unsuccessful, leading her to abandon all further dramatic ventures; she published the play anonymously and did not include it in her collected *Poésies* (her daughter added it for the 1707 edition). By contrast, most of her female contemporaries with a substantial poetic output – Scudéry, Villedieu, Pascal, Bernard, Saintonge, among others – also cultivated other genres and garnered the most enduring fame for drama or prose narrative; verse

⁷ Jean-Louis Murat, *Madame Deshoulières* (LABELS/Virgin France, 2001); <http://www.madamedeshoulieres.com>.

⁸ *Antoinette Des Houlières: l'enchantement des chagrins*, ed. Catherine Hémon-Fabre and Pierre-Eugène Leroy (Paris: Bartillat, 2005).

was relegated to a more marginal position or to specific stages of their respective careers. Among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women writers, only the comtesse de La Suze attained comparable standing through poetry alone; but, unlike Deshoulières, La Suze never published a volume composed entirely of her own (rather slight) œuvre and not augmented with texts by other authors.

By Deshoulières's own admission, "faire des vers" was her "violent penchant," her innate and inescapable "maudit talent";⁹ this fateful obsession with poetry is one of the traits that she shares with her counterpart and unfriendly adversary Boileau (see his second satire, addressed to Molière). At the same time, she could have adopted La Fontaine's profession: "Diversité, c'est ma devise."¹⁰ The great success and subsequent canonization of her idylls led to her being increasingly pigeonholed as a pastoral poet, but this label obscures the considerable variety of her poetry, which defies convenient classification. Throughout her thirty-five-year career as a published poet (from her debut in the 1659 *Recueil des portraits*) to her death in 1694), Deshoulières continually expanded the range of her lyre, moving from small, modern "salon genres" – *madrigaux, airs, chansons, sonnets en bouts-rimés* – to longer, "classical" forms such as odes, idylls, and eclogues and, eventually, to somber *Réflexions morales* and *Paraphrases de psaumes*. Her favorite genre, the verse epistle, provided a malleable medium for the discussion of a wide variety of subjects, both light and serious, ranging from the feelings of her devoted spaniel to the hypocrisy of the *faux dévots* and, of course, the heroic exploits of Louis XIV. Like La Fontaine's, Deshoulières's verse is eminently *mêlé* and *libre*, not just in meter but also in tone and content. This versatility can be related to Scudéry's ideal of *galante* conversation in which everything, from trifles to elevated subjects, can be addressed as long as it is done in an appropriate and agreeable manner.¹¹ Stylistically, too, Deshoulières's poetry strives to enact this conversational ideal by adopting a language that is flowing, *gracieux*, and *naturel*. Once widely celebrated, the familiarity, orality, and (deceptive) simplicity of her style were sometimes mistaken for prosaicness by later critics; today, they offer the advantage of

⁹ *Œuvres de Madame et Mademoiselle Deshoulières* (Paris: Les Libraires Associés, 1764), vol. 1, p. 110.

¹⁰ Jean de La Fontaine, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 863.

¹¹ Scudéry, "De la conversation," in "*De l'air galant*" et autres conversations: *Pour une étude de l'archive galante*, ed. Delphine Denis (Paris: Champion, 1998), p. 72-74.

making most of these poems quite accessible even to linguistically less-advanced students.

The protean diversity of Deshoulières's corpus is matched by the complexity of her historical position, first highlighted by Sainte-Beuve. On the one hand, her work shows strong roots in and nostalgia for the bygone era of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, which she opposes to the "decadence" of the present. On the other hand, it announces in many ways the following century: her poetic "school," "un peu jetée de côté dans le dix-septième siècle, [semble avoir] eu sa revanche au dix-huitième".¹² Deshoulières thus appears to be both behind her time and ahead of it; what's more, while she was critical of contemporary society and culture, she stayed intensely involved in the Parisian scene and intervened in current debates and quarrels, most (in)famously the cabal against Racine's *Phèdre*. The tenth satire of Boileau (published two weeks after Deshoulières's death) lampoons her as a "reste" of the original *précieuses*, a "noble héritière" who stubbornly upheld their "secte" and used her salon to shape the public discourse on literature.¹³ This malicious caricature testifies to her central role as a link between generations, a relay more active and decisive, perhaps, than the foundational figure of Scudéry herself. In her poetry, Deshoulières did not simply preserve the legacy of her youth but adapted and modernized it, thus enabling her personal version of it to carry over well into the eighteenth century.

Pedagogically, this multifaceted and elusive character of Deshoulières's work presents both challenges and benefits:

As it is her ambition to try every [poetic] genre, so her works will synthesize the multiple aspects of her age from the idyllic pastoral to satirical realism, from precious triviality to an almost romantic attitude toward nature, from subtle sensuality to philosophical mysticism. So persistent and successful are her efforts to be diverse, that the casual reader's attempts to fix her character are constantly frustrated.¹⁴

Any selection and presentation for classroom purposes runs the risk of assigning reductive categories and overemphasizing one dimension at the expense

¹² Sainte-Beuve, "Une ruelle poétique sous Louis XIV," p. 1324.

¹³ Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Satires, Epîtres, Art poétique*, ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 134.

¹⁴ George Paul Borglum, *Madame Deshoulières (1638-1694)* (dissertation Yale University, 1939), p. 71.

of others. In particular, it is tempting to follow a long-standing tradition that has privileged among Deshoulières's poems those displaying supposedly "feminine" literary modes, such as the idyllic depiction of nature or the elegiac expression of sentiment ("Her heart belonged to nature, feeling, melancholy reverie").¹⁵ But a more diverse choice of texts can allow a fuller understanding, not only of the poetic avenues open to a classical woman writer, but also of the wide spectrum of poetry generally in the second half of the seventeenth century. To be representative, selections should also convey the role of poetry in the specific contexts of *mondain* sociability as well as its interaction with other, literary and non-literary discourses: indeed, far from being confined to lyric soliloquy, much of Deshoulières's œuvre is (explicitly or implicitly) dialogic and dialectical. Reflecting and engaging in major social, moral, and philosophical debates of the time, it can be profitably paired with related works by other (male and female) writers.

One such grouping may focus on the poetic joust that took place in 1684, when the creation of Lully and Quinault's opera *Amadis* prompted Deshoulières to publish a provocative *ballade* whose refrain would become almost proverbial: "On n'aime plus comme on aimait jadis."¹⁶ Written in mildly archaizing "langage marotique" (i.e., in the manner of Clément Marot), the poem deplores the decline of gallantry and attacks the disloyalty, brutality, and licentiousness of contemporary lovers. It sparked a protracted exchange of further ballads as well as madrigals, published for the most part in subsequent issues of the *Mercurie galant*.¹⁷ Among the men responding was La Fontaine, who wrote a ballad on the same rhymes to toss the argument back at its author: provided the lady is attractive, "On aime encor comme on aimait jadis."¹⁸ In the collected edition of her *Poésies*, Deshoulières underlined the dialogic character of her ballad by including the gallant responses written by the duc de Saint-Aignan and by addressing it to another old friend of hers, the duc de Montausier, *jadis* one of the key figures of the Hôtel de Rambouillet and the patient suitor of Julie d'Angennes. This dedicatory epistle renews and reinforces the

¹⁵ Antoine Adam, *Grandeur and Illusion: French Literature and Society 1600-1715* (London: Weidenfeld, 1972), p. 188.

¹⁶ *Œuvres de Madame et Mademoiselle Deshoulières*, vol. 1, p. 143.

¹⁷ For a full account, see Sophie Tonolo, "Aimer comme Amadis: une poétesse entre deux siècles," in *Origines: Actes du 39e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, ed. Thomas M. Carr, Jr. and Russell Ganim (Tübingen: Narr, 2009), p. 273-286.

¹⁸ La Fontaine, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Pierre Clarac (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 622-623.

indictment of “un siècle corrompu” in which Montausier alone upholds “le vrai mérite, et l’antique vertu.”¹⁹ It can be read alongside another of Deshoulières’s epistles, this one addressed to a female friend living in the country, the “Épître chagrine à Mlle de la Charce.” Here too the poet blasts the insolence of “les jeunes gens” and the decadence of “la nouvelle Cour” but goes on to denounce the complicity of present-day women, who through their “indignes manières” spoil the young fops instead of demanding respect and fidelity.²⁰

This cluster of texts illustrates how “occasional” verse such as the balladic banter around *Amadis* can serve to expose and argue meaningful social issues: the relations between the sexes and the generations; the fate of *galanterie* and *politesse*; the status of the present as an age of progress or decline. It also shows Deshoulières’s strategic appropriation of poetic genres and traditions: both thematically and formally, the *ballade* harks back not only to the age of Voiture and Rambouillet but also beyond, to the model of Marot and the mythical “siècle d’Amadis.” As for the “Épître chagrine,” its generic designation is borrowed from Scarron and allows Deshoulières to write indignant and mocking verse without having to use the title of “satire,” which would have appeared indecent for a female author. Characteristically, in her exposition of the relations between men and women she refers to both male and female traditions and addresses both male and female interlocutors, thus realizing poetically the ideal of mutual attention and equality that has been lost in contemporary society.

Rich intertextual connections can also be drawn between Deshoulières’s major poems and the moralistic and philosophical currents of her time. Her two sets of “Réflexions diverses” are made up of pithy epigrammatic stanzas that echo (sometimes literally) the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal and the maxims of Sablé and La Rochefoucauld. When the latter was tormented by old age and illness, Deshoulières composed a lengthy “Ode” exhorting him to despise death, about which nothing could be known, but to accept – rather than stoically suppress – the reality of physical pain, the only “vrai mal” intrinsic to human nature. The poem sets out to expound various philosophical views of death and the afterlife but then breaks off, acknowledging (and denouncing) that women are not supposed to probe these

¹⁹ *Œuvres de Madame et Mademoiselle Deshoulières*, vol. 1, p. 141.

²⁰ *Œuvres de Madame et Mademoiselle Deshoulières*, vol. 1, p. 169-173.

issues: “Il est un certain langage / Que je ne dois point parler.”²¹ The passage points to the constraints that Deshoulières confronted when daring to write philosophical poems and that in turn complicated our attempts to find in them a clear-cut doctrine or system. This hermeneutic difficulty was first discussed by Bayle, who called Deshoulières “l’un des plus solides, et des plus brillants Esprits du XVIIe Siècle” and praised “l’élévation et la profondeur de sa Morale.”²² Replying to critics according to whom Deshoulières’s idyll “Le Ruisseau” negated the immortality of the soul and proved the author’s *libertinage*, Bayle cautioned that as a poet she was not speaking “dogmatically” and may have just been following “des Idées Poétiques qui ne tirent point à conséquence.”²³

A certain poetic vagueness, ambiguity, and playfulness must have been a prudent textual strategy for anyone tempted to articulate heterodox and materialist ideas, a fortiori for a woman writer; Bayle’s caveat should be kept in mind when studying Deshoulières as a “philosopher” or “free-thinker.” In any event, her poems and especially her idylls, although sometimes seen as an expression of *quiétisme*,²⁴ appear strongly rooted in the tradition of epicurean naturalism revived by Gassendi; here again, Deshoulières’s proximity to La Fontaine is notable and allows for manifold intertextual pairings.²⁵ Even her frivolous and almost universally dismissed cat-and-dog epistles may warrant a closer look in this context and are not devoid of anti-Cartesian overtones. In a diachronic perspective, her idylls – opposing the pure, innocent state of nature to the corruption of human society – can be read as a poetic preview of Rousseau’s first *Discours*.

²¹ *Œuvres de Madame et Mademoiselle Deshoulières*, vol. 1, p. 49; see also Linda Timmermans, *L’Accès des femmes à la culture sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Champion, 1993), p. 366.

²² Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 5th ed. (Amsterdam: Brunel, 1740), vol. 3, p. 560 and 757.

²³ *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, vol. 2, p. 721; see also Philippe Chométy, “*Philosopher en langage des dieux*”: la poésie d’idées en France au siècle de Louis XIV (Paris: Champion, 2006), p. 195-196, and p. 389-394 on Deshoulières’s “Imitation de Lucrèce en galimatias fait exprès.”

²⁴ Antoine Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Domat, 1948-56), vol. 3, p. 177.

²⁵ For a few comparisons, see Jean-Pierre Collinet, *Le Monde littéraire de La Fontaine* (Paris: PUF, 1970), p. 449-52, and Jean-Charles Darmon, *Philosophie épicurienne et littérature au XVIIe siècle en France: études sur Gassendi, Cyrano de Bergerac, La Fontaine, Saint-Evremond* (Paris: PUF, 1988), p. 301-306.

In her “philosophical” but also her “sensual” poems, Deshoulières’s voice often sounds muted and leaves much unsaid or implied. What has sometimes been criticized as intellectual or expressive feebleness seems to proceed at least in part from deliberate self-restraint in an attempt to conform to standards of female discretion and modesty; we might note that throughout her life she upheld a reputation as virtuous wife and mother, unlike some of her notorious contemporaries (her fellow poet La Suze, for example). Even so, Deshoulières was blamed for transgressing *bienséance* and *pudeur*:

[...] Madame *des* Houïllières, dont on vante beaucoup les talents pour la Poésie. On dit qu’elle a une facilité merveilleuse; mais que la bienséance devait la porter à mettre des bornes plus étroites à certaines libertés qu’elle a prises, et qui ne s’accordent point parfaitement avec la pudeur du Sexe.²⁶

This judgment by a contemporary of Deshoulières’s may help define two main tasks implied in teaching her poetry: to trace the tension between “limits” and “liberties” in the work of a classical woman writer; and to discern, through her manifold “talents” and “marvelous facility,” the living presence of a strong personal voice, of a self that exists and persists in verse.

²⁶ Adrien Baillet, *Jugemens des savans sur les principaux ouvrages des auteurs* (Paris: Dezallier, 1686), vol. 4, part 5, p. 450.