

## Antoinette Deshoulières's Cat: Polemical Equivocation in Salon Verse

This article examines poet Antoinette Deshoulières's (1638–94) interventions in a number of *querelles*. It focusses on a series of poems published in 1678, early in her career, and written as if from her pet cat. Often dismissed for their frivolity, these poems instead reveal Deshoulières's engagement with the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and the debates about the animal machine. While such interventions constituted an important strategy for making a name for herself, they are characterized by elusiveness. Although that elusiveness has been read as a gendered strategy of modesty, I show instead that her equivocal and even parodic, burlesque way of intervening in the two quarrels is consistent with her skepticism and presents readers with a hermeneutical challenge which disrupts the rhetorical logic of a quarrel. Deshoulières's interventions invite us to reflect on the roles of gender, genre and interpretation in early modern quarrels and their study.

**Keywords:** Antoinette Deshoulières, *querelles*, equivocation, burlesque, cats, Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, *la bête-machine*.

The poet, Antoinette Deshoulières (1638–94), was notorious both in her own time and in literary history for her involvement in one particular quarrel.\* She is considered by some to have composed the scathing anonymous *Sonnet burlesque, sur la Phèdre de Racine*, which was circulated in January 1677 and which triggered the *querelle des sonnets* over Racine's *Phèdre*, which was performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and Jacques Pradon's *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, performed at the Théâtre de Guénégard two days later. This quarrel occurred early

---

\* This article was written with the support of the Leverhulme Trust. I would also like to thank Emma Herdman, Hugh Roberts, and Kate Tunstall for their comments on earlier versions.

in her poetic career. Daughter of aristocrat Melchior de Ligier de la Garde, *maître de garde* to Marie de Medici and Anne of Austria, and married aged 13 to Guillaume de la Fon de Boisguérin, seigneur des Houlières, she published her first verses in 1659, in the *Recueil des portraits et éloges en vers et en prose*, and frequented the circles of the Marquise de Rambouillet, the Comtesse de Suze and Madame de la Sablière. Deshoulières became well known as a poet in the 1670s with the publication of several poems in the *Mercure Galant*; and over the next two decades she took part in a number of literary quarrels, with her engagement in the quarrel over the two versions of *Phèdre* granting her notoriety. These two plays fell on either side of the division between Ancients and Moderns, making this *querelle* part of that wider debate, with Pradon's as the polite, modern antithesis to Racine's incestuous and truly "Greek" version. Because of Deshoulières's known support of Pradon's play, her connections with the modern *mores* of the Hotel de Bouillon salon, which Pradon also frequented, and her friendship with the Duc de Nevers, to whom some attributed the sonnet, the *Sonnet burlesque* was credited to her in the later interventions in this *querelle*, shaping subsequent attribution (Tonolo, *Poésies* 479–82). Indeed, although she has been somewhat forgotten by all but specialists of the period, if Deshoulières is evoked at all by literary historians, it is this story that is always recounted: from Augustin Simon Iraitlh (344–45, vol. 2) to Frédéric Lachèvre (51). Her involvement subjected her to the scorn often reserved for women quarrelers: she is presumed to be one of the targets of Boileau's *Satire X*: "au mauvais goût public la belle y fait la guerre" (74) and Voltaire wrote "C'est dommage qu'elle soit l'auteur du mauvais sonnet contre l'admirable Phèdre de Racine [...] Une femme satirique ressemble à Méduse et à Scylla, deux beautés changées en monstres" (1156). We do not know who wrote this sonnet, which was most likely a collective effort (Forestier 549–72; Tonolo, *Poésies* 17); we do know, however, that Deshoulières did not deny the rumors of authorship.

Despite the disproportionate attention it has received in evaluations of her *œuvre*, the *querelle des sonnets* was not the first quarrel Deshoulières appeared to enter and nor would it be the last. Her engagement with the literary and cultural quarrels of her time shaped many of the early poems she either circulated as manuscripts or published in the *Mercure Galant* during the 1670s, before she published her first collection of poetry in 1688. The Pradon–Racine quarrel followed her “Ballade à M. Charpentier sur son livre intitulé *Défense de la langue française pour l’inscription de l’arc de triomphe*,” a pun-filled, satirical defense of François Charpentier, circulated in 1676, with which she contributed to the *querelle des inscriptions*, another version of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns in which she also took a Modern side. This *Ballade* was published in her *Poésies* of 1688, in which she engaged prominently with other aspects of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, by this point at its height.<sup>1</sup> Her Modern inclination is evident elsewhere in the poems gathered in this collection, for instance, from the Gallic medievalism she promotes in her 1684 exchange of *Ballades* with the Duc de Saint-Aignan, longing for the mores of the “siècle d’Amadis,” responding to the recent success of Lully’s opera of the same title. It is also evident in her playful pastoral lament, *Iris, Eclogue*, first published in the *Mercure Galant* in 1684 (Tonolo, *Poésies* 159), in which the shepherdess, Iris, longs for a less rustic and more sophisticated shepherd as suitor. Deshoulières anticipates the quarrel about pastoral verse between the Ancient, Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre, who defended the rusticity of antiquity, and the Modern, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, who wanted the pastoral to be about more than shepherds, to reflect higher morals and human progress.

---

<sup>1</sup> The timing of this publication to intervene in the high point of this Quarrel can be seen as significant since she had actually received the *privilège* ten years earlier.

The fact that Deshoulières represents a complex Modern in her rejection of progress, her nostalgia, her skepticism regarding human reason and preference for nature over man is not my main interest here; nor am I going to look at the particular interventions just outlined in more detail. Rather, this brief overview points instead to two other areas of interest. First, that Deshoulières's engagement in quarrels beyond that involving Racine needs attention and should be seen, as Sophie Tonolo argues, as a deliberate "stratégie d'auteur" (*Poésies* 17), given that such engagement marks not only her entry into the literary scene in the 1670s, but also the publication of her first collection in 1688. Second, the overview suggests that her approach to engaging in quarrels was often oblique: she used incidental verse and not the genres normally associated with quarrels, such as essays or epic; she employed a complex and equivocal voice, through satire, anonymity, suggestiveness and prosopopoeia, deploying an indirectness often typical of women quarrelers.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I shall consider the effect of both that strategy and her equivocation in relation to a particular series of early poems from 1678, the letters to and from her pet cat, Grisette, and in relation to the two principal quarrels that I show this series engages with: Ancients and Moderns and the *bête-machine*. Behind her engagement with both these quarrels, I suggest, lies a third *querelle* about gender and authority.

This series of epistles falls into two sections. The first nine letters, in which Grisette corresponds with Tata, the neutered male cat of the Marquise de Montglas, and then receives letters from other Tom cats ("Matous," that is, according to Furetière, "mâle et entire," unlike Tata), some of whom belong to other friends, were first published in a supplement, "L'Extraordinaire," of the *Mercurie Galant* in October 1678 (294–318). The final seven, an

---

<sup>2</sup> See the Introduction to this Special Issue for the wider context of women's quarreling strategies and the reception of female quarrelers.

exchange between Grisette and Cochon, the Maréchal de Vivonne's dog, were circulated in 1678, but were not published until 1695, in the second part of the volume of poems Deshoulières prepared before her death and where the Grisette–Tata and Grisette–Cochon letters were gathered together (188–224). The letters from the other Tom cats are not included in this 1695 edition, although they are in a posthumous edition of 1725, and for this reason my analysis will focus solely on the Grisette–Tata and the Grisette–Cochon exchanges. As mentioned, these epistles engage with (at least) two major polemics: Ancients and Moderns, simmering in the 1670s, particularly after Boileau's *Art poétique* of 1674; and the status of the animal, which, as Peter Sahlins has recently argued, was a major topic in the 1670s, thanks to the 1668 publication of the fourth edition of Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, in which he expounded his theory of the *bête-machine* (Sahlins 28–36, 277–310; Descartes 91–95). Both epistolary sequences stage fictional quarrels between the two correspondents (Grisette and Tata quarrel over their relationship; Grisette and Cochon quarrel about their differences, representing, as I will show, Moderns and Ancients); both sequences also represent engagement with a quarrel external to their fiction, that of the *bête-machine*.

Montaigne and Derrida have both received considerable attention as philosophers who “think with” their cats to explore human–animal relations, subjectivity, and the limits of human knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Montaigne famously asked in his *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*: “Quand je me joue à ma chatte, qui sait si elle passe son temps de moi plus que je ne fais d'elle?” (452) and Derrida echoed the destabilizing sense of reciprocity present in this question with the description of himself naked before his cat (18). Cats also proved problematic for many thinkers in the Enlightenment, from Louis de Jaucourt to the Comte de Buffon, as Amy

---

<sup>3</sup> On “thinking with cats”, see David Wood.

Freund and Michael Yonan show, because of the tension between their domesticity and their independence, which likens them to humans. As Freund and Yonan also show, cats were often associated with female sexuality and lubricity, with liberty and *libertinage*. They were figured as erotically charged, with “chatte” referring from the sixteenth century to “une femme de mauvaise vie” (Huguet) and “chat” figuring in erotic expressions, such as: “On dit qu'une fille a laissé aller le chat au fromage, pour dire, qu'elle a succombé à quelque tentation amoureuse” (Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*). Cats were associated with both the feminine and with flirtation in work by Deshoulières’s contemporaries, such La Fontaine’s “La Chatte métamorphosée en femme” (89), and later in Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s fairy tale “La Chatte Blanche.”<sup>4</sup>

Deshoulières’s cat, however, has not been taken seriously as a figure of thought. Although a key reference in François-Augustin de Moncrif’s *Histoire de Chats* (1727), Deshoulières’s Grisettes epistles have, for the most part, been overlooked by critics, or at best mentioned only tantalizingly in passing, and were famously dismissed for their frivolity and playful vapidness by Sainte-Beuve in his otherwise fairly positive discussion of Deshoulières in his *Portraits de femmes*. He introduces Deshoulières as part of a group of “philosophes” which includes her tutor, Jean Dehénault, and writes:

Quand on lit un choix bien fait de ses vers, desquels il faut retrancher absolument et ignorer tant de fadaïses de société sur sa chatte et sur son chien, on est frappé chez elle de qualités autres encore que celles qu’on lui accordait jadis. Elle semble plus moraliste qu’il ne convient à une bergère; il y a des pensées sous ses rubans et ses fleurs. Elle est digne contemporaine de M. de la Rochefoucault (441).

Sainte-Beuve sets up a dichotomy between her serious “philosophical” poems, which contain “pensées”, amongst which we might include those for which she is still best known,

---

<sup>4</sup> See also Antoine de Torche’s “Sur une chatte nommée Menone”. *La Toilette galante de l’amour*. Paris: E. Loyson, 1670.

particularly her pastoral idylls, *Les Moutons, Idylle*; *Le Ruisseau, Idylle*, her La Rochefoucauldian *Réflexions Diverses*, and her playful, ludic society poems. Recent critics have echoed this division: Perry Gethner describes the pet epistles as “petits poèmes familiers”, in comparison with “la partie la plus durable de cette œuvre [qui est] la série de poèmes philosophiques et moraux” (518). Tonolo, in contrast, recognizes the intellectual contribution of the pet epistles, arguing that they constitute “le premier roman par lettres libertin” (*Poésies* 53).

Following Tonolo, I shall argue against the division between “philosophique” and “familier” by exploring the Grisette epistles as interventions in quarrels. The first section of this article will highlight Deshoulières’s rhetorical strategies of equivocation and parody by examining the Grisette–Tata exchange; the next two will consider these strategies in relation to the Grisette–Cochon exchange and its engagement with the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and the animal question, placing these poems in the poetic tradition of pet epistles. Drawing on work by Des Chene (1–12) and Sahlins (28–31; 277–310), I show how the *bête-machine* was a complex and contested notion in its immediate reception and examine Deshoulières’s Grisette poems in this context. However, I also argue that Deshoulières takes a more reflexive approach, which complicates her involvement in these quarrels. She “thinks with” Grisette, her pet cat, to both engage with *and* unsettle quarrels. By identifying similarities between the Grisette poems and others in her *œuvre*, I suggest that her equivocal, parodic, even burlesque way of intervening in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and the *bête-machine* presents readers with a hermeneutical challenge: Deshoulières both takes a position in these quarrels and undermines this position and the quarrels themselves. In so doing, she deploys what I am calling “polemical equivocation,” thereby disrupting the rhetorical logic of a quarrel: this disruption both demonstrates her literary prowess, validating her participation in literary

culture as a woman, and provocatively destabilizes readerly interpretation, posing methodological questions for our approaches to quarrels. Like those of Montaigne and Derrida, Deshoulières's cat merits scholarly attention.

### “Un tas de Chattes précieuses”: Parody and Equivocation

The first sequence of letters between Grisette and Tata establishes the playful tone of Deshoulières's animal epistles and sets up their hermeneutical challenge. This exchange is made up of four letters and opens with a first pair in which Tata attempts to court Grisette by offering tender *amitié*, which Grisette accepts, and closes with a second pair in which he accuses her of *coquetterie* and she ends their correspondence indignantly. Tata is able to offer to Grisette only the platonic tender *amitié*, so vaunted by Madeleine de Scudéry, because of an unfortunate accident. He explains to Grisette:

Je suis réduit à l'amitié  
Depuis qu'un Jaloux sans pitié  
M'a surpris aimant ce qu'il aime (*Poésies* 378, lines 19-21).

Grisette welcomes his advances in *galant* terms of friendship, distinguishing herself from “un tas de Chattes précieuses”, who would not be interested in him:

Malheur chez elles aux Matous  
Aussi disgraciés que vous.  
Pour moi qu'un heureux sort fit naître tendre et sage,  
Je vous quitte aisément des solides plaisirs.  
Faisons de notre amour un plus galant usage,  
Il est un charmant badinage  
Qui ne tarit jamais la source des désirs (*Poésies* 379–80, 1-16).

With Tata's subsequent accusation of *coquetterie*, we see further representation of male–female behavior. In the *Mercure Galant*, his second letter comes after the forthright letters to Grisette from a range of Matous, which gives further context to his change of heart; in the 1695 version established by Deshoulières we only get Tata's accusations:

Mais, ceci soit dit entre nous



N'êtes-vous point un peu coquette? [...]  
Moi-même, franchement, je suis un peu coquet,  
malgré la perte que j'ai faite [...]  
Il n'est point de Chatte Lucrece  
Et l'on ne vit jamais de prude en notre espèce;  
Cela soit dit sans vous fâcher.' (*Poésies* 388, 4-5, 9-10, 21-24).

Grisette replies indignantly "sur les mêmes rimes":

S'il n'est point de Chatte Lucrece,  
Il n'est point de Tarquins, Tata, de votre espèce;  
Cela soit dit sans vous fâcher [...]  
Je ne suis pas plus satisfaite  
De votre Lettre que de vous' (*Poésies* 391, 22-24, 39-40).

The pets are engaging here with each other using the social codes and terms of *galanterie*: there is a sense that we are encouraged to respect Grisette for her virtue and modesty in her indignation at Tata's second letter and to see Tata as an example of the lovers Deshoulières warns her readers of elsewhere in her poetry (such as her *Rondeau contre l'amour* (*Poésies* 113) and her *Ballade à Mademoiselle D\*\*\** (229)). In this respect, we might interpret these epistles as a continuation of the sorts of discussions present in Madeleine de Scudéry's novels and in her depictions of exemplary heroines. Deshoulières also alludes to that exemplarity, promoted in Scudéry's *Clélie*, with the evocation of Lucretia.

However, this is quite evidently not a salon conversation *à la Scudéry*: it is an exchange between pets, who are mimicking humans. The language of courtship reveals their exchange to (also) be a playful parody of the *Carte de Tendre*, as Tonolo argues ("Rhétorique" 207): this is evident from the humor, such as Tata's explanation as to why he is offering *amitié*, or the playful juxtaposition of "chatte" and "Lucrece." The use of animals to mimic human interaction is a feature of burlesque humor, as is evident from Scarron's dedication of his *Œuvres burlesques* (1668) to his "chienne," or Cyrano de Bergerac's trial by birds in *L'Autre monde*. Approaching Deshoulières's epistles as "burlesque" is a fruitful way of appreciating the complexity of the challenge they pose to interpretation, particularly if we understand

burlesque as it is defined by Claudine Nédélec: that is, as characterized by “la discordance” and “l’équivoque” (“Burlesque” 36-37). This discordance comes about in particular because of the distinction between the voice of Deshoulières and that of the pets (or, to use linguistic terms, between *le locuteur* and *l’énonciateur*), which, as Nédélec argues, is a constitutive element of *l’équivoque* (“Équivoques” 3). For instance, Grisette’s self-characterization as modest is complicated by her name: “Grisette” is a sort of pet name for “an easy woman,” usually of a low class, which is rather at odds with how Grisette presents herself. Grisette’s modesty is further complicated by the association between cats and the feminine, and between cats and flirtation. As Nédélec shows, the distinction between *le locuteur* and *l’énonciateur*, which allows for the doubling of the voice, is not alone in producing *l’équivoque*: it is the dual presence of the two discordant voices, as we encounter here with Deshoulières and Grisette, that leads to the ambiguity (“Équivoques” 2–3).

Deshoulières’s technique of equivocation is common to a number of her poems which engage with what Philippe Chométy calls “la poésie d’idées” (259). Pierre Bayle, with his own characteristic duplicity of meaning, identifies this ambiguity in Deshoulières’s work. In his *Dictionnaire* entry on her tutor, Jean Dehénault, he discusses the latter’s influence on Deshoulières, citing her poem, *Le Ruisseau*, which contains the potentially provocative lines:

Nous irons reporter la vie infortune  
Que le hasard nous a donné  
Dans le sein du néant d’où nous sommes sortis (*Poésies* 219, 113-15).

Bayle remarks:

Il est sûr qu’une personne, qui parleroit de la sorte dogmatiquement, nieroit l’immortalité de l’ame. Mais pour l’honneur de Madame Des Houlières, disons qu’elle n’a suivi que des Idées Poétiques qui ne tirent point à conséquence. [...] Ne jugeons point d’elle par des Phrases Poétiques. Ce n’est pas qu’on ne puisse cacher beaucoup de libertinage sous les privilèges de la versification. (*Remarque D*, Bayle vol. 2, 721)

Chométy's excellent reading of this passage emphasizes Bayle's own logic of "prétérition, paradoxe et ironie" (262), and he stresses the parallels between Bayle's own suggestiveness here and Deshoulières's work: we are told both that there are no consequences to her poem and, as Bayle identifies in the opening sentence, that there might be one very serious one: that she is denying the immortality of the soul. Chométy thus identifies the ambiguity of Bayle's opposition between "phrases" or "idées poétiques," which are "empty" of meaningful content and so not "libertine," and "consequence" or "meaning" (what Bayle terms "libertinage"). He effectively uses Bayle's reading of Deshoulières to stress her (and Bayle's, as is much more documented) capacity for "du réversible, d'ambigu, d'ambivalent" (263). Who better to guide us through the slippery complexities of Deshoulières's verse than Bayle, ultimate equivocator?

Part of the ambiguity that Bayle identifies also comes from Deshoulières's use of self-parody, which is present in these animal epistles. "Deshoulières", owner of Grisette, "Madame de Montglas," owner of Tata, and "Vivonne", owner of Cochon, are fictional characters in this exchange but also, clearly, refer to their real-life counterparts. The epistles constitute a private joke between Deshoulières and her fellow salon-goers: they thus represent and parody certain poetic games that were a common feature of this culture. In the second pair of letters, Grisette responds to Cochon "sur les mêmes rimes," turning these poems into a social game in which participants might respond to a poetic "défi" of the sort also represented by Scudéry in *Clélie*, and practiced since Clément Marot, by, for instance, Vincent Voiture and the Duc de Montausier, and Deshoulières and Vivonne themselves. One of Deshoulières's earliest published poems, her 1671 *Sonnet sur l'or*, is thought to be a response to such a *défi*, according to a note accompanying a later version (*Poésies* 106). Her 1688 collection

includes another poetic game: the four poems she writes using feminine endings at the request of Vivonne, “Rimes en ailles, en eilles, en illes et en ouilles, que M. le Maréchal de Vivonne lui donna pour remplir à la louange du Roi, les Rimes masculines, à son choix” (*Poésies* 230-237). The parody of salon poetic exchange present in the Grisette–Tata exchange is also, therefore, a form of self-parody. As I will now show, this slippery position between the subject who parodies and the parodied object, and between the suggestion and the undermining of meaning, destabilizes the clarity with which Deshoulières’s Grisette epistles intervene in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and debates about the *bête-machine*. It opens the possibility of the quarrels and their participants themselves becoming objects of parody, posing questions about what it means to intervene in a quarrel.

#### “La fameuse querelle”: Grisette as Modern

The final seven letters of the Grisette sequence comprise an exchange between Grisette and Cochon, the Maréchal de Vivonne’s dog: it opens with a letter from Grisette to Vivonne, defending her inconsolable mistress against Vivonne’s accusation that she has written a “mauvais rondeau” (*Poésies* 373). This poem proves so charming that Vivonne realizes he is forgiven and laughs and his dog, Cochon, falls for Grisette; his attempts to seduce her and her resistance make up the rest of the exchange. Their exchange follows the rhetorical framework of *disputatio*—that is, the for and against of an argument. The traditional animosity between cats and dogs (which is evoked by Grisette to explain her resistance to Cochon: “la fameuse querelle” (*Poésies* 410, 88)) is explicitly mapped onto the discord of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns: Cochon traces his genealogy to the ancient Cynics, so called for their dog-like ways, and so represents the Ancients in the Quarrel. Grisette explicitly identifies herself as a Modern, by tracing an alternative and significantly non-Greek genealogy via the

Egyptian cat-goddess, Bastet, (*Poésies* 402, 40-41), and by questioning the importance of genealogy itself, referring to the practices of “un fourbe Généalogiste” (408, 23).

This animosity also lends itself symbolically to the question of gendered rhetoric, and so permits reflection on the quarreling voice. Grisetette associates Cochon with satirical discourse, drawing on the connection established by Menippus between the Dogs (Cynics) and satire:

On aurait bien connu sans que vous l’eussiez dit,  
Que vous êtes sorti de la Race Cynique  
L’air dont vous répondez à ce qu’on vous écrit  
En est une preuve authentique.  
Vous ne mordez pas mal (*Poésies* 401, 1-5).

In contrast, Grisetette, anticipating the famous recourse to “nos propres lumières” of Charles Perrault’s *Siècle de Louis le Grand*, appears more self-consciously modest, reliant on her own judgement instead of book learning, and thus Modern:

Pour moi je n’ai que mes seules lumières,  
Je vous l’apprends, si vous ne le savez.  
Et que je ne cours point les Toits, ni les Gouttières.  
Jamais cris aigus, scandaleux,  
Ne sont sortis de ma modeste gueule (*Poésies* 403, 64-68).

In terms of the quarrel, Deshoulières’s poems manifest her preference, as expected, for the Modern side—this is clear from Grisetette’s position of authority in this second sequence; the fact that the views of both sides are aired; and even Grisetette’s conciliatory gesture at the end: “Finissons, Cochon, j’y consens / Une si fameuse querelle” (*Poésies* 410, 87-88). The very *disputatio* model used here promotes the rhetoric of the Moderns. However, Deshoulières also uses Grisetette to challenge the expected modesty of the female quarreling voice promoted by the Moderns: “modeste gueule” is a contradiction in terms. We see elements of this challenge in Grisetette’s initial aggression towards Vivonne:

À dessein de m’en aller  
En chatte fidèle et tendre  
Brusquement vous quereller (*Poésies* 394, 40-43).

Here ‘tendre’ and ‘quereller’ are provocatively juxtaposed.

This argument for Grisetette presenting a challenge to the modest female voice is strengthened by another usage Deshoulières makes of a pet voice. Deshoulières’s first publication in the *Mercurie Galant* (and indeed the third poem she had published) was her “Lettre de Gas, Épagneul de Madame Deshoulières, A Monsieur le Comte de L. T [La Tour],” first published in the *Mercurie Galant* in 1672 (*Poésies* 95). It opens: “Pour vous marquer mon courroux, / J’ai mis la plume à la patte.” As Volker Schröder has shown, this opening echoes Juvenal’s satirical adage, “facit indignatio versum” [anger makes verse] (Satire 10), and so evokes a genre not usually associated with female modesty (99). Gas features again later in Deshoulières’s 1695 collection in a poem that precedes the Grisetette–Tata exchange, *Apothéose de Gas, épagneul de Madame Deshoulières*, in which she imagines her dog arriving on Mount Parnassus and becoming its guard-dog (*Poésies* 373). Apollon is about to punish him for drinking at the fountain of Parnassus when “la badine Erato”—another burlesque verbal juxtaposition—steps in, identifies him as Deshoulières’s dog, and appoints him “le Cerbère du Parnasse”. He decides to chase away all the verse forms of which he disapproves. This poem, as Schröder suggests, has a satirical intertext, recalling Boileau’s incarnation of himself in *Satire VII* as a dog chasing away the “fat” and allowing merit to remain (55). By purifying and modernizing Parnassus with her dog, Deshoulières is at once making a case for Modern, sanitized and feminized taste, but, as she later does in the Grisetette letters, at the same time she complicates the very expectations of such taste by drawing on the male and Ancient genre of satire and ridiculing this portrait of Parnassus by giving a central place and authority to her dog.

In using the Grisetette–Cochon sequence to engage in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, Deshoulières also echoes a recent, feminocentric incarnation of the pet epistle: the pigeon cycle of poems exchanged by Scudéry, or “Sapho,” and her friends in the mid-1660s, which stage the Ancient and Modern debate by comparing (pseudo)Anacreon’s *Ode to a Pigeon* with that of (modern) Sapho. One of the poems in the sequence, the *Réponse de la pigeonne de Sapho* asserts that “La France surpasse la Grèce” (Niderst 460). “Sapho’s” response, *Sapho à sa pigeonne*, seems, as Myriam Dufour-Maître argues, to counter this assertion, by suggesting acquiescence to the Anacreon’s ancient bird (“il faut céder à sa pigeonne”, Niderst 461) but in so doing her own poetic “douceur,” in this “querelle fictive,” “marque en effet la supériorité des Modernes sur la rudesse des mœurs antiques” (Dufour-Maître 337). By using the pet epistle to distinguish modern mores from ancient, these salon poems break with the classical tradition that had dominated the Renaissance: not only Anacreon’s *Pigeon*, but also Ovid’s *Amores* 2.6, in which he laments the death of the parrot belonging to Corinna, his girlfriend, and Catullus 2, an ode to the sparrow of his girlfriend, Lesbia. As Annette Tomarken shows, versions of these second two forms—the epitaph and the (surrogate/mock) encomium—shaped the subsequent tradition of verse about pets in France: typically, the pets tended to be either dead and/or they belonged to someone other than the poet (199–229). This tradition can be traced in Lemaire de Belges, Ronsard, and Du Bellay. With her Grisetette–Cochon exchange, Deshoulières could be seen to be establishing her own genealogical line, recognizing Scudéry and her friends as creators of the Modern pet epistle while using the pet epistle herself to promote Modern aesthetics. This genealogy is complex as Deshoulières also pulls away from the modest Modern female voice promoted by Scudéry; by using pet epistles to challenge feminine modesty, Deshoulières also echoes the more licentious, erotic connotations of Ovid’s parrot and Catullus’ sparrow.

The challenge to the modest and Modern feminized voice that Deshoulières presents in the Grisette–Cochon exchange is, however, most evident in the satirical comment on the Quarrel itself that is present in these poems. The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns is turned bathetically into a lover’s tiff; and the perpetrators here are, after all, non-human subjects, cats and dogs. This whole exchange represents an irreverent and burlesque parody of this Quarrel, its participants and the coded *disputatio* rhetoric of the Moderns. Deshoulières does not entirely undermine the Quarrel because she takes a Modern side; however, this positioning is questioned and complicated by the distancing effect of her satire. The rational *disputatio* model of a two-sided debate loses its self-contained nature and is disrupted by something wilder, something akin to what Nédélec calls “le rire du burlesque” (“Burlesques” 37).

#### “La machine aboyante”: Grisette and Cochon as animals

These epistles also stage an argument about Grisette and Cochon as animals. This is not, as it was with Ancients and Moderns, an argument between the two participants, but rather an external quarrel to which their letters make allusion. For instance, Cochon pokes fun at the views attributed to Descartes when he refers to himself as a “la machine aboyante” (*Poésies* 400, 32). There are a number of occasions when Grisette draws attention to her status as a (non-human) animal or makes comparisons with the human world, for instance, when she claims she cannot write well: “Écrire bien n’est pas notre talent. / Il est rare, dit-on, parmi les Hommes même” (*Poésies* 380, 36–37); and in her judgement of humans: “Je connais leur défauts mieux qu’ils ne font les miens” (*Poésies* 408, 27). With such comments Deshoulières signals a form of engagement with the quarrel about the *bête-machine*, such that, as I will discuss, her fictional(ized) pets could be interpreted as her way of discussing real animals, in a gesture that heeds Laurie Shannon’s argument that “not all textual animals labor equally



under the yoke of human symbolic service” (5). However, as I then show, Deshoulières’s representation of human–animal relations is also a way of thinking through questions of gender and authorship and of male–female relations. This is evident from the lines just quoted: the litotic phrasing, female narrative persona (“notre”) and the ambiguous “les Hommes” and reference to “leurs défauts” could be seen to champion women’s literary capacities and constitute thinly veiled insults of male writers.

The Grisettes epistles, in so far as they can be seen to make a case against the *bête-machine*, can be placed in a wider salon movement (Rosenfield 154–79; Sahlins 277–310). Other members of Madame de la Sablière’s salon, which Deshoulières frequented, notably La Fontaine, with whom Deshoulières establishes a clear alliance through her references in her epistles to his cat-related fables, were skeptical about Descartes’s *bête-machine*: this is most evident in La Fontaine’s 1678 *Discours à Madame de la Sablière*. As Nathalie Grande and Nicole Aronson show, Madeleine de Scudéry also took a stance against the animal-machine in her novel *Clélie* (vol. 8, 956–74), in her *Histoire de deux caméléons*, composed in 1673 and published in 1688, and her letters to Catherine Descartes, salon poet and niece of the philosopher. And as Tonolo underscores, the timing of these animal epistles is significant with regards to Deshoulières’s wider engagement with questions of man’s relationship to animals, as some fifteen months earlier, in July 1677, her poem, *Les Moutons*, had been published in the *Mercure Galant* (“L’idylle” 35). In this poem, drawing on the Gassendist, Epicurean philosophy of her tutor, Dehénault, she opposes the innocence of nature to the corruption of man, ideas which characterize much of her poetry. A case could be made that Grisettes and Cochon possess the craftiness and resourcefulness of La Fontaine’s wily beasts, demonstrating that their abilities are more than the *bête-machine* would suggest. Deshoulières depicts an affective and reciprocal relationship between owner and pet which also emphasizes

Grisette's far-reaching capacities and could be seen to align the poet's views with those of Montaigne, author of another important playful cat, who, as discussed, uses his cat to stress the reciprocity in human–pet exchange. It might also be tempting to read the mutual affection and friendship that Deshoulières depicts between “Mme Deshoulières” and Grisette along the lines of feminist (eco)criticism, whereby women's resistance to the *bête-machine* and the objectification of animals is paralleled with their broader resistance to their own objectification: such a reading has been made by Erica Harth (98–106) and Anne E. Duggan of Scudéry's *Histoire de deux caméléons*.

However, for all that Deshoulières's pets have real (specific or general) pets as possible referents, and so are possibly being used to argue against the *bête-machine*, they are also entirely textual: they are literary devices or tropes and Deshoulières gives them clear literary antecedents, as we have seen. Even their “materiality” is also metaphorical. The epistles are suffused with animal-related puns in which literal meanings, where the animal is the agent or subject, are juxtaposed with figurative meanings, in which the animal is metaphorical, laboring under the yoke of human symbolic service, to rephrase Shannon. For instance, Grisette repeatedly puns on the words “mordre” and “mordant” in relation to Cochon, meaning both what a dog might do and a figurative attribute of satire. Furthermore, in the opening poem to Vivonne, Grisette declares:

Jusqu'à venger son affront,  
Soit, Seigneur, que de ma patte  
Je me serve comme Chatte  
Ou comme les hommes font (*Poésies* 394–95, 53–56).

A cat might literally scratch but the “coup de patte” which is echoed in this phrase figuratively refers to a (Modern) style of arguing in which one is critical without appearing to

intend to cause offence.<sup>5</sup> A similar pun of the expression “donner un coup de griffe à quelqu’un” (“rendre mauvais office à quelqu’un”, *Dictionnaire de l’académie française*) is echoed when Grisetette declares:

Que vous soyez des descendants  
De ces Philosophes mordants,  
Si vous avez de bonne dents  
Nous n’avons pas mauvaise griffe (*Poésies* 402, 13–16).

This irony reminds us of Deshoulières’s narrative presence, a reminder which complicates the animals’ (even fictional) subjectivity. The dual voices entailed in such irony, and their discordance, return us to the equivocation we explored earlier and serve to destabilize Deshoulières’s argumentative position in this debate. Is Deshoulières seriously engaging in the quarrel about the *bête-machine* and if so, can she be seen to be taking a female-centric approach? Or is she offering a parody of the quarrel? Deshoulières uses her pet cat to play with a set of ambivalent positions within the quarrel: by both participating in the quarrel while also maintaining ironic detachment from it—showing she knows the rules and can disregard them—she highlights her sophistication and literary distinction. However, her equivocal undermining of any authoritative position also destabilizes that very distinction: by enabling self-parody, her pet cat, like those of Montaigne and Derrida, serves as a figure for the limits of the philosopher’s or poet’s authority and so is redolent of the skepticism that Bayle read into her other poetry. The very concept of quarrels—in which, inherently, people take a different side according to fixed views—is thus questioned if all fixed positions are to be doubted and scrutinized.

Coda: “fait exprès”

---

<sup>5</sup> See Tonolo, *Poésies* 395.

Schröder has argued that Deshoulières's playfulness and *badinage*, her focus on general moral and social vices rather than those of individuals, and her care not to publish any *ad hominem* attacks during her lifetime—in short, her indirectness—are all part of a strategy of appearing modest, to civilize and render *bienséant* the satirical elements of her poems, resulting in what he calls her “satire au féminin.” This is persuasive, especially given that she carefully does not class any of her poems as “satires,” when she readily uses other poetic genres in their titles (“ode,” “idylle,” “eclogue,” “ballade” etc). However, an argument can also be made for reading the satirical voice Deshoulières uses, which is also at times parodic and burlesque, as being more disruptive and less accommodating than Schröder's reading would permit. Rather than seeing her indirect, equivocal rhetorical strategy as wholly or only acquiescing to gendered norms, it could also be taken on its own terms and seen as an argument in itself, as a discordant interruption into the rational two-sided quarrel that stresses the limits of this rhetorical framework.

Such a reading is strengthened by analysis of another poem by Deshoulières, the *Imitation de Lucrèce, en galimatias fait exprès*, her “nonsense” version of Lucretius's *Hymn to Venus*, circulated in 1679, written around the same time that she was writing her *Grisette* exchanges, and published posthumously in 1705 (*Poésies* 443–45). Countering critics who have dismissed this *Imitation* as incomprehensible, Chométy shows that with this poem, Deshoulières offers a self-reflexive exploration of the challenges of interpretation. As I have implied that she does in relation to the poems analyzed above, in the *Imitation* she examines what it means to locate or “make” meaning from poetry (Chométy 265–71). Her *Imitation* is also ludic and contains an exclusive playfulness only fully appreciated by those party to the joke, in the same way as her *Grisette* exchanges. It also, as Chométy argues, enables self-parody because it allows her mock her position as “savante” in its subversion of learned

discourse and thus to play with her own image as an “élue” of the *Académie des Ricovrati* (279). “Galimatias,” like satire and the burlesque, is a masculine poetic mode: “Galimatias” recalls, among other instances, the characterization of “Capitaine Galimatias” in Furetière’s *Nouvelle Allégorique*, in which Galimatias wages war on the “Princesse Rhétorique” of the land of Eloquence, who is supported by female-gendered associates, Modestie, and “Romanie,” that is, the country of novels. Just as in her *Imitation de Lucrece*, the indirect nature of the parodic, satirical and equivocal voice Deshoulières adopts in the Grisette sequence is not simply a strategy of modesty or a feminizing of a poetic mode. Rather, the indirect voice is deliberately employed to explore the themes that persist in her work: literary authority; the complexity of interpretation; the role of the personal and the playful in “public” poems.

Where does this leave her Quarrels? Deshoulières’s position is not so extreme that she entirely undermines the Quarrels with which she engages, as Nédélec has shown some burlesque interventions in various quarrels to do (“Burlesque” 74). Nor is her allegiance itself unclear in the Grisette epistles: she claims allegiance to the Modern camp and those opposed to the *bête-machine*. Gérard Ferreyrolles has argued that polemic is one of the “lieux de naissance de l’herméneutique” in the seventeenth century because polemicists work to reduce the gap between expression and meaning in language, setting out clear rules of interpretation in which the meaning depends on speaker’s intention and the reader’s understanding (27). Deshoulières works against these clear rules, complicating her status as polemicist: she both takes a recognizable side *and* mocks quarrels, in the particular and in general. Such negation cannot and should not be entirely explained by gender—it is, of course, in part potentially a strategy of modesty; but it is surely also, in equal or greater part, the opposite: virile, satirical, burlesque and disruptive, and pertaining to her philosophical attitude of skepticism.

Deshoulières's case poses a methodological challenge for us as critics in terms of not necessarily seeing all of her quarreling gestures (and those of other women writers who fall into the category of "salonnières") through the prism of gendered modesty and acquiescence. Her quarreling voice(s) also pose a challenge to scholars of quarrels because her simultaneous engagement and distancing pushes the limits of what might constitute quarreling. But, in the end, does this very disruption not bring us back to gender? By disrupting the two-sided disputation, by expressing skepticism towards the authority of the quarrels and quarrelers of her day, does she not draw attention to her charged status as a woman engaged in such quarrels? Deshoulières reveals the female quarreler to be inherently marginal and marginalized in a masculinist logic of quarrel participation, in which women were rarely considered legitimate participants. The female quarreler does not fit easily in the standard view of literary history, which has tended to use a similar framework to categorize who might count as a quarreler. Polemical equivocation—an apparent contradiction in terms worthy of our poet—, therefore, more than being female modesty, serves to question the dogmatism of polemic and so to destabilize literary history's assessment of what (and who) is polemical.

**Helena Taylor**

**University of Exeter**

#### WORKS CITED

*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. Paris. J-B. Coignard, 1694.

*Recueil des portraits et éloges en vers et en prose dédié à Son Altesse Royale Mademoiselle*.

Paris: Sercy and Barbin, 1659.

Aronson, Nicole. "Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?: Mlle de Scudéry et les animaux." *Les Trois Scudéry*, edited by Alain Niderst. Paris: Klincksieck, 1993.

Bayle, Pierre. *Dictionnaire historique et critique par Mr. Pierre Bayle, cinquième édition.*

Amsterdam: Brunel, 1740. 4 vols.

Boileau, Nicolas. *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Antoine Adam and Françoise Escal. Paris:

Gallimard, 1966.

Chométy, Philippe. “Du *clinamen* au galimatias: l’Imitation de Lucrèce d’Antoinette

Deshoulières.” *Traduire Lucrèce. Pour une histoire de la réception française du De*

*rerum natura (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)*, edited by Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini.

Paris: Champion, 2017, pp. 257–84.

Des Chene, Dennis. *Spirits and Clocks: Machine and Organism in Descartes*. Ithaca: Cornell

University Press, 2001.

Deshoulières, Antoinette. *Poësies de Mme Des Houlières*. Paris: Vve de S. Mabre-Cramoisy,

1688.

---. *Poësies de Mme Deshoulières, deuxième partie*. Paris: Villette, 1695.

---. “Imitation du Lucrèce, en Galimatias fait exprès”. *Poësies de Mme Deshoulières, nouvelle*

*édition, augmentée de toutes ses œuvres posthumes*. Paris: Villette, 1705, p. 244.

---. *Madame Deshoulières: Poësies*, edited by Sophie Tonolo. Paris: Garnier, 2010.

Derrida, Jacques. *L’Animal donc que je suis*. Paris: Galilée, 2006.

Descartes, René. *Discours de la méthode*, edited by Laurent Renault. Paris: Garnier

Flammarion, 2000.

Du Bellay, Joachim. *Divers jeux rustiques and et autres œuvres poétiques*. Paris: Morel,

1558.

Dufour-Maître, Myriam. *Les Précieuses: naissance des femmes de lettres en France au XVIIe*

*siècle*. Paris: Champion, 1999.

- Duggan, Anne. "Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime, or of Chameleons." *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 27-41.
- Ferreyrolles, Gérard. "Le XVIIe siècle et le statut de la polémique." *Littératures classiques*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2006, pp. 5–27.
- Forestier, Georges. *Jean Racine*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006.
- Freund, Amy and Michael Yonan, "Cats: The Soft Underbelly of the Enlightenment." *Journal18*, vol. 7, 2019, <http://www.journal18.org/3778>.
- Furetière, Antoine. *Nouvelle Allégorique ou Histoire des derniers troubles arrivés au royaume*  
---. *Dictionnaire universel*. Amsterdam: Leers, 1690.
- Gethner, Perry. "Antoinette Deshoulières (1637-1694)." *Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien Régime, XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, Vol. 2, edited by Aurore Evain, Perry Gethner and Henriette Goldwyn. Paris: Garnier, 2015, pp. 515–592.
- Grande, Nathalie. "Une vedette des salons: le caméléon." *L'animal au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, edited by Charles Mazouer. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003, pp. 89-102.
- Godefroy, Frédéric. *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du 9<sup>e</sup> au 15<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1881-1902), <https://www.classiques-garnier.com/numerique-bases/godefroy>.
- Harth, Erica. *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- Huguet, Edmond. *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle* (1925-1967)  
<https://www.classiques-garnier.com/numerique-bases/huguet>



- Irailh, Augustin Simon. *Querelles littéraires ou mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des révolutions de la république des lettres, depuis Homère jusqu'à nos jours*. Paris: Durand, 1761. 2 vols.
- Lachèvre, Frédéric. *Les Derniers libertins*. Paris: Champion, 1924.
- La Fontaine, Jean de. *Fables*, edited by Antoine Adam. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1966.
- Lemaire de Belges, Jean. *Les Epîtres de l'amant vert*, edited by Jean Frappier. Geneva: Droz, 1948.
- Moncrif, François-Augustin de Paradis de. *Histoire des Chats*. Paris: Quillau, 1727.
- Montaigne, Michel de. "Apologie de Raimond Sebond". *Essais II*, edited by P. Villey and V. L. Saulnier. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965, pp. 438-604.
- Nédélec, Claudine. "Équivoques de l'auctorialité au XVIIe siècle." *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, vol. 33, 2004, <http://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/235>.
- . "Burlesques et polémiques." *Littératures classiques*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2006, pp. 28-46.
- Niderst, Alain. *Madeleine de Scudéry, Paul Pellisson et leur monde*. Rouen: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976.
- Ronsard, Pierre de. *Les Poèmes de P. de Ronsard*. Paris: Buon, 1567. 6 vols.
- Rosenfield, Leonora C. *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie*. New York: Oxford UP, 1941.
- Sahlins, Peter. *1668: The Year of the Animal in France*. New York: Zone Books, 2017.
- Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin. *Portraits de femmes*, edited by Gérard Antoine. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.
- Scarron, Paul. *Les Œuvres Burlesques, dédiées à sa chienne*. Rouen: Berthelin, 1668.
- Schröder, Volker. "Madame Deshoulières, ou la satire au féminin." *Dix-septième siècle*, vol. 258, no. 1, 2013, pp. 95-106.
- Scudéry, Madeleine de. *Clélie, Histoire romaine*. Paris: Courbé, 1660. 10 vols.

---. "Histoire de deux caméléons." *Nouvelles Conversations de morale, dédiées au roy*. vol. 2, Paris: Vve de Cramoisy, 1688, pp. 496-539. 2 vols.

Shannon, Laurie. *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmology in Shakespearean Locales*.

Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013.

Tomarken, Annette. *The Smile of Truth: the French Satirical Eulogy and its Antecedences*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Tonolo, Sophie. "De la querelle à l'idylle: quelques enjeux de la poésie de Mme

Deshoulières." *Concordia Discors: 41e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, edited by Benoît Bolduc and Henriette

Goldwyn, vol. 2. Tübingen: Biblio 17, 2011, pp. 33-45. 2 vols.

---. "Rhétorique du cœur et écriture intime. L'art épistolaire d'Antoinette Deshoulières."

*Femmes, rhétorique et l'éloquence sous l'Ancien Régime*, edited by Claude de La

Charité and Roxane Roy. Saint-Étienne: Presses Universitaires de Saint-Etienne, 2012, pp. 205-217.

Voltaire, "Le Siècle de Louis XIV." *Œuvres historiques*, edited by René Pomeau. Paris:

Gallimard, 1957, pp. 605–1274.

Wood, David. "Thinking with Cats". *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, edited by Peter

Atterton and Matthew Calarco. London: Continuum, 2004, pp. 129–44.