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The Reception of *De Rerum Natura* in the Poetry of Madame Deshoulières

Abstract: This paper explores Antoinette Du Ligier de la Garde Deshoulières' philosophical poetry in context. The presentation of Epicureanism in various works, including *Imitation de Lucrèce*, her *maximes*, and idylls is analysed, considering both format and content choices and focusing on the ways in which both were used subversively. Her reception of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, as well as her social and political context inform this analysis. The challenges and limitations of producing work from the interstices of several conflicting identities are included to posit her case as an example of why women are under-represented in the history of philosophy.

Keywords: Philosophy, poetry, France, *philosophe*, *salonnière*, salon, Deshoulières, Epicureanism, Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, *ataraxia*, *aponia*, equanimity, naturalism, material causation, deism, immortality, Atomism, women, gender, *querelles des femmes*

Introduction

Deshoulières in Context

The salon was a crucial site of French philosophical and literary development, existing in various forms from the 17th to the mid-20th century. Its first iterations informed nascent Neoclassicism; while not yet the formalised movement of the late 18th century, they were characterised by late-Renaissance polymathy and a valorisation of Greco-Roman culture. These characteristics along with the salon as a site of cultural foment, informed by its position between establishment and dissident milieus, provide the context for this paper.

The salon was a permitted marketplace of ideas often aimed at the arbitration of taste. A place to discuss and establish norms and ideas within the bounds of a rigid social contract, it was not only a performative space for an intellectual cohort but also a forum in which to process shifts in philosophical, religious, scientific, and political thinking. These sites served to both formalise and mitigate discussions of import and controversy. In their relatively permissive format, they allowed in-roads for unconventional thought and unconventional participants, among these Antoinette Du Ligier de la Garde Deshoulières and the female *philosophes* of the time.

Born in Paris in 1637 or 1638,¹ Mlle De la Garde was daughter to the master of household for Anne d'Autriche. In 1651, she married Guillaume de La Fon de Boisguerin, M. Deshoulières – master of the king's household. M. Deshoulières was also a gentleman in the household of the Prince of Condé and a lieutenant in his military service. Condé and M. Deshoulières' role in La Fronde outcasted Mme Deshoulières;² though she separated from her husband in 1658 and was eventually awarded an annuity from the king and re-integrated into courtly society.

¹ *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, ed. Roman D'Amat (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1965); John Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 46.

² Pierre LeGuay, "Des Houlières", in *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, 1387–1388.

She learned Latin, Italian, and Spanish and was tutored by Jean Hesnault, a libertine and herself a pupil of Pierre Gassendi. Deshoulières was highly regarded for both her literary and poetic talent. She is featured in *Le Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses* under the name Dioclée,³ published her first verses in *Le Mercure Galant* in 1672, and engaged in crucial debates in her role as *salonnière*. In her early public life, she was keenly anti-religious, famously refusing to baptise her son (later baptised in his twenties to equal public interest) and eschewing religious dogma as a tool of control through fear. However, at the end of her life, suffering from cancer and insolvency, she renounced these ideals.

Salon Culture and the Female Philosophe

Women met regularly in various salons, and in the early 17th century, a literary movement authored by women – *préciosité* – emerged. The term *les précieuses* was used arguably as a way of diminishing the conversation generated by these women and, while the genre was tolerated, it was never venerated. Molière wrote a telling satire of this movement called *Les précieuses ridicules*, which cemented the idea of sharp female thinkers as ridiculous, or at best a diminutive novelty. Women were accepted as arbiters of taste, but the application of a woman's intellectual faculties to a subject outside aesthetic was not widely accepted.⁴

This disenfranchisement was the de facto reality for Deshoulières. Education was controlled by family and available almost exclusively through private tutelage.⁵ The salon was one of only a few sites of investigation and expression available to women, being largely barred from participation in academies and publishing serious treatises. Thus, the salon and the medium of poetry became necessary tools of production for women.⁶ In spite of these limitations,

³ Antoine Baudeau de Somaize, *Le grand dictionnaire des pretieuses* (Paris, 1661), 66.

⁴ See Danielle Haase-Dubosc, "Intellectuelles, femmes d'esprit et femmes savantes au XVIIe siècle", *Clio* 13 (2001): 43–67.

⁵ John Conley, "Tutor, Salon, Convent: the formation of women philosophers in early modern France", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27 (2019): 802.

⁶ For more on the available sites of expression, see Conley, "Tutor, Salon, Convent: the formation of women philosophers in early modern France".

they produced affecting work, sometimes breaking into the sphere of institutional recognition. Deshoulières was published by Le Mercure Gallant and elected to the Académie at Padua, Arles, and the Abbé d'Aubignac. She was recognised by the Académie Française, published multiple dramatic works, and was praised by both Voltaire and Rousseau.⁷ This paper aims to understand her work in context, informed by relevant socio-political factors, and will begin by accepting the content of Deshoulières' work as intentional.⁸

The space between establishment and other explored by salon culture allowed for the development and dissemination of the philosophy she espoused, as its tenets were unacceptable in formal environments. However, it is important to note that dialogue was evolving in formal institutions as well;⁹ Deshoulières' context is one of paradigm shift. Discussion in the salon was one part of a complex marketplace of ideas, changing and adapting to new social and political thought; at once looking forward to the emergent scientific thought of Kepler, Galileo, Boyle, Hooke, and Newton, and back in its idealisation of classical civilisation.

This environment, characterised by discourse between allegiants to various schools of thought (Catholicism, atomism, libertinism, Cartesianism – often overlapping) and highly aware of presentation, informed one era in the *longue durée* of Lucretius' didactic epic *De Rerum Natura* (DRN). DRN's eloquent and rich delivery of Epicurean philosophy aligned with the milieu's aesthetic standards as well as the idealisation of the ancient world, and it found reception Madame Deshoulières' work.

Her Epicureanism stood in opposition to the establishment paradigm – Aristotelian-Galenic theory.¹⁰ This opposition was also present in libertinism, Gassendi's attempt to reconcile Lucretius and the church, and the resultant

⁷ Ibid.: 790.

⁸ “[T]he first step in the retrieval of the moral philosophy of French neoclassical women is to take their work seriously”, Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*: 17.

⁹ “[Nicolas] Lemery, for example, used his lectures on chemistry to criticise the dualism of Descartes and to defend the atomism of Gassendi”, *ibid.*: 9.

¹⁰ For more regarding the establishment's Aristotelian-Galenic position and challenges by Gassendi and other Epicurean thinkers, see P. James, “Médecine à Molière”, *Vesalius* 4 (1998): 36–40 and Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 1–19.

resurgence of Atomism and Epicureanism,¹¹ all of which found a platform in the relatively permissive environment of the salon. These divisions are by no means a complete representation of French philosophy at the time, but do signify the dialogue between the establishment and others that must inform this evaluation. In her poetic work, Deshoulières mirrors Lucretius in using the poetic format to subversively express Epicurean philosophical content.

Materials and Method

Considering the relationship between DRN and Deshoulières' poetry requires a fresh approach to her work. The significance of her reception and presentation of Epicureanism lies in her unique social positioning between mainstream and outsider, establishment and other. She was a member of contradictory groups: a woman, but educated and published; part of a performative religious society, but rejecting Catholicism; a member of the aristocracy, but disenfranchised by political affiliation. The subversive adaptations that may have been necessary to produce philosophical poetry from the interstices of these dissonant identities have been overlooked in much of the scholarship. The evidence for her Epicureanism argued here is an attempt to redress the oversimplification which characterises the extant corpus. First, it is necessary to perform a short examination of biases that inform this in order to appropriately consider the effects of social, historical, and gendered context on both her work and subsequent analyses.

A requisite overview of Lucretius, Epicurean philosophy, and DRN will be given. Then, parallels in Lucretius' and Deshoulières' format and content choices will be presented, with particular consideration paid to the subversive qualities of each. Evidence for this analysis will come mainly from her *Imitation de Lucrèce*, *maximes*, and *idylls*. The first is an imitation of DRN; and the *maximes* and *idylls* provide insight into her philosophy in both content and form.

¹¹ On libertinism via Epicureanism and Gassendi, see Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 6.

Accepting Deshoulières as a Philosophe

Because she does not state her intentions as directly as Lucretius does, there exists some doubt as to whether Deshoulières' Epicurean connotations are incidental or intentional;¹² with most detracting statements dating to the 19th century. However, this contrast to Lucretius can also be seen as a symptom of her exclusion from publishing a treatise rather than evidence against her philosophical intent. Though it is admittedly difficult to find a statement from Deshoulières that claims allegiance to a philosophical school by name, many markers point to her Epicureanism (as will be argued here),¹³ not least the overtly titled *Imitation de Lucrèce*.

The bulk of the scholarship seems to have missed the opportunity for deeper analysis. The first mention of her work comes from the fourth edition of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, in a footnote to an article about Jean Hesnault.¹⁴ Bayle, though in some ways supportive of her intelligence, sets the dismissive tone for Deshoulières' reception, telling his reader, "Ne jugeons point d'elle par ces phrases poétique" and implying that she simply hides a certain libertinage in verse.¹⁵ Nineteenth-century reception continues this trend. For example, Durazzo in *Les Classiques et Les Romantiques* makes no mention of philosophy whatsoever, missing the clear naturalistic themes in favour of a facile read of her metaphorical choices. He understands the format of the idyll but seems unwilling to consider that it may provide commentary on a principle. In refusing to accept this genre as more than aesthetic, he precludes himself from a second layer of meaning in Deshoulières' work: "L'Idylle ne doit traiter que des mœurs, des occupations villageoises,

¹² For a brief discussion, see Philippe Chométy, Michèle Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce: Pour une histoire de la réception française du De rerum natura (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 2017), 258–266.

¹³ Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 14.

¹⁴ The original location of this material comes to me through John Conley's citation in *Suppressing Women Philosophers: The Case of the Early Modern Canon*. Because of recent restrictions to uniquely online sources, I was only able to find the second and fifth editions, available from the BNF at <ark:/12148/bpt6k5712738f> and <ark:/12148/bpt6k97647121>, respectively, and the textual citation comes from an 1820 re-print, available at <ark:/12148/bpt6k50440b>. Full edition information is included in the bibliography.

¹⁵ Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, t. VIII (Paris, 1820), 4.

des champs, des troupeaux; de là, le nom de Bucoliques donné à ces sortes de poèmes: l'Idylle peint naturellement et naïvement les objets qu'elle décrit".¹⁶ Further, in his treatment of *Le Ruisseau*, he misunderstands her personification of the stream which highlights its acceptance of its natural state and the accidents thereof. Durazzo treats the line *Point de loi parmi vous ne la rend criminelle* with confusion because "On ne comprend pas non plus la course criminelle d'un ruisseau".¹⁷ The cognitive dissonance created by the literal understanding that streams do not commit crimes might have prompted him to look to a metaphorical read of this line, but he seems to struggle with the sense of personification *tout court* and declares that the metaphor lacks a clear and precise meaning. This is debatable at best, but further, the meaning of the stream's abandonment to its natural state and the fact that amidst nature there is no law to make such an abandonment criminal (to induce the fear, guilt, and anxiety that Deshoulières and Lucretius so abhor) is fairly available through the text, as this analysis will later show.

A further example of the gendered nature of Durazzo's approach is attached to the lines regarding the equanimity with which the stream accepts its role of unending supporter, Durazzo offers this read:

*'Mille et mille poissons, dans votre sein nourris,
Ne vous attirent point de chagrins, de mépris
Avec tant de bonheur d'où vient votre murmure.'*

*Que signifient ces vers? esi-une comparaison entre la fécondité des rivières, et la fécondité des femmes? Je ne comprends pas le surplus de ces mots chagrins, mépris: le nombre de ses enfants n'attire jamais sur une femme le chagrin et le mépris, surtout dans le sens que l'auteur semble avoir adopté.*¹⁸

Not only does he assume that, because the author is female, the verse must be a comparison of the fecundity of women and the fecundity of a stream; he also fails to see that the taxing work referred to might be the difficulty

¹⁶ C. Durazzo, "Madame Deshoulières. Madame de la Fayette. (An essay on their works and style)", in *Les Classiques et les Romantiques*, eds. C. Martin, L. Bescherelle (Paris, 1838), 330.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 335.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 336.

in maintaining a complex and highly-ordered series of relationships, and not child-rearing. Even if the reference is about motherhood, his ensuing statement that “number of children never brings a woman sorrow or contempt” is plainly ignorant.

Taking this as an example of the scholarly treatment of her verse,¹⁹ one must adopt a sceptical approach. It is beneficial to re-evaluate the criteria by which “serious” philosophical work is judged and to consider a wider range of sites of expression. It is reasonable to consider the salon a site of philosophical development, and to accept poetry as philosophy (indeed, see Lucretius). It therefore seems that Deshoulières’ work has been pre-emptively disqualified from consideration as philosophy predominantly because of her sex.²⁰

Her relationship with Jean Hesnault, as well Hesnault’s decidedly Epicurean philosophy, are well-documented,²¹ and Hesnault’s influence on Deshoulières is supported by credible scholarship.²² Her institutional recognition is a matter of record, as is her reception by Rousseau and Voltaire. In light of these factors, it bears exploring her poetry with a critical eye prepared to look past the choice format and see, instead of a woman relegated to idle poetry, a woman who rises to the challenge of circumstance and manoeuvres the means available to her in order to participate in the conversation. Conley helps to justify this decision adroitly:

A study of the sites of philosophical formation can reveal the origin of the distinctive style and themes each woman philosopher develops in her writings. This attention to the social origin of philosophical style and themes should not ignore the originality of the philosophical positions developed by each author... [A]communitarian approach would also lower one of the barriers to

¹⁹ Sainte-Beuve bolsters this trend in *Portraits des Femmes*, speaking of Deshoulières, “manière (sic) pomponnée” and calling the variety in her verse, “Quelques différences de noeuds et de rubans seulement” (Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Portrait des femmes* (Paris, 1886), 378, 366.

²⁰ By contrast, a recent edition of her work introduces her as poet-philosopher: “Antonette, dans l’élan créatif, est une philosophe-poète au sens le plus large du terme” (Catherine Hémon-Fabre, “Étude Historique et littéraire”, in *L’enchantement des chagrins: poesies complètes*, eds. Catherine Hémon-Fabre, Pierre-Eugène LeRoy (Paris, 2005): 438).

²¹ For commentary on this relationship, see Chométy, Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce: Pour une histoire de la réception française du De rerum natura (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)*, 260.

²² See Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 46.

our current knowledge and appreciation of the works of these early modern women: genre. Deshoulières' naturalism will remain opaque if the exegete and the reader cannot grasp the poetic forms, especially that of the nature idyll, which permeated the literary culture of her tutor and salon.²³

Lucretius, Epicureanism, and *De Rerum Natura*

Aside from the ideas conveyed in DRN, almost nothing is known of Titus Lucretius Carus. The quality of his work is mentioned in the textual record,²⁴ and the sole effort at a bibliography comes from the Latinist and Church Father Jerome. The narrative is dubious, not least the anecdote of Lucretius' suicide after being driven insane by a love potion.²⁵ Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, the text of DRN and its Epicureanism are more focal than the identity or context of its author or its history of transmission.²⁶

The modern understanding of the term "epicurean" is a result of the philosophy's complex reception²⁷ and misses the mark on crucial Epicurean tenets. Epicurus espoused pleasure as the highest good, but its definition is centred on eschewing pain and fear (the states of *aponia* and *ataraxia*, respectively), not on hedonism. For him, religious belief – especially regarding the after-life – detracts from the pursuit of these states and is used as a tool of control, playing on a fear of the unknown. The desired states are made possible by the pursuit of knowledge, i.e., correctly understanding the mechanisms of the universe, and the equanimity resultant from *aponia* and *ataraxia* is the end goal of Epicureanism. Equanimity requires understanding that the fundamental particles of the universe (which we now call atoms) combine and recombine to form all types of matter and that all phenomena are a result of these recombinations – all processes and experiences can be understood by

²³ Conley, "Tutor, Salon, Convent: the formation of women philosophers in early modern France": 803.

²⁴ Cicero, *Ad Quintum Fratrem* 2, 9, 3.

²⁵ For a defense of Jerome's history, see David B. Gain, "The Life and Death of Lucretius", *Latomus* 28 (1969): 545–553.

²⁶ For a history of DRNs transmission, see David Butterfield, "Lucretius in the Early Modern Period", in *Lucretius and the Early Modern*, eds. David Norbrook, S. J. Harrison, Philip R. Hardie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5–9.

²⁷ Monica Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2001), 10.

investigating their material causation. Nothing is infinite except these particles, and it is indeed an attachment to the idea of the infinite whence comes most pain and suffering. The attempt to control infinite outcomes by guarding against infinite pain or pursuing infinite pleasure (most commonly in the form of amassing goods or desperately seeking an immutable love) are misguided and harmful. Rather, all natural inclinations are best accepted in their finite state – love, hunger, anger, et al. This acceptance is equanimity and attempts either to preserve or fight against inclinations move one out of this state. These are the tenets of Epicureanism with which Deshoulières would have interacted and which are espoused in her work.

Results

Though poetry was a necessary choice for the subversion of the social norms which limited female expression, its format had distinct advantages as well. Deshoulières, like Lucretius, turns to the poetic format for its subversive utility. In this way, form and content are interrelated for both authors. For each, parallels in choice of poetic format and device will be explored, followed by those in language and imagery, and finally parallels in philosophical content.

Format and Device

Making the Message Palatable

Deshoulières mirrors Lucretius' use of the poetic format to soften the message she posits and to situate that message within well-known cultural milieus. Where Lucretius uses the didactic epic; Deshoulières uses poetry *tout court* for her *Imitation de Lucrèce*, and the format of the idyll and *maxime*.

Lucretius' choice of the didactic epic is more suited to his purpose than the prose format for his directive intention²⁸ – this is one element of the rich tra-

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

dition upon which the didactic epic calls, and situates him within his cultural milieu. This choice was deliberate (in contrast to Deshoulières' forced hand) because the prose treatise was a well-established option by the time of authorship.²⁹ Further, Lucretius declares his intention thus:

[A]s with children, when physicians try to administer rank wormwood, they first touch the rim of the cups all about with the sweet yellow fluid of honey, that unthinking childhood may be deluded as far as the lips, and meanwhile that they may drink up the bitter juice of wormwood, and though beguiled be not betrayed, but rather by such means be restored and regain health, so now do I: since this doctrine commonly seems somewhat harsh to those who have not used it, and the people shrink back from it, I have chosen to set forth my doctrine to you in sweet-speaking Pierian song, and as it were to touch it with the Muses' delicious honey, if by chance in such a way I might engage your mind in my verses, while you are learning to understand the whole nature of things and perceive its utility.³⁰

Here, he states the utility of the format as well as his goal: he chooses poetry as a means of subversion, using his skill as a poet to make palatable the challenge he poses to closely-held beliefs and social norms.³¹

For Deshoulières, though the poetic format may have been a necessity, the specific choices in her oeuvre merit attention. Her appeals to the authority of classical literature and her use of the idyll and the *maxime* situate her firmly within her cultural milieu, and she repurposes these formats subversively, in keeping with the satire characteristic of salon exchanges. In authoring idylls which express a deeper message than just the bucolic, and *maximes* that question religious sentiment, Deshoulières suggests she is not only interested in expressing her thinking but also in cleverly manipulating literary norms to highlight her premises.

²⁹ E.g. Cicero's *De Inventione* and Varro's *Rerum rusticarum libri III*, see also Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, 6.

³⁰ DRN 4.1–25. All DRN translations are from William Henry Denham Rouse, *Lucretius. On the Nature of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924).

³¹ However, some argue that Lucretius' wordsmithing is wasted on his choice of subject (Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome Vol. 5*, trans. William P. Dickson (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), 476). This disjunction between format and content is argued against by Monica Gale and David West, among others.

The use of the idyll to underscore naturalism and material causation at once engages the strength of the genre and manipulates it. Known for its simplicity, the idyll focuses on a detail of the pastoral. While maintaining this granular focus, Deshoulières uses the genre to comment on the macroscopic: self-imposed internal strife resultant from unnecessary social constructs – a clever foil to the expected aim of the format. She likewise plays with the expectation of the *maxime* format. These were short-form moralist poetry that began as a salon activity – *un jeu-galant* born of the taste-making designs of the *précieuses*. Fixated on elegant and stylized language, as well as careful expression: “l’effort, comme le talent, était de resserrer ces observations dans le cadre le plus étroit que possible, et de leur donner un tour agréable”.³² The *maxime* was closely associated with the socially and politically controversial Jansenist movement because of its use to express their dissent in an acceptable guise.³³ Further, the composition and exchange of *maximes* was a way of communicating with multiple people through correspondence, expressing and honing ideas under the guise of salon participation.³⁴ Thus, Deshoulières’ appropriation of the *maxime* is in line with its history of subversive use. Her series of *Réflexions* are written in the *maxime* format,³⁵ though she does adapt the length, publishing a series of interconnected moral statements instead of isolating them into separate works.

Appeal to the Classical Tradition

Both authors appeal to the authority of tradition with their format choices. Deshoulières appeals to the authority of classical literature in multiple instances. Most obviously, titling a work an imitation of Lucretius associates the work directly with philosophical poetry. Deshoulières makes her appeal with the delicacy expected of her gender: she writes an imitation of Lucretius, but qualifies it as “babble” (*Imitation de Lucrèce en Galimatias fait exprès*); this allows her to re-frame the poem as an attempt to imitate a known work,

³² Victor Cousin, *La Marquise de Sablé* (Paris, 1854), 74.

³³ Vincenza Guidarelli, *The Salon of Madame de Sablé: Foyer of Literary Jansenism* (unpublished dissertation, Fordham University, 1979), 223.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁵ Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 70.

and not as her own attempt to promote Epicurean philosophy, should it be necessary. If it were poorly received, the work could be eschewed as an exercise in imitation, and the blame, at least in part, could fall to Lucretius – ultimately, it is his philosophy being expressed.

Her *Réflexions diverses* are described as just “teintées de morale augustiniennne”.³⁶ However, it is this tint of classicism that allows her some authority: “[I]l est donc possible de rattacher son oeuvre au courant de la poésie d’idées”.³⁷ Classical references in Deshoulières’ poetry convey an intellectual authority in a time of heightened fascination with the ancients.

In this, she imitates Lucretius’ appeal to the authority of tradition. His allusions to Homer and Hesiod allow him to demonstrate his technical prowess, as well as couch his work within the established and respected tradition of epic poetry. Trading on this cultural capital was likely deliberate, and his homage to extant works is apparent throughout DRN, beginning with the use of epic hexameter (the meter of Homer and Virgil).

Both authors use an invocation, further appealing to tradition as well as allegorically conveying content. At the opening of DRN, the imitation of Homer’s invocation of the Muses wherein Lucretius appeals to Venus is a careful choice to both establish himself as a mouthpiece for a deity, as well as associate his work with a deity that relates to the cosmology he will posit.³⁸ Not only does he use the invocation to provoke this dual sense of authority, but he also chooses the divinity assiduously – Venus serves political, cultural, literary, and philosophical purposes. As the patron goddess of Rome and mother to Aeneas, she serves as a nationalist signifier and was associated with both nature and pleasure.³⁹ The latter of these Lucretius espoused as the highest good, and he reinforces this by calling her *hominum divomque voluptas* – “pleasure of the gods and of men”.⁴⁰

³⁶ Chométy, Rosellini, *Traduire Lucrèce: Pour une histoire de la réception française du De rerum natura (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle)*, 258.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ For more on the tradition of the poet as a mouthpiece for the divine, see Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, 6–7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁰ DRN 1.1

Perhaps most importantly, Venus in her role as the goddess of love is aligned with one of the two fundamental forces Lucretius addresses in his text. For Epicureans, attraction and repulsion – or love and strife – inform the recombinant patterns of matter and, in many cases, the accidents thereof. This association is a historical one; for Lucretius “[a]n important precedent had been set... by Empedocles, who seems to have assimilated the opposed forces of love and strife... to Venus and Mars...”⁴¹ Lucretius theory subversively chooses to manipulate the reader’s religious sentiment in order to support a philosophy that ultimately eschews religion altogether.

Deshoulières engages with this tradition as well, calling on both the convention of invocation as well referencing the Lucretius’ multifaceted choice by invoking Venus in the opening lines of her *Imitation de Lucrèce*. She likewise proposes that love is the attractive force for inter-particle actions, and strife is the repulsive force. This is a core tenet of her materialism, and indeed directly imitates Lucretius. Stalwart in her imitation, the work is a commentary on the mechanism of the cosmos, as is DRN.

Imagery and Language

Appeal to Autopsy

Deshoulières mirrors Lucretius with an appeal to autopsy throughout her work. For both authors, imagery regularly reinforces the message and appeals to autopsy reinforce their Epicureanism by positioning sensory experience as evidence for arguments regarding materialism and natural causation. Their methods, however, differ notably across the two bodies of work. Lucretius folds these appeals into evidentiary epic similes, which are both detailed linguistic ornament and evidence for the theory.⁴² On this, Bardon

⁴¹ Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, 34.

⁴² See for example the description of Brownian motion in DRN 2.109–120. “[T]he ‘simile’ is not just a poetic flourish but part of a ‘scientific’ explanation for a familiar phenomenon” (Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, 29); further “It is typical of Lucretius’ poetic genius suddenly to give an extra thrust to the knife of his argument by this sudden appeal to what we

writes: “La métaphore donne à cette découverte son accomplissement total; chez Lucrèce, elle est poésie, parce qu’elle est evidence”.⁴³ Deshoulières relies on the autopsy of common experience endemic to the idyll. These poems appealed to commonly experienced pastoral scenes or actors (or romanticised tropes about them) – e.g. the behaviour of sheep in *Les Moutons*, the life cycle of flowers in *Les Fleurs*, the ecosystem of a stream in *Le Ruisseau*. She uses these common references to set up commentary on broad-scale societal values (to be discussed in detail later); this is both a subversive manipulation of the genre and in line with the use of stock illustrations in the tradition of Hellenistic philosophy.⁴⁴

However different, this appeal to autopsy and common experience is an important device for both authors as they guide the reader through their thinking. Both authors ask readers to accept the sensory experience as trustworthy evidence, thereby prompting them to trust the senses as a part of their own deductive skill set. This juxtaposition between romanticisation and objectivity – hyperbolic wonder and mundanity – shows the reader their vulnerability to an overawing account of natural phenomena and then confronts them with the mundanity of material causation. This strategy guides the reader through the cognitive dissonance necessary to accept the tenet. It is this guiding strategy – one that appeals to autopsy, to common experience, and also cleverly employs the juxtaposition of society’s romanticisation of nature with the banality of material causation – that both authors employ to their advantage.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphic imagery supports an argument for equanimity from both authors. Lucretius often writes about natural phenomena using human

have all seen with our own eyes” (David West, *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 8).

⁴³ Henry Bardon, “L’obstacle: métaphore et comparaison en latin”, *Latomus* 23 (1964): 3–20.

⁴⁴ For more on these common illustrations, see West, *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius*, 14.

terms, e.g. water vomits,⁴⁵ the earth is both mother and ancestor.⁴⁶ He endows nature with a sense of society: “An oft-recurring phrase, for example, is *foedera naturae*, “the laws of nature”, as we would say; the Lucretian phrase means more literally the “alliances” or “treaties” of nature and conveys a strong hint of personification”.⁴⁷ These choices support his naturalism – by portraying nature as a sentient character, he places it and its laws on equal footing with humans and their laws. Further, equating the internal experiences of humans with the “experiences” of natural phenomena allows for an imitative imperative: if nature accepts its experiences with equanimity, then humans must also be able to do this. This is the starting point from which Lucretius will criticise the self-imposed torment of supernatural belief.

Likewise for Deshoulières, the rhetorical link between anthropomorphising nature and the imperative of equanimity is omnipresent. This is most easily observed in her idylls. In *Le Ruisseau*,⁴⁸ the stream is anthropomorphised by being directly addressed and by declaring the stream happy (*Ruisseau, que vous êtes heureux!*), by the imagery of the stream nourishing its inhabitants at its breast (*Mille et mille poissons, dans votre sein nourris...*), by references to aging (*La vieillesse chez vous n'a rien qui fasse horreur*), and in some cases by the use of pronouns generally reserved for animate objects (*Vous et lui jusques à la mer* – where “lui” refers to another stream). There is a clear intention to draw a parallel between the actions and experiences of the river and those of humans. The parallel is established in the first three lines of the work:

*Ruisseau, nous paraissions avoir un même sort;
D'un cours précipité nous allons l'un et l'autre,
Vous à la mer, nous à la mort.*

She further supports this parallel by referring to the concepts of law and criminality, embedding the river in its own sense of society: *Point de loi parmi vous ne la rend criminelle....* The poem goes on to discuss a divergence

⁴⁵ DRN 2.199.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.598–599.

⁴⁷ Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, 28.

⁴⁸ Antoinette Deshoulières, *Oeuvres choisies de Mme Des Houllières*, ed. Adolphe Mathurin de Lescure (Paris, 1882), 98.

in experiences for the stream and humans, characterising the stream's equanimity in the face of the natural:

*Vous vous abandonnez sans remords, sans terreur,
A votre pente naturelle;
Point de loi parmi vous ne la rend criminelle.
La vieillesse chez vous n'a rien qui fasse horreur:
Près de la fin de votre course,
Vous êtes plus fort et plus beau
Que vous n'êtes à votre source;
Vous retrouvez toujours quelque agrément nouveau.*

The peaceful and happy nature of the stream is re-stated throughout the poem, in contrast to the human constructs governing love, ageing, political and social avarice, and death. The stream's ability to accept or eschew, as appropriate, each of these concepts renders it happier than men are able to be. Thus, it underlines the superiority of a value system which prioritises natural inclination and the pursuit of pleasure over artificial systems of regulation.

*Les Moutons*⁴⁹ opens with similar anthropomorphizing techniques. References to the emotional state of the sheep (*Hélas! Petits moutons, que vous êtes heureux!*), as well as the use of the terms *chez vous* and *sage* help to personify the animals. As in *Le Ruisseau*, Deshoulières endows the sheep with a sense of society which she then contrasts to that of humans:

*On ne vous force point à répandre des larmes,
Vous ne formez jamais d'inutiles désirs...
Paissez, moutons, paissez sans règle et sans science.*

Deshoulières then establishes that the equanimity of the sheep, as with the stream, is rooted in acceptance of and submission to natural inclinations:

*Vous paissez dans nos champs sans souci, sans alarmes,
Aussitôt aimés qu'amoureux!
...*

⁴⁹ Ibid., 89.

*Dans vos tranquilles coeurs l'amour suit la nature;
Sans ressentir ses maux, vous avez ses plaisirs.
L'ambition, l'honneur, l'intérêt, l'imposture,
Qui font tant de maux parmi nous,
Ne se rencontrent point chez vous.*

It is the attenuation of the sheep to their inclinations which saves them from the torment caused by trying to govern natural inclinations with reason (here referred to as a chimera):

*Sous la garde de votre chien,
Vous devez beaucoup moins redouter la colère
Des loups cruels et ravissants
Que, sous l'autorité d'une telle chimère,
Nous ne devons craindre nos sens.*

The same pattern is expressed by the imagery and language choices in *Les Fleurs*,⁵⁰ as well as in *Réflexions diverses*.⁵¹

Mirroring Lucretius, Deshoulières' decision to set the natural world on equal footing with the human one is the first premise in a syllogism aimed at persuading the reader that submission to natural inclinations is the path to equanimity. If beings in nature can accept their state, their experiences, and their impulses with equanimity, so must humans. She posits that the natural world and the human one are comprised of similar experiences, and humans would be better served by accepting natural inclination instead of controlling it. In order to accept these tenets, it is important to first accept that natural inclinations are indeed a result of nature and not the supernatural. The internal human experience, for Deshoulières and for Lucretius, is an accident of its physical composition. She reinforces the proposed equity between human and nature by regularly contextualising humans and their works within the natural world. This is especially observable in her references to temporality, decay, and impermanence, discussed in the next section.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 92.

⁵¹ Ibid., 140.

Cyclical Nature of Matter

A recurring cycle of growth and decay is expressed by both authors on a macro- and micro-scale. As an example of the latter, Lucretius writes that the rain “perishes” or “passes away” into the earth in order that it might bear fruit. For this, he uses language which connotes pregnancy and also implies that the trees are exhausted, or used up, by the ripening of their fruit: *fetuque gravantur*.⁵² On the macro-scale, the structure of the poem indicates this cycle: it opens with an appeal to Venus and her powers of creation and ends with a description of the plague, its rampant destruction, and the flawed societal responses to the event. By continually referencing this cycle, Lucretius contextualises all things in the arc of creation and destruction, reinforcing the cyclical nature of matter and the material causation endemic therein.

Les Fleurs provides our first example of this from Deshoulières. In it, the flowers are happier than humans because of their cyclical context (*Plus heureuses que nous que nous, c'est ne que le trépas / qui vous fait perdre vos appas; / plus heureuses que nous que nous, / vous mourez pour renaître*). By contrast, humans fear death (...*cette affreuse nuit qui confond les héros / Avec le lâche et le parjure...*) because of the finality it represents to them (*Quand une fois nous cesson d'être, / aimables fleurs, c'est pour jamais!*). She underlines that this understanding is incorrect by contextualising the end of life within the cyclical nature of matter (*Nous rentrons pour toujours dans le profond repos/ d'où nous a tirés la nature*). In calling attention to this common fear, she is once again highlighting Epicurean philosophy – humans are fully mortal, death is the end of each being, there is no promise of immortality.

Deshoulières furthers this comment on mortality by again asserting the conservation of matter in *Réflexions diverses* – but crucially, only their matter, not their souls. The imagery she chooses in this poem plays an inverse role to that of anthropomorphising the natural world. It similarly equates men and nature, but this time by describing humans with nature's terms. For example, Deshoulières uses natural imagery to convey the passage of time for humans in lines such as, *On croit être devenu sage, / Quand, après avoir un plus de cinquante fois / Tomber le renaissant feuillage...* and *Quand le sort t'a laissé*

⁵² DRN 1.1.250–252.

compter cinquante hivers... Even when referring to youth in the poem, she chooses the term *ta jeune saison* – “young season” instead of “youth”.

The imagery in the twelfth verse gives us the strongest support for the cyclical nature of matter:

*Palais, nous durons moins que vous,
Quoique des éléments vous souteniez la guerre,
Et quoique du sein de la terre
Nous soyons tirés comme vous.
Frères machines que nous sommes,
A peine passons-nous d'un siècle le milieu.
Un rien peut nous détruire; et l'ouvrage d'un Dieu
Dure moins que celui des hommes.*

Here, humans “being drawn from the earth”, same as the elements of the edifice, assert the continuity of matter: humans, like the stones of the palace, are made up of atoms. This is further reinforced by the reference to humans as an *ouvrage de Dieu* – drawing a parallel between the works of humans and the works of God. In both cases, despite romanticised claims that either will endure in material form, memory, or spirit, only the constituent atoms from both works will do so. This discussion of duration also underlines the futility of human efforts to endure in individual memory or cultural consciousness.

Parallel Philosophies

The contention that Deshoulières espoused Lucretius’ Epicureanism has been presented; this section will further demonstrate this by highlighting examples of key philosophical assertions on the part of each author. The deism of both authors will be addressed first in what is a relatively straightforward presentation, and while all tenets considered here are interconnected, the ensuing concepts of reason, material causation, naturalism, and immortality are more intricately interdependent.

Deism

The reception of Epicureanism requires adaptation in each cultural milieu. A comparison of Lucretius and Deshoulières' deism is an exemplar and shows the malleability of Epicurean philosophy. Lucretius posits that the gods exist, but separately from men – they do not affect the happenings of the natural world. By establishing this deism, he allows for his argument of naturalism and material causation without fully embracing an atheistic point of view:

For The gods dwell apart in eternal peace. the very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal life in the deepest peace, far removed and separated from our affairs... it is neither propitiated with services nor touched by wrath.⁵³

Just as Lucretius interacts with the religious nature of his society, Deshoulières does too, and neither deny the existence of their own culture's god concept. In a predominantly Catholic society, Deshoulières' lack of demonstrable religious practice was remarkable. While it is true that Deshoulières does not make the same direct statement about the removed nature of the deity, her actions and writings support such a claim (see, for example, the line *ouvrage de Dieu*).⁵⁴

Reason and Nature

The two authors seem to have contrasting ideas of reason but a similar understanding of the distinction between social convention and nature. Deshoulières writes about the social constructs that she sees as troublesome as a result of reason (law, social mores, ideas of "right" behaviour which run contrary to natural inclinations). Lucretius disavows these same concepts but does not name reason as their progenitor. This has much to do with the difference in philosophical landscapes for the two authors: Deshoulières was challenging a Cartesian paradigm, in which reason was the God-given faculty which justified the continued exertion of men over the natural world. Lucretius had no such foil – for him, a parallel existed between reason and

⁵³ DRN 1.45–49.

⁵⁴ Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 73.

philosophy, with reason being used to understand and accept the natural world.⁵⁵

Lucretius espouses faith in deductive reasoning on many occasions in DRN. Reason is often the subject for his metaphors of illumination,⁵⁶ speaking of the constructs of religion, death, accumulation as forces which darken the human experience: “[W]hy doubt you that this power wholly belongs to reason... This terror of the mind, therefore, and this gloom must be dispelled, not by the sun’s rays nor the bright shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature”.⁵⁷ It is by the use of reason that we better ourselves: “...so trivial are the traces of different natures that remain beyond reason’s power to expel that nothing hinders our living a life worthy of gods”.⁵⁸ He also asserts that one can reason poorly and that the flaw is recognisable and amendable.⁵⁹ Reason is the means by which one should confront awe: “Forbear then to be dismayed by mere novelty and to spew out reason from your mind, but rather ponder it with keen judgement”,⁶⁰ and reason compels his work: “But because nevertheless true reason and the nature of things compels, be with me, until in a few verses I make it clear that there are such things as consist of body solid and everlasting”.⁶¹

Lucretius further promotes reason with his use of the didactic – in which the reader is increasingly relied upon to use his reasoning skills to come to the same conclusions as Lucretius. He inverts this technique as well, claiming that if the reader has reached a contrasting conclusion, they must be reasoning poorly: “But if you think the deeds of Hercules rival his [Epicurus], you will stray much farther still from true reasoning”.⁶² This tactic serves to “prove” to the reader that the philosophy is indeed accessible because they are meant to use reason to fill in the gaps that Lucretius does not.

⁵⁵ DRN 2.37–61.

⁵⁶ E.g. DRN 5.1386–1389.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.60–61.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.320–22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.503–510.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.1040–2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.497–501.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 5.22–3.

Deshoulières' Cartesian context sets her on a different path to the same conclusion. For her, reason is the analytical faculty that moves us away from complete submersion within nature, and sits outside the singular causality of matter.⁶³ On her rejection of reason, Conley writes: "For Deshoulières, the desires of reason are paradoxically irrational eruptions of wilfulness refusing to accept the constraints of nature and instinct upon the human person".⁶⁴ She espouses this in multiple works. In *La Solitude*,⁶⁵ it is pride, and the shame brought on by our reason which leads to attempts to quell natural impulses:

*En vain notre orgueil nous engage
A ravaler l'instinct qui, dans chaque saison,
A la honte de la raison,
Pour tous les animaux est un guide si sage.*

In *Les Moutons*, she derides reason in two sections, blaming it for ambition, self-interest, fraud, and the idea of honor – Lucretius names similar concepts as self-imposed evils: acquisition,⁶⁶ social advancement,⁶⁷ and romantic love.⁶⁸ She goes on to say that the application of these values does little to affect the emergence of natural inclinations:

*L'ambition, l'honneur, l'intérêt, l'imposture,
Qui font tant de maux parmi nous,
Ne se rencontrent point chez vous.
Cependant nous avons la raison pour partage,
Et vous en ignorez l'usage.*

...

*Cette fière raison, dont on fait tant de bruit,
Contre les passions n'est pas un sûr remède :
Un peu de vin la trouble, un enfant la séduit,
Et déchirer un coeur qui l'appelle à son aide
Est tout l'effet qu'elle produit.*

⁶³ Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 53.

⁶⁴ Conley, "Tutor, Salon, Convent: the formation of women philosophers in early modern France": 788.

⁶⁵ Deshoulières, *Oeuvres choisies de Mme Des Houllières*, 253.

⁶⁶ DRN 2.20–36.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.1011–1457.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.1121–1140.

Deshoulières critiques romantic love, jealousy, and monogamy in *Les Fleurs* and *Les Moutons*. In the former, she highlights the equanimity with which the flowers accept Zephyr's divided attentions:

*Les médisants ni les jaloux
Ne gênent point l'innocente tendresse
Que le printemps fait naître entre Zéphire et vous.
Jamais trop de délicatesse
Ne mêle d'amertume à vos plus doux plaisirs.
Que pour d'autres que vous il pousse des soupirs,
Que loin de vous il folâtre sans cesse;
Vous ne ressentez point la mortelle tristesse
Qui dévore les tendres coeurs...*

In the latter, she extols the freedom with which the subjects love and are loved:

*Hélas! Petits moutons, que vous êtes heureux!
Vous paisez dans nos champs sans souci, sans alarmes,
Aussitôt aimés qu'amoureux!
On ne vous force point à répandre des larmes;
Vous ne formez jamais d'inutiles désirs.
Dans vos tranquilles coeurs l'amour suit la nature;
Sans ressentir ses maux, vous avez ses plaisirs.*

This critique of the restriction of love would have found an audience among declared libertines and followed logically from the ideas of naturalism and material causation.

Naturalism and Material Causation

These concepts permeate both authors' work. For Lucretius, in his fight against superstition, material causation was perhaps the most paramount idea to convey.⁶⁹ If one can accept that the world is composed of knowable matter and governed by natural laws, then it follows that anything that occurs must

⁶⁹ Gale, *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, 13–14.

have a physical – or material – cause. Lucretius’ thoughts on the relationship between the sexual urge and the societal construct of love exemplify this. He explains the cause of sexual desire as a result only of physical maturation, and that the sexual impulse is unremarkable,⁷⁰ equating the urge to satisfying the sexual impulse with the urge to treat a wound – both acceptable and necessary.⁷¹ Lucretius asserts that the concept of romantic love associated with this urge is an accident of a concept of the infinite. A notion of attainable infinite pleasure – conceptualised as an undying romantic love shared between two people in perpetuity – misunderstands the fleeting and recurring nature of the sexual urge and informs the emotional distress of romantic love.⁷² These passages aim to debunk the seemingly magical effect of love. Necessarily tied to his rejection of the supernatural, he posits that expectations of sexual desires and love should mirror the realism of other expectations of natural phenomena. They will arise, and they should be addressed but not elevated to a mythical status.

This pleasure principle dovetails into Lucretius’ naturalism. He asserts that pleasure is the greatest good and that understanding of the mechanism of the universe is the best route to this pleasure.⁷³ This is because it frees one from the superstition of religion or human constructs like shame, the drive for material or social acquisition, and love. When allowed to fulfil the natural inclinations which it feels as a result of its material being, the actor will remain unvexed by the pain arising from giving these inclinations an overcomplicated narrative and importance. The constant pursuit of these mirages of fulfilment will invariably result in continued pain.

Deshoulières mirrors Lucretius in these tenets, with naturalism broadly evident in her idylls. The superiority of natural inclination – over which reason tries to exert itself – is readily available in her texts, and she too decries the suffering experienced when human law contradicts natural law. While her naturalism is evident, her material causation is mentioned less frequently.

⁷⁰ DRN 4.1037–1057.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4.1049.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.1058–1140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2.1–13.

The best references are in *Imitation de Lucrece*,⁷⁴ where she speaks of fundamental particles and the attractions which combine and recombine them...

*Ces atoms conjoint avec la lumière,
Par leur extrême fluidité,
Sont toujours en société,
Avec l'essence régulière,
et dans un tourbillon de subtile matière,
répandant à grand flots leur inégalité,
de tout le genre humain font l'heureuse manière
du monde à l'infini la multiplicité.*

...as well as the physical causality behind mental and physical action:

*Aussitôt des esprits fixes et végétales,
Les mouvements fuligineux,
Rendent les esprits transpirables...*

*Dans cette physique victoire,
Rien ne puisse arrêter le cours!*

Deshoulières takes a similar position on the conventions of romantic love. The disdain for jealousy expressed in *Les Fleurs* and the freedom with which the subjects love and receive love in *Les Moutons* are indicative of her disinterest in the mores of appropriate love. For her, like Lucretius, love is an accident of matter and should be engaged with as such.⁷⁵

Immortality

The conservation of matter as expressed by Lucretius and Deshoulières is the core tenet from which their critique of a belief in immortality arises. Ultimately, this critique is aimed at the suffering caused by such beliefs, holding to the assertion that pleasure is the ultimate good. In order to

⁷⁴ Deshoulières, *Oeuvres choisies de Mme Des Houllières*, 100.

⁷⁵ Conley, "Tutor, Salon, Convent: the formation of women philosophers in early modern France": 789.

arrive at this conclusion, one must start at the fundamental level – first accepting that all things are made of fundamental particles (the mind and the soul as well). These particles have fixed identities; they simply combine and recombine, held together by attractive forces which are named differently for each author but which behave in the same manner. From this, one can conclude that while the stuff of the universe may be immortal, the beings it makes up cannot be, as their constituent parts will be recombined into other materials. Lucretius calls these fundamental particles “the seeds of things”, Deshoulières “atoms”; both argue that a rejection of this mortality brings only suffering. However, for Deshoulières, this understanding was insufficiently comforting, and she ultimately rejected her own assertions in deference, perhaps, to the anxieties she once argued must be rejected. This serves as a reminder of the strength of fear and uncertainty, and the comfort of supernatural belief, the eradication of which Lucretius wrote DRN to affect.

He begins explaining the makeup of the universe with an assertion that the soul is made of material things, albeit tiny⁷⁶ – this carries with it the implication that these fundamental particles must follow the same laws as any other. Whatever happens to the body when it dies must also happen to the soul. The mind along with the spirit are born and age along with the body, so it stands to reason that they die with the body as well.⁷⁷ In thinking of death, the fixation on loss (especially from the point of view of the dying) is misleading, as no one will feel anything after death.⁷⁸ The idea of immortality – most frequently expressed as a religious belief in an afterlife – is the root of much suffering. The idea that thoughts, feelings, and actions will be rewarded or punished after death distorts the thinking and action of the individual away from the relief of pain and the pursuit of pleasure. In fact, these systems of reward and punishment are methods of control that prey on the manipulation of a person’s perception of and interaction with their natural inclinations. They serve to postpone the satisfaction of an inclination, and Lucretius posits that a delay in addressing

⁷⁶ DRN 3.231–245.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.445–458.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.894–903, 914–930.

a natural inclination causes an inconsolably longing and pain (cf. pp. 20). Be it the expression of anger or love, it is best to address the inclination and move forward with equanimity. By placing the consequences, good or bad, of addressing an inclination in the afterlife, this equanimity becomes unattainable.

Deshoulières says the same, sometimes with direct address and sometimes with allusion. In *Les Fleurs*, she sets up a fear of death as a permanent end and posits that the fear of both the unknown and no longer existing persists in the minds of men (as opposed to the flowers she uses for contrast, who die happily but are reborn). She answers that fear by framing death as a welcome respite from the pain and complexity of human life. This echoes Lucretius' sentiments about the finality of death and the idea of death as a release from wanting.

*La vie est-elle un bien si doux?
Quand nous l'aimons tant, songeons-nous
De combien de chagrins sa perte nous délivre?
Elle n'est qu'un amas de craintes, de douleurs,
De travaux, de soucis, de peines;
Pour qui connoît les misères humaines,
Mourir n'est pas le plus grand des malheurs.*

Further in line with Lucretius, she condemns the human attitude toward ageing, death, and impermanence. This is achieved by comparing the love of aged monuments and the contempt with which old age is approached. This disdain for "our own old age" (*Réflexions divers*) as contrasted to our reverence for the aged material world exists because our own ageing reminds us of our mortality, and ruins help us to believe that there is a permanence to material things. In a previously quoted passage (cf. pp. 16), she reminds the reader that inanimate objects decay and disappear as well; we are simply deceived by the slower rate at which this happens. In the same passage, she calls to our attention that both men and their monuments are made from the same material, reinforcing her at once her atomism and her assertion that all things are mortal.

This passage also calls to mind the suffering created by the longing for immortality, but a better condemnation of the same is given in her later work *Réflexions Morales*:⁷⁹

*On croit se dérober en partie a la Mort,
Quand dans quelque choses on peut vivre.*

*Cette agréable erreur est la sources des soins
Qui dévorent le coeur des hommes.
Loin de savoir jouir de l'état ou nous sommes,
C'est a quoi nous pensons le moins.
Une gloire frivole et jamais possédée,
Fait qu'en tous lieux, a tous moments,
L'avenir remplit notre idée.
Il est unique but de nos empressements.
Pour obtenir qu'un jour notre nom y parvienne,
Et pour nous assurer durable et glorieux,
Nous perdons le présent, ce temp si précieux,
Le seul bien que nous appartienne,
Et qui tel qu'un éclair disparoit a nos yeux!
Au bonheur des Humains leur chimères s'opposent.
Victimes de leur vanité,
Il n'est chagrin, travail, danger, adversité,
A quoi les mortel ne s'exposent
Pour transmettre leur nom a la postérité!*

This passage laments the effort to cheat death by transmitting one's memory into posterity – an effort that recalls her discussion of manmade monuments as misguided attempts at the same. Further, this pursuit makes men lose sight of the present, pleasure in which is the highest good. This echoes Lucretius' condemnation of pursuits that distract from the pleasure of the present moment.

⁷⁹ Antoinette Deshoulières, *Oeuvres de Madame des Houlières. Tome 2. Nouvelle édition, dédiée au sexe amateur de la poésie agréable* (Paris, 1798), 75.

Discussion

It is useful to consider Deshoulières' engagement with Epicureanism in the context of the *querelle des femmes*,⁸⁰ in which the establishment maintained the misogynistic position. There was indeed a cohort who supported the concept of intellectual parity – however, while not a novel idea, it was a radical one. The existence of dissent allowed an opportunity for women to support this opposition. Not only was there an established counter-argument, but they were also the evidence that supported it:

The very existence of a group of educated French women competent in literature and philosophy constituted a prima facie evidence on behalf of the egalitarians.... Empirical evidence had overwhelmed the prejudicial theory.⁸¹

If the *querelle des femmes* pivoted around the intellectual capability of women, then Deshoulières likely recognised in herself evidence supporting the idea of the “sexless mind”,⁸² i.e., the intellectual capacity of an individual was neither determined nor limited by sex. Rather than sex, this was a question of access. While self-preservation may have required caution in asserting this, women like Deshoulières used the means available to them to create evidence that their cognitive processes were equally skilled and their thinking equally relevant. Questions arise from these considerations: could the combination of an outsider's view and self-as-evidence express as a trend of women as early adopters of new theory? How might their position and experiences have affected their acceptance of emergent evidence?

⁸⁰ The term *querelle des femmes* characterises centuries of discussion (from c. 1450 to c.1789) on the abilities, social and economic role, and autonomy of women. See Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the ‘Querelle des Femmes’, 1400–1789”, *Signs* 8 (1982): 4–28 and Daniella Kostroun, “La Querelle des femmes au cœur du jansénisme”, *Histoire, Économie Et Société* 30 (2011): 47–61.

⁸¹ Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 9.

⁸² See Poullain de la Barre's *On the Equality of the Two Sexes*, Anthony La Vopa, “Sexless Minds at Work and at Play: Poullain de la Barre and the Origins of Early Modern Feminism”, *Representations* 109 (2010): 57–94 and Daniel Roche, “Sociabilités et politique de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution”, *French Politics and Society* 7 (1989): 7–13.

Operating from the interstices, Deshoulières was a capable mouthpiece for the relatively daring claims of Epicurean philosophy. Her unique social positioning between mainstream and outsider made her a bridge between the *communis opinio* and unconventional ideas, and her gender required a nuanced approach to presenting her anti-establishment thinking. With the salon as a venue and poetry as a vector, she subverted the social norms aimed at limiting her participation. Encouraging her audience to eschew fear of the unknown and perhaps a self-preservation instinct that prompt the creation of harmful narratives of immortality, she echoed Lucretius' assertion that it is the philosophy that brings us out of the darkness of fear and longing and into the light of comprehension and equanimity.

Here it is important to note that, at the end of her life, Deshoulières rejected these philosophies wholesale, mocking in particular her scepticism about immortality. This may have been a result of social pressure, but this pressure would likely not have been significantly different from the beginning of her public life to the end. It seems, predictably, that her approaching death influenced her philosophy. The same fear she wrote so fervently to admonish likely influenced her allegiances as she was confronted with her own mortality. This is a trend in adopters of Epicurean philosophy: Gassendi clung to the idea of an immaterial and immortal soul, Diderot argued whether reason could govern religious truth but not whether a religious understanding of immortality was reasonable, and in Thomas More's *Utopia*, the only condemned religious conviction is that of atheism, specifically because it denies an afterlife. This begs the question: what is the common experience which destabilises a commitment to this school of thought? Fear of the unknown and perhaps a self-preservation instinct that prompts us to create a narrative in which we never cease to exist seem to subsume the antecedent tenets of Epicureanism. Even now, with so much of Lucretius' material theory validated modern science, we struggle with the idea of mortality. Though Lucretius argued that a clear understanding of the machinations of the universe would ultimately assuage these fears, we do not see this born out in performances of self. Societies that on the one hand accept the existence and indestructible nature of fundamental particles and their recombinant nature (now expressed as the first law of thermodynamics and applied to infrastructural policy-making on a broad scale), on the other hand remain staunchly committed to ideas of morality

motivated by punishment-and-reward systems in the afterlife. At the very least, this begs questions about the public imagination of science and its role in the thinking of the individual. For Lucretius and Deshoulières, in any case, it is the philosophy that brings us out of the darkness of fear and longing and into the light of understanding and equanimity.⁸³

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⁸³ For just as children tremble and fear all things in blind darkness, so we in the light fear, at times, things that are no more to be feared than what children shiver at in the dark and imagine to be at hand. This terror of the mind, therefore, and this gloom must be dispelled, not by the sun's rays nor the bright shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature (DRN 2.52–61).

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