

---

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Pascal, Françoise, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Antoinette Deshoulières, and Catherine Durand. *Challenges to Traditional Authority: Plays by French Women Authors, 1650–1700*. Ed. and trans. Perry Gethner

Jane Couchman

---

Volume 39, Number 3, Summer 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086532ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i3.27741>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Couchman, J. (2016). Review of [Pascal, Françoise, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Antoinette Deshoulières, and Catherine Durand. *Challenges to Traditional Authority: Plays by French Women Authors, 1650–1700*. Ed. and trans. Perry Gethner]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(3), 200–202. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i3.27741>

---

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

---

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

as accommodating, if not promoting, inconsistency without firm resolutions. What Morgan ultimately reveals is a garden's meaning as experiential rather than abstruse or available only to a narrow audience. By so doing, Morgan has produced a cogent and lucid study of interest not only to specialists in landscape history but to anyone interested in the cultural history of the period.

LESLIE WEXLER

University of Toronto

**Pascal, Françoise, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Antoinette Deshoulières, and Catherine Durand.**

***Challenges to Traditional Authority: Plays by French Women Authors, 1650–1700.***

**Ed. and trans. Perry Gethner.**

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 36. Toronto: Iter Academic Press / Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015. Pp.ix, 308. ISBN 978-0-8669-8530-7 (paperback) US\$34.95.

Perry Gethner writes in the introduction to this volume that “literary historians of the last two centuries made what seems to be a concerted effort to devalue women writers and ignore their work” (1). This is particularly true of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French women playwrights. The present volume is the most recent of Gethner’s important contributions to the recuperation of these authors and their works, and to their publication in French and in English. It complements well his earlier *The Lunatic Lover and Other Plays by French Women of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (1994). Here, Gethner offers a useful distillation of current research that situates the plays historically, thematically, stylistically, and technically. We learn that many plays by women were performed with considerable success in Parisian and provincial theatres, and published during their authors’ lifetimes or soon after, and we discover that they are indeed worth the attention of current students and scholars. The chosen works of four authors give a good sense of the range of themes, genres, and styles practised by women dramatists in the period. This collection is a pleasure to read. It will be useful as a course text and as an aid to the comparative study of early modern women dramatists writing in various languages.

*Endymion*, by Françoise Pascal, is a “machine play,” featuring magical dream sequences, fantastic scenery, monsters, tempests, transformations,

conflicting passions, the quest of a hero to merit his lady's favour, and a literal *dea ex machina* when Diana arrives to carry off the hero in her chariot. As in a masque or a semi-opera, Pascal gives us many poetic soliloquies, sometimes set to music. It would be great fun to stage! Pascal's version of the multiply-interpreted Endymion myth differs from others, according to Gethner, in that the female characters play more powerful roles. Less convincingly, he argues that Pascal transforms the hero into a model for devout, mystical Catholics. Endymion does indeed prefer love for a divine and apparently inaccessible goddess to that of a mortal woman, but there are few if any Christian overtones.

*Nitétis*, by Marie-Catherine Desjardins (Mme de Villedieu), is a classical tragedy set in ancient Persia. The source is Herodotus, but substantially revised. The drama arises from the rich and nuanced expression of late seventeenth-century debates about love and honour with which the principal characters confront each other. At the centre, Cambyses, the archetypal tyrant, immoral and irreligious, consumed by his incestuous love for his sister Mandane, argues hypocritically that as an absolute ruler his decree overrides nature. His wife, Nitétis, the heroine of the play, is a *femme forte*, a heroic woman protagonist, noble of spirit and capable of leadership. Her sense of her own honour is fascinating in its complexity. Though the play is "tragic" in form and ends with Cambyses's death, the virtuous characters triumph.

*Genséric*, by Antoinette Deshoulières, offers a different, compelling expression of the tragic. None of the characters is admirable, the tyrant triumphs, and moral order is not restored. In this play, "virtue is linked to innocence but rarely to heroism" (169). This anti-heroic vision appears to be the dramatic expression of the daring pessimistic naturalism found in Deshoulières's poetry. The historical events on which the play is based are convoluted; the source is actually the novel *l'Astrée*. Although the main character, the Vandal Genséric, was an Arian Christian, Deshoulières depicts him and his followers as pagans and has them refer superficially to fate, fortune, and "the gods"; no Christian beliefs are referred to at all. The flawed characters are the cause of the tragedy. The Machiavellian manoeuvres of Genséric and Sophronia are brilliantly depicted, but also those of Genséric's prisoner the Empress. The naiveté of the innocent princess Eudoxia, of the virtuous Thrasimund, and also of Thrasimund's evil brother Humeric, is equally convincingly depicted; none of them is a match for Genséric. The evil Sophronia kills herself after accidentally killing Thrasimund, while Genséric remains in control, the fate of Eudoxia in his hands.

Catherine Durant wrote novels and poetry as well as the ten delightful proverb plays Gethner has chosen for this collection. Originating as a popular parlour game, the proverb play presents a short, usually humorous sketch with largely stylized characters; the participants try to guess what proverb is illustrated. These privately-performed entertainments were not restricted by the increasingly rigid rules for classical dramaturgy, and could include risqué themes and satires of powerful people. Women are depicted here as intelligent and often independent characters. Students will find most of these plays amusing, and they could be performed as dialogues without elaborate staging.

For his translation, Gethner has aimed at, and achieved, readability and performability. He uses a loose, un-rhymed iambic pentameter to render rhymed alexandrines in the verse plays. For my taste, a few of Gethner's choices fail to respect the level of language. For example: "deadly embarrassment" (204) for "funeste embaras" ("discomfiture", or even "agony", are closer); "I intend to push you into a pleasing match" (205) for "sous d'agréables lois j'entends vous réduire"; "Can't figure out how to calm" (227) for "ne sait par où calmer" ("Is powerless to calm"); "gesturing indifferently to one or the other" (260) for "en faisant des mines indifféremment à l'une et à l'autre" ("addressing both women without distinction"). The translation of "Mademoiselle" as "miss," mainly in the proverb plays, is awkward and changes the tone; why not just use "Mademoiselle"? I also began to count the multiple reoccurrences of "in short." These are minor flaws in an otherwise admirable and useful collection.

JANE COUCHMAN  
Glendon College, York University

**Reeser, Todd W.**

***Setting Plato Straight: Translating Ancient Sexuality in the Renaissance.***

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xii, 390 + 3 ill. ISBN 978-0-226-30700-8 (hardcover) US\$45.

For the study of same-sex love in the Latin West after around 1440, when Plato's prohomeroerotic dialogues on eros began to become accessible again, inquiry into his early modern reception is a great scholarly opportunity. Despite some contributions on that topic from Giovanni Dall'Orto, James Hankins, myself, and others, no such comprehensive study yet exists. Plato's dialogues on love