It is a commonplace to observe that a preoccupation with the passions, amounting at times almost to an obsession, dominated classical French literature. Moreover, the interconnection between love and language is one that various scholars have sought to illuminate.

But their efforts have focused primarily on the dazzling alexandrines of Corneille and Racine, and that fascinating group of writers known as the moralistes has not received equal attention. Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Mme de Lafayette, and, to a lesser degree, La Bruyère have filtered into the American curriculum; but a significant number of others—the chevalier de Méré, Saint-Evremond, Jacques Esprit, Guilleragues, and Mme de Sévigné—have been consigned to the relative obscurity of such pejorative critical categories as minor and secondary.

The moralistes contributed to a general effort of the age to define—or perhaps, to redefine, following a cataclysmic period of history—what constituted the self. And it was on language and its power not only to explicate but also to create that they placed their reliance in this endeavor. Their writings communicate the urgency they so keenly felt to reform the raw material of human nature, and to transform the private and the untamed into the societal and the controlled.

Professor Horowitz examines this important group of writers as they grappled with a subject that they, with the rest of their age, found persistent, unsettling, and absorbing—the passions and the liberation from them. The moralistes viewed with particular alarm the savage
Love and Language
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OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS: COLUMBUS
TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER