

Interpretation

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Book Reviews

Diana J. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's Persian Letters* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), xvi + 199 pp., cloth \$57.50, paper \$23.95.

WILL MORRISEY

"Sex is a theme hardly mentioned in the thought underlying the American founding," the late Allan Bloom complained.¹ America is 'Lockeland,' and John Locke was not a notably sexy man. The education of his young gentleman includes no hearty recommendation of a jaunt to Paris. Preservation, not procreation; fear, not love; a leveling shove to a deadening common denominator where men and women remain upright with both feet dully on the ground: these features seem to comprise the Lockean heritage in America. Bloom could not bring himself to love it. America's gallant defender might point to Thomas Jefferson's letter to Maria Cosway, or to the gleam in Ben Franklin's eye; the defender might deny that America is 'Lockeland.' The larger question remains: Can modern liberalism, so considerably shaped by Locke, Smith, Bentham, Mill, challenged and supplemented by a phalanx of dutiful Germans beginning with Kant, all issuing in the decidedly unerotic consummation that is John Rawls—can this liberalism account for eros in any way superior to Darwinian population studies or some other low Victorianism?

But then there are the French. They, too, have their bores, the ones who want to ideologize sexuality in some misguided imitation of German system-building (Jean-Paul de Beauvoir, the grim Foucault), or mechanize it, in a misapplication of Newtonian mechanics (Voltaire, the *philosophes* generally). Still, liberalism is also Montaigne, Montesquieu, Tocqueville.

Montesquieu is among the sanest of the moderns, one who never lets one nation, or one obsession, dominate his thought. The first thing he does, when he wants to write of France, is to introduce his readers to Persia. Two Persians have lived in his home, he tells us. This was an opportunity for him to learn, because persons transplanted from distant lands "no longer have any secrets" (*The Persian Letters*, Preface). They regard their host as so foreign that they have no need for the usual social caution, the white lies and dark concealments, that society invites and compels its members to make. Secrets are the obverse of the public, social bonds; secrets assert liberty and bespeak vulnerability. The Enlightenment would make what had been secret public, in the names of equality and liberty. Montesquieu contributed to a great Enlightenment project, the

Encyclopédie, but with his own pointed correction. He contributed an article on “taste,” which he knew the project needed, rather than the articles on despotism and liberty which the editor had supposed it needed.

That telling anecdote is one of many brought to light by Diana J. Schaub in *Erotic Liberalism*. She brings to her task a mind well matched to her subject: stocked with useful learning; sensitive to details, but with a strength that never lingers too long on the surface; not unfamiliar with the uses of both secrecy and display, indirection and flourish. The *Persian Letters* has found a reader of *esprit*.

In Montesquieu she finds “a liberalism responsive to circumstances, history, and national differences, while avoiding the perils of relativism and historicism” (*Erotic Liberalism*, p. xii). A genuinely erotic liberalism would never love humanity but hate people, as some *philosophes* were wont to do. Sexuality reminds of the particular even as a universal trait. Montesquieu speaks intelligently on subjects much in vogue now: diversity, sexuality and ‘sexual politics,’ the multiplicity of cultures. But he never gets lost in mere *différence*, nor allows his readers to give themselves over to self-righteous thumotic passions. Schaub shows herself to be alert to the political atmosphere of her own times, using the ‘Montesquieu our contemporary’ motif to invite, charm, attract those readers now marching to the brassy notes of the regnant conformo-anarchism. Like her man, she wants her readers not only to read but to think. Thinking imperils orthodoxies; Schaub is a very subversive writer. At the same time, and just as pertinently, she shows how critics of current orthodoxies might proceed in a manner less direct, less overtly challenging, less ‘masculine’ and gadfly-like than that of Bloom—in a more serpentine and indeed Lockean manner. In this she has recent precursors, Mary P. Nichols and Catherine H. Zuckert. Against intellectual tyrants with powerful foreign regimes behind them, some combination of Socratism and Churchillian statesmanship makes sense. Against the high priests and priestesses of egalitarianism, backed not by armies but by a *deus semi-absconditus* called modern bureaucracy, a less manly approach may in the end prove more effective—at least in some circumstances and in some respects, as Montesquieu might not hesitate to add. Strategically, we are all Gramscians now.

Montesquieu, Schaub writes, carefully distanced himself from “the younger *philosophes*” and their “polemicization of philosophy” (EL, p. 158, n.8). Such polemicization, she invites readers to see, can only defeat the tolerance that ‘multiculturalism’ seeks to encourage. “The prosecutorial method”—shared by thumotic personalities always and everywhere—“may not be the best way to ascertain Montesquieu’s intention” (EL, p. 8), or indeed the best way to open anyone’s mind, including one’s own.

Politically, the “erotic foundation” of Montesquieu’s liberalism affords a place for the building blocks of the polity, family and property, both “rooted in a particular disposition of sexual passion” (EL, p. 9). “Montesquieu’s poetry

may be in the service of the bourgeoisie,” the class that gives modern politics its energy and stability, “in a way that Rousseau’s does not” (EL, p. 9). This is nonetheless every bit a modern poetry; the epistolary novel is “a new vehicle for the new philosophy,” one that organizes the drama less around *arguments* (and, by implication, reason) than the dialogue form does, and more (though not exclusively) around the *passions* of the characters and of the reader. Montesquieu rejects the supposed Platonic notion that ideas are “positive things” (“Essay on Taste,” quoted in EL, p. 161, n.41). He is anti-‘abstraction,’ more ‘bodily,’ concerned with the “feminization of philosophy” (EL, p. 11) for the new, predominantly female audience of novel-readers. The Montesquieuan political philosopher rejects the ‘masculine’ approaches to “the philosopher’s relationship to the political community” (EL, p. 11), whether Platonic (the ideas, the triumph in speech over the city’s destruction of Socrates’ body) or Machiavellian (the entirely nonabstract, but regrettably tyrannical ambition to conquer the woman, Fortuna).

An epistolary novel is as dramatic as a dialogue, as much an imitation of conflict. Contradiction first requires separation, and the *Persian Letters* is nothing if not a study of separation—of the separation of self-exiled Persians from their country, of the Persian Usbek from his wives, of Usbek’s Enlightenment head from his possessive heart, and even the philosophic part of his head from the social-emulative-political part of his head. Not only does Usbek’s professed reason for leaving Persia, “a desire for knowledge” (PL, no.1), contradict his more physical and political reason, the need to evade his enemies, but the very word he uses for “desire,” “*l’envie*,” may hint that his desire is not pure eros for knowledge as such, but mixed with a certain concern for social status. Too, there is the separation of the creator from the created, in this case, the disappeared god, Usbek, from the eunuchs he has created (PL, no.2) and from the women the eunuchs are to guard. Why should a genuine creator-god need to seek knowledge? This *deus absconditus* has not merely disappeared; he does not really exist as a god, at all. As the sixty-fourth letter shows, the priests secretly rule ‘god,’ that is, they rule in place of a god who effectually does not exist. The *Persian Letters* deserves its reputation as a masterpiece of atheism, an attack on “the claim common to the three great revealed religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” (EL, p. 17). “Montesquieu’s overarching purpose in the *Persian Letters* is to disorient—to dis-Orient Christianity, France, and the patriarchal family” (EL, p. 17), to get them away from the ‘Oriental’ ethos of despotism and of an abstracted but still commanding god (whose priests are ventriloquists), and to reconnect human beings to nature.

To do so, Schaub observes, Montesquieu understands just as acutely as Hegel that philosophy can no longer begin with nature, or with political conventions that are so simple that they still reflect nature. Philosophy must begin “amidst human history and human convention” (EL, p. 20). Hence Montesquieu’s reputation as the father of sociology. *Political liberty at best* will still

be a somewhat looser, more comfortable unfreedom, because men are fish caught in nets made up of laws that either chafe irritatingly (despotism) or give them sufficient room to ignore their capture. Despotism is a certain pattern of law-nets, not so much a reflection of the tyrannical soul, a natural soul perverted, as seen by the ancients. Despotism is a net woven from the fabric of doctrines, not of soul-types. It is woven of such doctrines as Biblical religion and Hobbesian natural right. These doctrines share an appeal to fear, whether fear of God as the beginning of wisdom or fear of violent death, threatened by the 'absolute' monarch who settles all controversies in order to impose a peace that precisely and pointedly does not pass all understanding (or even the meanest understanding).

Why not a renewal and adaptation of that estimable moderate, Aristotle, then? Montesquieu remains a modern, a man of impassioned individuality. Moderation and prudence are recoverable (perhaps the better word is "simulated") "not on the grounds of classical virtue but on the grounds of security and liberty for the individual" (EL, p. 25). This is moderation 'from below'—from the passions—not 'from above'—from a reason that rules through thumos. (Usbek's Enlightenment rationalism is impotent as it attempts to rule the passionate wives by means of the thumotic eunuchs; Montesquieu also satirizes Plato's tripartite regime of philosopher-kings, in this). The fundamental human passions are capable of such 'moderate' or tamed expression because they are not thumotic. Montesquieu's state of nature is peaceful. Men are naturally timid and needful. "The prayers of natural man are directed not to God but to natural woman" (EL, p. 26); it is not clear to whom natural woman prays, or if she does. Warlike passions arise in Persia or in Paris, in fear-based despotism or honor-bound monarchy-aristocracy. Warlike men do not pray to women; they seize and incarcerate them in harems or nunneries of various sorts. The harem, the regime of castration of guardian-eunuchs and claustration of women-possession shows "most starkly the results of an attempt to realize virtue in the face of natural opposition" (EL, p. 38). Schaub pauses to remind readers that "Montesquieu turns individuals away from such life-denying ethics as ancient manliness and Christian martyrdom, but not, like Hobbes, by directly advocating cowardice. An at least residual admiration for human high-heartedness may be quite indispensable to political life" (EL, p. 39). The wives at last rebel openly, after years of discreet rebellion.

In sum: Socrates the manly, the gadfly, yes. But also Socrates the midwife, who "swears by Hera rather than by Zeus," *anthropos* rather than *aner*, human rather than manly (EL, p. 43). Still, Montesquieu's Socratism goes only so far. Montesquieu's woman-oracle is Roxane, who speaks of her desires and the laws of nature, the passions, not Diotima, who "speaks of eros and immortality" (p. 43). The ruling passions of the noblest Montesquieuian minds aim at bodily pleasures, although not bodily pleasures basely conceived. "[N]ature is body, not the sunlight of truth" to be seen outside the cave (EL, p. 47). And—

one hopes the ghost or *esprit* of Foucault listens—such pleasures are ruined by the introduction of despotic power-politics into the harem by the excessively manly Usbek. This brings out counter-despotic thumos in the women (they are not “entirely creatures of the body,” Schaub notes [EL, p. 54]) and defeats the purpose of the family, which is procreation and the rearing of progeny. “Under the dynamic of despotic jealousy, Usbek gives no thought to either the continuance of life or the commodiousness of life” (EL, p. 53). In Europe, this critique of infecundity would result in the liberalization of divorce laws, the end of primogeniture, and far less recourse to the cloister and the monastery. In this, English Protestantism is wiser than French Catholicism, producing Jane Austen heroines instead of Eloise or Emma Bovary. Tyranny (and here Schaub says tyranny, not despotism) of fathers heavenly and earthly—the separation of men from women, the possession of other property by central state and central church, insufficiently separated—yields population decline, the prevention of life by celibacy and the destruction of life by unnecessary poverty and wars. (Whispered to feminists: abortion is no more to be encouraged, for the same reason [EL, pp. 67–68]).

Formulated another way, Montesquieu is a *philosopher of esprit*. He commits the sin against the Holy Spirit by identifying it with the proselytizing spirit, thus the imperial spirit, thus the attempt to conquer nature. Nature returns to break the priestly pitchfork by revolutionizing the despotic, ‘Oriental’ regimes. But note: Satan’s pitchfork will also break. Machiavelli’s militant, proselytizing, imperialist atheism, to say nothing of the Hegelian spirit to come, with its insane, tyrannic derivations ‘left’ and ‘right,’ will fail for the reason Charles de Gaulle identified: they are unnatural, unattractive, finally impossible to maintain. De Gaulle thought of the statesman not as a conqueror but as a farmer. Montesquieu, Schaub recalls, made his living from vineyards. Moderated Machiavellianism means, among other things, an atheism that does not contradict itself by deifying itself. It does not fall victim to the disease Schaub calls *impotence tyrannus*. Just as eunuchs are alienated from the generative part of their own nature (and as monks are so alienated by their celibacy, anticipated in much milder form by the Jewish practice of circumcision [EL, p. 79]), rechanneling their desires to domination, so the despot alienates himself from his own nature as a man even as he strives thumotically for ‘manly’ dominance. The power-man is the man of impotence; the jealousy of the jealous god or husband is really impotence, ungodliness, unmanliness. With a perhaps too-cruel pun, Schaub writes, “Usbek cuts rather a sad figure” (EL, p. 88). Enlightenment alone will not do.

Fecundity results in wealth and variety. “The importance Montesquieu attaches to the need for variety cannot be underestimated” (EL, p. 95). There is one bad regime, despotism, but many good regimes, in the many circumstances in which human beings live. The nonholy *esprit* of Montesquieu is “the spirit of laws and the general spirit of nations” (EL, p. 98). (Again, one might note the

contrast with the Bible, where the chosen nation [and later, the individuals chosen by the Holy Spirit] is separated from the mere nations, the gentiles.) *Esprit* is “a capacious word” meaning wit and wisdom, spiritedness and mind; the human at its best (EL, p. 98). Montesquieu’s other Persian, Rica, the one who readily adopts to things Parisian, tells the story of a philosopher-queen who refounds the regime of a despotic husband in the *esprit* of “spiritedness in defense of political liberty” (EL, p. 103), of the regime of variety. Such stories are satirical, but this is a satire of a non-Juvenalian kind, inviting readers to smile at themselves. “Ridicule becomes a goad to self-examination, rather than an instrument of scorn and separation” (EL, p. 103), too easily an instrument of despotic narrowing of the range of human possibility. In another enlightening story, one of Montesquieu’s writers has recourse to the original religion of Persia, Zoroastrianism, a natural religion “in which the sacred law affirms the inclination of nature” (EL, p. 105), including marriage of equal partners and, not incidentally, the fecundity of commerce. Nature brings together, unlike the ‘founding separation’ seen in both Biblical creationism and classical philosophy, with its ascent from the cave and its talk of ideas. These myths, Montesquieu implies, are dangerous, as is entropic Hobbesian physics. Montesquieu’s “dis-Orienting” is a remixing; nature mixes, blurs, presents distinctions whose edges are not clear cut. Story-themes of incest and androgyny, cross-cultural fertilization, and procreative sex, of *commerce* in the most comprehensive as well as the usual sense of the word, all convey this claim. Republicanism is part of it: Rica writes to Usbek that fear, the foundation of despotism, has only one language, whereas nature is multiform. This conception of nature is a ‘feminine’ insight. Rica, though a young man, has a woman’s name (EL, p. 113); he is receptive, not dominating, and one wonders if his mother, who misses him and accuses Usbek of stealing him (PL, no.8), suspects that her son has been made Usbek’s catamite. At any rate, “Despotism, it seems, exaggerates or absolutizes sexual differentiation; liberty, by its encouragement of individuality, erodes it. The facts of nature doubtless remain, but their social bearing is far from ossified” (EL, p. 119). Eros takes different shapes in different regimes. Under despotism, where women are objects of luxurious accumulation, eros is pleasure, that is, a kind of selfishness that separates while coupling. Not only fear but eroticism itself divides men so as to make them conquerable under despotism. In republics, with their reciprocity or commerce, and their taste in literature for the pastoral romance (seen in Hellenistic Greece, Renaissance Italy, and England), eros is love. In monarchies, where women rule behind the scenes as orderers of luxury, eros is gallantry. Montesquieu’s France moves toward republicanism from its current combination of monarchy and despotism; this may be seen in its taste for badinage, boudoir talk in public, “the opening up of the private to the public” (EL, p. 119). (The use of this practice in today’s commercial republican regimes may be seen on television; many philosophers who would understand contemporary America will start their day

with breakfast with Regis and Kathie Lee and their *embourgeoisement* of badinage.) “Women are consummate consumers” (EL, p. 121); to please their consuming women, aristocrats must learn to work for a living, and thereby step toward a new regime, leaving warlike pride or machismo (Greek *thumos*, Machiavellian *virtù*) for productive pride or vanity. “[P]erhaps France is salvageable,” even if Persia is not (EL, p. 135).

“Vanity is a kind of socialized fear—not the natural, dissociative, Hobbesian fear that culminates in despotism, but a man-made, communicative, opinion-based fear that renders human beings interdependent” (EL, p. 136). Nature fluctuates as water can; the attempt to restrict it too rigidly, too despotically, leads to broken dikes and dams. Respect it, and it can become tamer, rechanneled into, and by, formal institutions that will not break. Commercial republicanism and despotism both rely on the passions, but commercial republicanism does so intelligently, effectively. Liberty replaces virtue. Virtuous republicanism self-destructs because a regime founded upon public opinion cannot at the same time adhere consistently to virtue conceived as self-renunciation (a problem unseen, one might note, by such American progressives as Woodrow Wilson). Commerce will satisfy human passions and pacify as well as stimulate them. One of Montesquieu’s more attractive characters lives in Venice, the commercial republic that governs water liberally. “[I]t is commerce not religion” —variety, not oneness—“that effectively inspires good faith,” by observing contracts among men “rather than the covenant with God” (EL, p. 140).

As in his politics, so in his writings: “the disjointed and open-ended quality of Montesquieu’s writing is a call to self-government,” to his reader’s reasoning capacities, to the ability to make sense of the writer’s complex universe (EL, p. 145). Montesquieu is not a *deus absconditus*; he is present in every line he writes. But, like nature, he wants to intermingle with his readers. “In Hobbes, reason panders basely to the passions; in Montesquieu, passion is the divine consort of reason,” the most perfect, the noblest, the most exquisite *of the senses* (EL, p. 144).

Perhaps any liberalism based upon Enlightenment, the bringing of reason to the many, requires eros of some sort, not only because it involves liberty conceived as the liberation of the passions, but because reason is itself erotic, desirous. A philosopher who wants only an Enlightened despot may take nature, and human nature, as entropic; human beings are atoms, colliding, separating fearfully, made to cohere by the one man who artfully and forcefully consolidates them, who pulls the net tight. But if nature is erotic, or at least more erotic than entropic, the net can be looser. Montesquieu evidently differs from Plato not so much in his eroticism but on the issue of sensuality or materialism. Materialism appears to lend a more egalitarian cast to his thought; the despotic materialists of this century unwisely tried to mix *thumos* with their materialism, spawning ‘leaders’ who dreamt of master races and vanguard

classes. The newer, post-‘totalitarian’ ideologues commit the same error, incoherently wanting uniformity of opinion amidst diversity of ‘cultures,’ bodies, and bodily combinations. Can the *pharmakon* of Montesquieu cure them of their illusions, enlighten them?

Taken by itself, the *Persian Letters* cannot. It is not clear how erotic liberalism could defend itself, except over the very long run, and then only intermittently. Perhaps that is all Montesquieu hopes for. But perhaps not: he went on to write *The Spirit of the Laws*. As the writer of letter 86 suggests, law can settle the very thumotic disputes that disappointed love provokes. True law is the law of reason, and must be administered by the few who are reasonable. The few who are reasonable and who administer the law are judges. They are an anomaly within the commercial republic (unless they are bad judges of the sort who ‘follow the election returns’). Nonetheless, a commercial republic needs more than good laws and wise judges. It needs, in terms Montesquieu uses, executive dispatch and resolve. This involves thumos. De Gaulle and others have seen that commercial republicanism needs more than a moderated Machiavellianism to defend it. There is a need for thumotic republicanism, too, in some complex mixture with the erotic kind.

NOTE

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 187.