

# Interpretation

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Montesquieu is widely recognized for his contributions to the modern philosophic project and American institutional design; as one commentator has succinctly put it, Montesquieu's reputation is typically that of a "Frenchified Locke."<sup>1</sup> He is not, however, usually thought of as a poet. If anything, Montesquieu is sometimes seen as the last gasp of Enlightenment rationalism before the first modern poet-philosopher, Rousseau, exploded onto the intellectual scene to tear the Enlightenment edifice down in the name of beauty, freedom, and virtue.

Yet Montesquieu's actual body of work complicates this narrative. Those familiar with his biography know that Montesquieu was a literary celebrity before he was known as a political thinker: it was the instant success of his epistolary novel *Persian Letters* in 1721 that propelled him into the public eye. At key moments in his magnum opus, *The Spirit of the Laws*, one finds Montesquieu comparing himself to a sculptor and to the painter Caravaggio, and even writing an Invocation to the Muses.<sup>2</sup> In fact, an overview of his collected works reveals nearly as many works of fiction—and especially fiction dealing with erotic themes—as ostensibly serious works of political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In short, Montesquieu's reputation may be in need of revision:

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<sup>1</sup> Diana J. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's "Persian Letters"* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), ix.

<sup>2</sup> For the comparison with a sculptor and with Caravaggio, see the Preface to *The Spirit of the Laws*. The Invocation to the Muses can be found at the beginning of part 4 of the work.

<sup>3</sup> It will be admitted that these works of fiction, while surprisingly numerous, are not always of the highest quality. See, for instance, the salacious but trite *Temple of Gnide*.

any comprehensive treatment of Montesquieu's work must grapple with both his rationalist and poetic sides.

No work showcases Montesquieu's literary genius better than *Persian Letters*, his first, and best, artistic effort. *Persian Letters* is an epistolary novel that follows two Persians, Usbek and Rica, as they leave Persia and experience France—perhaps to satiate a genuine love of wisdom (1) or perhaps to flee persecution at court (8). In part, *Persian Letters* is a book satirizing France. During their time in France, the Persians are constantly struck by the vanity of the French people and absurdity of much of French life. As they are foreigners—not to mention Muslims—they are able to speak more boldly, irreverently, and anticlerically than Montesquieu ever does in his own name. One thinks of a particularly bold instance where Rica bluntly calls the pope “an old idol worshipped out of habit” (29). In Montesquieu's hands, the foreignness of the Persians is a weapon expertly employed to satirize what no Frenchman dare openly ridicule.

However, the main drama of the book occurs not in France, but in Persia. When Usbek left Persia, he left behind a seraglio of wives, guarded by a bevy of both physically and spiritually mutilated eunuchs. Although time and distance separate Usbek from his wives, his jealous obsession with them only seems to grow, as do their attempts to resist his despotic regime. The disintegration of order in Usbek's seraglio, and Usbek's corresponding psychological descent into obsession, misery, and denial, is the dramatic core of the book. Montesquieu uses Usbek's brutal household regime to create a vivid portrait of the psychology of despotism, and the spiritual violence the regime inflicts on both the ruler and the ruled.

This brief description, however, does not capture what makes *Persian Letters* such a joy to read. In one way only, *Persian Letters* is like a meringue: it is far less light than it may seem. The work is so witty, playful, and occasionally salacious that it can feel like pulp fiction; meanwhile, however, almost imperceptibly, the book takes on a dizzying thematic and structural complexity. Especially in the latter part of the book, one begins to find letters within letters, characters spinning myths, and subtle networks of relationships between the characters, revealed without a word, often by discrepancies in the text and silences more than anything said explicitly. Thematically, one sees Montesquieu address the weightiest of topics: nature and convention, the possibility of a philosophic life, happiness, vanity, women, Eros, and nearly all of the substantial philosophic themes that one can find in his overtly

serious works. Without ever losing its playfulness, *Persian Letters* provides an intellectual feast for serious readers.

However, until now, the same complexity and style that makes the work so fascinating has erected barriers between English-language readers and the text. When so much is held together with such delicacy, when only the thinnest linguistic thread (such as the multiple meanings of the word *jalousie*) creates an important thematic link between two otherwise disparate-seeming letters, the task of a translator can be daunting. In their fine new translation of *Persian Letters*, Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard have risen admirably to the occasion. They have produced a superlative scholarly edition that masterfully captures Montesquieu's elusive style. Warner and Douard also provide helpful tools for those reading the book in any language, including the original French. These include a detailed explanation of Montesquieu's rather oblique system for dating the letters, a chart that juxtaposes the order in which the letters are chronologically written and the order in which they are presented (which, they note, frequently diverge), and a chart tracking the quantity of letters written and received by each character, as well as invaluable notes throughout the manuscript.

One must also stop and appreciate the fine introduction Warner writes for the book, which is executed with an almost Montesquieuan subtlety. He guides readers towards the places where Montesquieu has cached his universal themes: through Usbek's exceptional misery, Montesquieu investigates the theme of human happiness (xvii), while the relationship between nature and convention is often explored through the letters on clothing and women (xxii). He also, in a series of exceptionally sharp analyses of the text, models how one should approach such an artfully crafted book. Especially noteworthy is his exquisitely subtle explanation of the incestuous fable "Story of Aphéridon and Astarté" (67), which is ultimately too nuanced to summarize in this review (xxxiii–xliv). In another brilliant piece of such analysis that particularly struck this reviewer, the translators note that during a sequence involving a slave who pleads for Usbek to allow him to escape castration, Montesquieu seems to reference Genesis through the names of the characters and through the setting (a garden). Montesquieu draws an intriguing parallel between expulsion from Eden and castration. Or, to be more accurate, Warner explains that Montesquieu actually "invert[s] the story of the Garden of Eden in *Genesis*, for there the human is fully articulated only when outside of Eden, and not within it" (xlviii).

It is the hope of this reviewer that this excellent translation will encourage readers to return to the *Persian Letters* with a new seriousness. *Persian Letters* is fertile ground for further scholarly research. There is particularly fruitful work to be done investigating the role of philosophy in the book. From the outset of *Persian Letters* philosophy plays a central role. Usbek introduces their travels in the first letter by explaining that they travel because of “a longing for knowledge” and that he and Rica have “renounced the pleasures of a tranquil life in order to search laboriously for wisdom” (1). It initially seems that the motive behind Rica and Usbek’s journey—and therefore the impetus behind the whole body of letters—is a philosophic quest. However, it quickly becomes clear that Usbek is not the enlightened man promised in the first letter. He ultimately looks like a parody of philosophy; spiritually crippled, he withdraws into theoretical concerns out of fatigue with life. As Warner puts it, the critical question becomes “why...Montesquieu craft[s] a character who is both philosophical and tyrannical” (xv). This question is the baffling core of the account of philosophy within *Persian Letters*. Bizarrely, it even seems that there is a *correlation* between how spiritually crippled Usbek is and how much his writings turn to questions of metaphysics and political philosophy: as he begins withdrawing more into solitude, he explicitly remarks to Rhédi that he has “become more of a metaphysician” than ever before (69). There is more scholarly work to be done to understand the meaning of this apparent connection between philosophy—or at least, certain things that appear to be philosophy—and the despotic personality.

However, one also finds individuals who exemplify the hunger for true knowledge and wisdom that Usbek initially claimed to have. Rhédi, a young Persian, voyages through Italy with “the sole end” of “educat[ing] himself” (25). “My mind,” Rica states, “is insensibly losing everything Asiatic that remains to it” (63). As the existence of these young cosmopolitans shows, not all those who seek knowledge are as conflicted as Usbek. Montesquieu confirms that there is something in the human heart that chafes against the confines of convention and is powerfully compelled toward a type of knowledge that has no national bounds.

In fact, the book addresses philosophic themes in an additional way: it seems designed to evoke, in the reader, the cosmopolitan urge that carried Rhédi and Rica so far from Persia. Beneath Montesquieu’s satirical take on French society is a universal enticement to readers to reach outside of convention in general. For instance, in letter 30, Rica describes how the French, upon learning that Rica is Persian, are inevitably struck with amazement: “if

by chance, someone in a group learned I was Persian, I heard at once a buzz all around me: ‘Ah! Ah! Monsieur is Persian? That is a very extraordinary thing! How can anyone be Persian?’” (30). The foil to the French mindset appears in the subsequent letter, where Rhédi explains that his time in Italy has allowed him to “com[e] out of the clouds that covered my eyes in the country of my birth” (31). Letters 30 and 31 present a pair of sharply diverging human possibilities: on one hand, there are the French, who have accepted, quite incorrectly, that their particular cultural horizon contains the sum of all human possibilities. On the other hand, there is Rhédi, who understands that he has been born with national prejudices and who strives to see beyond them. One shows the ridiculousness of accepting convention blindly, the other shows that one is not inevitably trapped within one’s conventional mindset: there is a way out of the cave. Together, these two letters comprise a call to action. The book gently invites all readers who live in the midst of societal conventions—which is to say, all readers—to examine our own provincial mindsets, to push aside the veil of convention which clouds our gaze.

In many ways, *Persian Letters* is a work that resists being summarized; ultimately, it must simply be read and enjoyed in all its richness. Warner and Douard’s excellent translation provides a new opportunity for English-language readers to experience Montesquieu’s literary masterpiece. It is to be hoped that other scholars will take up the baton offered up by Warner and Douard, and that such an outstanding translation will be matched by outstanding new interpretations of the work.