



Montesquieu
Persian Letters

A new translation by Margaret Mauldon

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



PERSIAN LETTERS

MONTESQUIEU was born Charles-Louis de Secondat in 1689 at the château of La Brède, south of Bordeaux. He was educated by the Oratoriens at the Collège de Juilly in Meaux and completed a law degree at the University of Bordeaux in 1708. After a few years in Paris he returned to Bordeaux in order to manage the family estates following the death of his father. He married Jeanne Lartigue, a practising Calvinist, with whom he had three children. In 1716 he joined the Academy of Bordeaux and was its director for the year in 1718. On the death of his uncle he inherited the title of baron de Montesquieu and the post of *président à mortier* at the Parlement of Bordeaux where he had begun his career in law. From an early age he manifested a ceaseless intellectual curiosity and devotion to extensive scholarship. He pursued through systematic investigation the numerous factors that shape societies and an understanding of them. In 1721 he published the *Persian Letters* (*Lettres persanes*) anonymously in Holland; his authorship, which became an open secret, gained him entry to the literary salons of Paris, where he lived from 1721 to 1725. Elected to the Académie Française in 1728, he sold his judicial office and travelled around Europe for three years. On his return he continued his scholarly research. His work on the ancient Romans addressed fundamental issues in the philosophy of history and prompted thinking about forms of government that would inform his later work. In 1748 his major work, *The Spirit of the Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*), was published in Geneva. Despite progressive eye-trouble, he published a *Defence of the Spirit of the Laws* in which he repudiated the allegation that he was a deist, and began work on 'An Essay on Taste' for Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. In 1754 he published an extensively revised version of the *Persian Letters*, acknowledging authorship for the first time. He died in Paris in 1755.

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MONTESQUIEU

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Translated by

MARGARET MAULDON

With an Introduction and Notes by

ANDREW KAHN

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INTRODUCTION

THE *Persian Letters* (*Lettres persanes*) is perhaps the first great popular work of the European Enlightenment. Conceived around 1717, it was published anonymously in 1721 and enjoyed immediate notoriety. The playwright Marivaux was critical of its 'false brilliance' about serious subjects, while the historian and journalist Denis-François Camusat applauded its brilliance but called the contents 'dangerous'. A cleric, stung by its critical attitude to religion, told Montesquieu that his book 'would sell like hot cakes'. The prediction was correct, and Montesquieu later noted that booksellers, eager to cash in, implored members of the public to 'write them some *Persian Letters*'. The original two slim volumes clearly caught the mood of the moment.

Montesquieu now stands as one of the great political thinkers of the modern world. His views on the nature of states and their constitutions had a tangible impact on the world around him. In Russia, Catherine the Great drew on his writing in her legislative reforms of the 1760s, and in America the Founding Fathers looked to his great *Spirit of the Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*, 1748) in framing their constitution for the new republic. When in the early twenty-first century pundits everywhere worry about the compatibility of Islam and the West, we see Montesquieu's name invoked in discussions about the banning of the headscarf in France, in editorials about the war in Iraq, and in polemics about the separation of powers in the United States.¹

Yet when encountered first in the 1720s, Montesquieu does not look like an obvious figure to anticipate the tireless scepticism of future *philosophes*. For one thing, they were from less privileged backgrounds, Voltaire the son of a bourgeois lawyer, Diderot the son of a provincial cutler. As an aristocratic landowner and magistrate, Montesquieu might rather have been expected to follow received wisdom about church and state, god and man. He began, however,

¹ See e.g. Michael Johnson, 'Revisiting the French Guru of American Democracy', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Mar. 2007.

by making waves, creating in the *Persian Letters* a style of philosophical fiction in which to pose a wide range of questions about human feeling, institutions, and societies. With typical understatement and irony, Montesquieu retrospectively commented that the *Persian Letters* ‘were pleasant and gay and were found pleasing for that reason’.² In fact, everything about this book is designed to surprise and even confound, and it made monarchy and religion the subject of rational enquiry rather than the objects of unquestioning acceptance. Of course, Montesquieu was hardly unique in questioning the precepts and role of Christianity in his time. But, for example, in having his Persian correspondents call the pope ‘a great magician’, he treated the state religion and sacraments with a new spirit of corrosive irony. Even the form is not what we expect. Novelistic without being a novel, the *Persian Letters* combines different modes and creates a new type of writing, which makes ideas come to life as part of the lived fabric of a fictional world. By comparing East and West, his oriental travellers reflect critical curiosity about human behaviour and social structures, turning a mirror both onto the world they left behind in the East and the world they newly encounter in Paris of the 1720s.

The World of the Regency

Montesquieu was born into the gloomy France of Louis XIV’s later years. At Versailles, the culture of the court had earlier flourished on a grand scale under the Sun King, but now Louis XIV’s devoutness cast a long shadow. Throughout the seventeenth century France had been constantly unsettled by international disputes and a punitive tax burden required to sustain the King’s European wars. Poor harvests in the 1690s and a devastating famine of 1707 fomented unrest among the peasantry. By the turn of the century a sense of stultification beset France at a moment when England, in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, enjoyed a burst of intellectual energy.

² Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1956), 122 (*Mes Pensées* no. 886 [1533]). *Mes Pensées* is the title given to the three large compositional notebooks in which Montesquieu (or his secretary) recorded ideas, aphorisms, thoughts on his reading, sometimes extensive drafts of his creative work. Montesquieu said that these were undeveloped thoughts on which he would meditate at a suitable occasion.

Toleration of the Protestant faith had been made the policy of the Catholic state as enshrined in the Edict of Nantes (1585), which ended the catastrophic Wars of Religion that convulsed France in the sixteenth century. Under pressure from the church and Jesuit thinkers, and bent on concentrating more and more power in his own hands, Louis revoked the edict in 1685. The immediate result was the flight of 200,000 Huguenots from France to the more tolerant England and the United Provinces. When Pope Clement XI, following the King's wishes, issued a Bull *Unigenitus* condemning Jansenism in 1714 this was regarded as a further disgraceful example of Christian intolerance.³ Other policies of a centralizing absolutism had provoked the dissatisfaction of aristocrats and the Parlements, the sovereign courts in Paris and the provinces, manned by the loftiest and wealthiest of the 'Robe' nobility (*noblesse de robe*). In 1673 the King withdrew the right of the Parlements to delay royal edicts, and further consolidated his power by appointing provincial *intendants* directly answerable to the King.

When Louis finally died in 1715 hopes were high for national revival. The King's nephew Philip of Orléans was installed as Regent during the minority of Louis XV. A flamboyant figure, the Regent was famous for a strong hedonistic streak and interest in the arts. His foreign policy was Anglophile, a sea-change that enhanced cultural contacts and affinities between the two nations. Montesquieu, for one, had a keen interest in the advances being made in English science and philosophy. Montesquieu's readership, which included nobles and magistrates, Jansenists and freethinkers, embraced the promise of renewal offered by the Regency.⁴ Even if the nobles made only modest headway in restraining the Regent's own absolutist tendency, later writers waxed nostalgic about a period they saw as distinguished by a new sense of freedom. Satirists mocked the Regent's love of luxury, but his patronage of the arts and his love of pleasure banished the prudishness of the previous reign. Although Voltaire

³ See John McManners, 'Jansenism and Politics in the Eighteenth Century', in Derek Baker (ed.), *Church, Society and Politics: Studies in French History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), esp. 253–67.

⁴ See Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), ch. 2.

landed in the Bastille in 1718, and Montesquieu was obliged to avoid the censure of the church by publishing the *Persian Letters* anonymously in Holland, the Regency gained a reputation for a new spirit of intellectual liberty. By accepting the dedication of an edition of Pierre Bayle's *Critical Dictionary* (*Dictionnaire critique*, 1709), the Regent communicated a new openness to a great Protestant thinker who was dedicated to religious toleration and the application of reason to theological enquiry.⁵

As a nobleman and *parlementaire*, Montesquieu was inclined by background to look warily on centralization by the King, and to value independence. In 1716 he began service as a magistrate in the Parlement of Bordeaux. He came of age in a world where scientific achievements and speculative philosophy, energized by the legacy of Descartes, were posing profound challenges to theology; and when the uncertainty created about the workings of the universe, its age, and size caused numerous thinkers to ponder the origins and practice of individual societies (allegorized in the celebrated fable of the Troglodytes in Letters 11 to 14).⁶ In 1694, shortly after Montesquieu's birth, the Académie Française published its dictionary in which the term *philosophe* is defined as 'a man who by liberty of spirit [*esprit*], stands above the normal duties and obligations of civic and Christian life. This is a man who refuses nothing, who is constrained by nothing, and who leads the life of the Philosopher.' By 1721 the 'New Philosophy', together with the rise of science—not least in the provincial academies such as Bordeaux, where Montesquieu was an active member—encouraged a belief among the relatively small educated public that the application of reason would lead to a better understanding of the natural world and society. Looking beyond their local domain, scientists and interested amateurs, who shared intellectual affinities, created an international network often referred to as the Republic of Letters. By the time he reached the age of 30, Montesquieu was one of this new generation of men immersed in the scientific spirit of the age. His membership of the Academy of

⁵ On Bayle and western tolerance towards Islam, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 615–20.

⁶ Alberto Postigliola, 'Montesquieu entre Descartes et Newton', in C. Volpilhac-Augier (ed.), *Montesquieu: les années de formation (1689–1720)*, *Cahiers Montesquieu*, 5 (1999), 91–108.

Bordeaux and adherence to the larger Republic of Letters make him a *philosophe*, and therefore a member of the group of men and women whose activities as writers, intellectuals, and propagandists contributed to the establishment of the Enlightenment as a movement committed to seeking the truth and to bettering life on earth. As a magistrate in the Parlement of Bordeaux, Montesquieu opposed clerical interference in politics (and traces of this hostility to Jesuit activism have been detected in the *Persian Letters*), and his interest in the links between religion, politics, and history—a curiosity that shapes the observations of his Persians—bore fruit in his early *Dissertation on the Politics of the Romans with respect to Religion*. Voltaire, in his story *Zadig* (1747), pithily captured the mentality of the age by saying of his hero that he was ‘happy because he possessed the style of reason’—a style which Montesquieu and the more enlightened figures of the *Persian Letters*, both western and Orientals, also possess.

The Regency lasted from September 1715 to February 1723. The narrative of the *Persian Letters* falls within those years, cast as a period of extremes in national spirits and fortunes. The fictional calendar of the text ends in 1720, only a year before the date of publication. The real world can occasionally be glimpsed in the letters when events like the death of Louis XIV (Letter 89) are noted. It has been remarked that Montesquieu had an advantage in creating foreign narrators, because their Parisian chronicle required a minimum of verisimilitude by comparison with the extensive description expected in travel accounts. Yet Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a famed observer of the East, observed that ‘Montesquieu, in his *Persian Letters*, has described the manners and customs of the Turkish ladies as well as if he had been bred up among them’. And if the lightness of touch means that the topography of East and West is spare, Montesquieu’s initial readers delighted in seeing parts of Paris—the rue Vivienne and the rue Quincampoix, the Palais-Royal, and the Café de la Régence (immortalized in Diderot’s dialogue *Rameau’s Nephew*)—strongly associated with the Regency. The effect is to stress the luxury and opulence of Paris as the new focus of attention after the decline of Versailles as the royal seat; and to draw attention to cultural and intellectual spheres, where the arts of conversation and refinement are on display. The austerity of the old regime had given way under Philippe to a delight in sexual pleasure

and depicting the erotic. The Persians arrive in Paris just as the elite become enticed by a culture of seduction in which sophisticated role-playing and subtle rules of social comportment shape behaviour. Topical comments about passion and jealousy (Letter 26), the nature of beauty (Letter 32), courtesans (Letters 26 and 55), adultery and divorce (Letters 53 and 113) capture an ethos of libertinism and gallantry explored in the fictions of the younger Crébillon in the 1730s and staged in the plays of Marivaux, and soon to be graphically depicted by Watteau, Fragonard, and Boucher. Such letters are set in striking juxtaposition with the travellers' own sexual politics in their letters about virginity (Letter 56), the comportment of widows (Letter 120), the capacity of eunuchs to experience sexual jealousy (Letter 51), and, most remarkably, the tale of the incestuous love of the siblings Apheridon and Astarte (Letter 65) that anticipates Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1771), the greatest Enlightenment text on this taboo. Serious-minded as they are, Usbek and Rica move from questions of individual sexual behaviour to questions of national interest and a broader web of connections linking local values and global trends. By speculating (Letters 110 to 120) on the impact of monogamy and polygamy on population growth in Muslim and Catholic countries, they arrive at a critique of colonialism, which in their view undermines the growth of conqueror and conquered. The workings of colonialism and money were a practical as well as theoretical matter in the Regency. For colonialism fuelled the speculative bubble engineered by the Scotsman John Law, the controller-general of the Bank of France, who sold shares backed by putative future profits from France's holdings in Louisiana. Irrational exuberance gripped speculators, and the collapse of his 'System' wiped out individual fortunes and virtually emptied the state's coffers.

The travellers' interrogation of social custom, politics, religious practice, and ecclesiastical authority bespeaks a positive belief in the power of critical examination to better their world. In the nine years during which the two principal travellers, Usbek and Rica, live in Paris, they experience two governments and three currency revaluations, events which sharpen their sense of uncertainty. In the 1750s, when Montesquieu published a new and substantially revised edition of the *Persian Letters* (see the Note on the Text), he had mixed feelings about the Regency, calling its failed projects, its attempts at

systems, a 'formless blend of weakness and authority' that was nothing more than a 'beautiful spectacle'. The device of balancing fictional foreground and historical backdrop enabled Montesquieu to reach beyond satire of the immediate context. The sense of historical change just outside the fictional frame adds to the impression that individual fates are inseparable from the national and institutional histories and their instabilities. The delayed news of Roxane's tragedy and the collapse of his eastern world reaches Usbek at precisely the moment when the French state is rocked by financial collapse. If their experiences reflect an element of gloom on Montesquieu's part about France's immediate political prospects, the travellers' energy and openness in recording their experiences still record a positive attitude to the progress Montesquieu sees as possible in an age committed to rational values.

A Novel Form

The *Persian Letters* are often called a novel, but the label is not necessarily an apt one. What would Montesquieu have understood by the term 'novel'? Eighteenth-century neoclassicism favoured the epic poem and the theatre, while the novel remained a less well-defined genre practised outside the control of the academic sphere and its expectations. In the multi-volume romance favoured by aristocratic women writers of the second half of the seventeenth century, it was love and sensibility that made the world go round. The chivalric values of the aristocracy imbued the seventeenth-century adventure novel, which was made up of semi-mythical heroic encounters, escapist plots, and exotic settings. But our modern view of the novel emerges not from these earlier traditions, but rather from some major eighteenth-century works marked by an increase in psychological plausibility and sense of social realism, features that made Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1730) an important step in this direction.⁷

⁷ See Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), vol.1: *History, Geography and Culture*; and Jenny Mander (ed.), *Remapping the Rise of the Novel* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007). On the development of the English novel and its great variety, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Novel Beginnings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

In 1717 Montesquieu's approach to the genre is in the nature of an experiment—indeed, some would argue that Montesquieu was not originally intending to write a novel at all. His book takes the form of a correspondence centred around two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, who are travelling through France. The attraction of an epistolary form lay in its flexibility and openness of plot, structural variety, and capacity for multiple discourses. Although epistolary fictions did exist, and often their subject-matter was exotic, such masterpieces of the genre as Richardson's *Pamela* (1740–1) and *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747–8), Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) had yet to be written. Montesquieu would later claim that he was the first to teach 'how to write a novel in letters', but he did not invent the epistolary correspondence as a literary form. Gabriel Guilleragues's *Portuguese Letters* (1685) first established the letter-form as a type of narrative fiction. Among Montesquieu's models the most interesting is *Letters Written by a Turkish Spy* (1684). Attributed to Giovanni Paolo Marana, the novel's dedication presents it as a genuine translation from the Arabic of a work written in 1683 by one Mahmoud, an agent of the Porte stationed in Paris for forty-five years. The letters present a one-dimensional narrator, as rigid in his loyalty to his faith and masters as Usbek and Rica are by comparison flexible and questioning. And while Montesquieu shares more common ground with Marana than has been acknowledged—in particular, the latter's interest in the scientific and philosophical questions of the Enlightenment have been underestimated—the narrative focuses mainly on diplomatic and military issues.

At the same time Montesquieu was also drawn to the new form of the periodical, that was having a sensational success as best represented by Addison's *The Spectator* (and imitated in France by Marivaux). The emergence of periodicals in England implied a new readership and sphere of debate. While the public sphere was emerging more slowly in Paris, there was such a readership, as Rica observes in Letter 124 (and see Appendix, p. 235). The periodical made it possible to discuss serious things in what Dr Johnson called the 'middle style', that is, in a conversational tone of voice. To this style, Montesquieu joined the exotic visitor and the intellectual preoccupations of Bayle, while also looking back to the seventeenth-century moralist tradition and the study of types that he learned from La Bruyère's satirical portraits in his *Characters* (1688).

While Montesquieu follows Marana's example of the foreign observer embedded in a new culture, Usbek and Rica owe their tone of humour and sophistication to the model set by Joseph Addison's Mr Spectator. The Addisonian speaker instructs by entertaining, provoking, charming, and puzzling. Like the articles in *The Spectator*, the chapters of the *Persian Letters* often begin as vignettes before advancing to a more general, abstract level of discourse, and they fold journalistic observation of current events into an essayistic style written in the neutral middle register. Their diction is the educated speech of polite society. Coupled with the multiple perspectives in which the epistolary novel excelled, the elegance of Montesquieu's fleetly punctuated and conversational style represents an innovation. Some twenty different voices can be heard in the *Letters*, including the travellers, friends, Muslim clergy, and eunuchs. The use of the letter-form means that the writer is freed from the essayist's obligation to engage in thorough argumentation and exposition of a topic, and can therefore sound more chatty. When Montesquieu wishes to increase the degree of amusement and satire, he stages scenes as in a comedy. And when he wishes to underscore emotional drama, he shows equal facility in using a tragic register.

The type of organic growth that we expect from fictional characters is not a fundamental part of Montesquieu's understanding of how the novel works. Nonetheless, the letters are often psychologically revealing, showing shifting attitudes juxtaposed with inflexibility on certain points. This openness to experience seems to reflect Montesquieu's interest in John Locke's empiricism.⁸ Nothing in the *Persian Letters* suggests that he wishes us to believe that ideas are innate to the human soul. If anything, the experience of the travellers, whose spirit of discovery causes them to question the religious and domestic practices of their native Persia, suggests that part of their mission is to approach the world in the spirit of a Lockean epistemology, where sensation is seen as the basis of all ideas. Formed by other cultures and experiences, Usbek and Rica are hardly blank slates; yet they possess the sensibility to experience the new and the

⁸ Edwin Curley, 'From Locke's Letter to Montesquieu's *Lettres*', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 26: 1 (2002), 280–306.

rational means to assess how it challenges the values they hold. With the exception of faith, what they know depends on their experience of the outside world and does not come from within. At the same time, the presence of two main letter-writers constantly varies the perspective, and events prompt both to considerations that lay bare their individual psychologies in their reaction to a new environment. The usual critical tendency to see Rica as superficial and Usbek as morose and profound is too simple. They both exhibit qualities of intelligence, but their modes of observation are different. Rica's characteristic approach is to channel his bemusement and surprise through anecdote, often deflecting conclusions through wit. Without pointing the moral of his stories, he leaves it to the addressee of his letters and the reader to ask the necessary questions. While there are a number of letters where Usbek works inductively from his empirical observations to more abstract questions, it is more often the case that he begins with a general proposition and organizes his narrative to corroborate his view. Usbek's identity develops through a double procedure. We understand him through letters that treat his relationship to the institutions of his home culture; through letters that capture his naive and then increasingly sophisticated perspective on French manners, customs, and institutions; and through the letters to the seraglio which capture an emotional self over which he has seemingly little control.

Questions about the sources of individual identity, whether approached in essentialist terms or in terms of cultural determination, are raised over and over again. The *Persian Letters* does not offer a conclusive verdict, because its aim is to pose the question. A Persian can play at being both a Frenchman—and, surprisingly, a Persian. In Letter 28 Rica recounts how his Persian dress made him an object of fascination in Paris, to the point that:

old men, young men, women, children, they all wanted to see me; if I went out, everyone crowded at the windows; if I went walking in the Tuileries, I would instantly find a circle forming round me; even the ladies encircled me with a rainbow of a thousand delicate shades; if I went to a theatre I would immediately be conscious of a hundred lorgnettes focused on my face; in a word, no man has ever been seen as much as me. It sometimes made me smile, to hear people who had scarcely ever ventured from their chambers saying to one another: 'One must admit he looks very Persian!'

Such celebrity inspires an experiment. Shedding his Persian costume, he dresses as a Parisian and now fails to persuade anyone who will listen that he is the same fascinating foreigner. Rica also finds himself in a position to see the question of identity through the eyes of a Frenchman. Letter 52 is one of the most theatrical in the entire work. Rica sets the scene in the first paragraph, as he describes a conversation overheard from the neighbouring room. The story concerns a man who has fallen on hard times and can no longer cut the figure of an *honnête homme* or gentleman in society. He catalogues the defining qualities of the Parisian ‘bel esprit’:

‘I must say, the reputation of being a wit is very difficult to maintain; I don’t know how you have managed it.’ ‘I’ve had an idea,’ said the other man, ‘let’s work together on being witty; we’ll team up to do it; every day we’ll agree what we’re going to talk about, and we’ll be such a help to one another that if someone comes and interrupts us in the middle of our thoughts we’ll get him to join us, and if he won’t come willingly we’ll make him; we’ll agree on where to show approval, and where to smile; on other places where we should really laugh, laugh heartily; you’ll see, we’ll set the tone for all the conversations, and we’ll be admired for our razor-sharp wit and the felicity of our repartee; we’ll protect one another with prearranged signals; today you’ll shine, tomorrow you’ll support me; I’ll arrive at a house with you, and exclaim, gesturing towards you: “I must tell you a very funny reply that M. just made to a man we met in the street,” and I’ll turn to you: “He wasn’t expecting it, it certainly took him aback.” . . . So, my friend, that’s how to go about it; you do what I tell you, and I promise you a seat in the Academy before six months are out; in other words, you won’t have to work for long, because you can then abandon your study of the art; you’ll be a wit no matter what you do.’

The performance displays conviction in the notion that only appearance is authenticity. This Parisian is no more a native of his world than Rica, unless he can satisfy social expectations of his identity. At the end of the letter Rica observes that, in France, ‘as soon as a man joins an association, he immediately acquires what is termed *esprit de corps*’. If clothing and manners make the external man, will the inner man change to follow suit? This remains an open question, left for the characters and reader alike to ponder.

Irony affords a sense of distance from the France under observation, while a feeling of erotic anxiety makes Persia feel near. During the nine years that Usbek spends in France the largest number of letters that he receives are from the harem: there are eleven from his

wives, five from the chief eunuch, and six from others in the seraglio. He is portrayed in these letters as being unable to transfer his new-found views on the question of women's emancipation to the situation of his own wives, who even in the absence of their lord and master remain abject slaves of their eunuch guardians, deprived of rights and in a state of virtual incarceration (on which see the Appendix, pp. 240–3). In counterpoint to the conversational tone that Usbek and Rica maintain, the language of the correspondence between Usbek and residents of the seraglio is highly dramatic. In letters to the chief eunuch and his subordinate, Usbek becomes another person: he commands and brusquely threatens all his wives, apart from Roxane.

By the time Montesquieu produced a revised edition in 1754, with eleven new letters, the novel as a genre was well established. In this context the original Regency work looked old-fashioned alongside fictions where plot drove the narrative. Keen to gain a second success on these new terms and to deflect criticism, yet at pains to minimize the obviousness of any changes, Montesquieu offered a new interpretative key in 'Some Reflections on the *Persian Letters*'. He claimed that 'Nothing has given readers of the *Persian Letters* greater pleasure than finding, without expecting to, a kind of novel in it . . . These passages are invariably associated with a feeling of surprise and amazement, and never with any idea of scrutiny, even less with that of criticism.' In adjusting the order of the letters and supplementing it with new letters that reinforced the plot-line, Montesquieu aimed to realign his fiction with new conventions and to underscore the drama of the seraglio, Usbek's loss of control and blindness about the degree of rebellion and disenchantment. He called this the 'secret chain' that linked the disparate letter-writers of his work, and their diverse subjects.

Although the *Persian Letters* has traditionally been read in French (and in English translation) in this later version, encrusted with the older writer's changes, the present translation, for the first time in English, gives the initial version as it was first read in the 1720s. In both texts the major plot-line of the book is built on the episodic exchanges of these letters about the seraglio. But in the original text they are interspersed within the travel narrative at such irregular intervals that the building suspense might go unnoticed were it not for the arrival of urgent news almost at the end of the book, where we

are reminded that even in his absence Usbek remains an actor on a different stage. In the original edition Usbek's final letter to his wives, enjoining them to show obedience, is sent on 4 October 1719. Written with anxious urgency, Usbek's appeal goes unanswered until Roxane writes on 2 March 1720 to describe the chaos of the rebellion. Letters 143 and 149, reporting on the complete breakdown of order in the seraglio, come twenty months after Usbek wrote Letter 63 ordering that measures be taken to end the chaos. Roxane's final letter, in which she exposes her own role in the revolt and declares her intention to commit suicide, is written on 8 May 1720, and will reach Usbek long after she has killed herself. While the 1754 text adds letters in order to bolster the seraglio intrigue, arguably the effect of the revolt is more dramatic in the earlier version because it is more sudden and violent. Turning-points, while prepared for, can only be spotted with hindsight. Montesquieu uses the time-lag between Usbek's sending and receiving letters to create a sense of helplessness: the characters' emotions escalate, but their reactions cannot be synchronized, and their passions dictate their fates.

In this respect Montesquieu learned much from neoclassical stage technique, and especially from the timing and reversals that create tension in Racine's tragedy *Bajazet* (1672). Set in the East, the play concerns an adulterous hero and heroine (the latter shares her name with Usbek's wife Roxane) whose fate depend entirely on the absent emperor Bajazet: if he perishes in battle they are safe, if he returns victorious then false friend and unfaithful wife will pay with their lives. An unreliable rumour from the battlefield arrives, keeping the protagonists on edge (and spectators in suspense) until Bajazet's unexpected and late return seals their doom. Montesquieu's final letters stand in stark contrast with the urbane tone maintained for most of the work, and with the deceptive earlier reports that allayed Usbek's fears of Roxane's restiveness. The unexpectedness of the revelations, together with their bluntness, create a stunning *coup de théâtre* at the end. If the travellers in their letters attempt to penetrate the appearance of French polite society, Usbek's letters to the seraglio perpetuate the performance that he must maintain according to the sexual politics of the harem. In the final letters, where a genuine voice of unvarnished emotion speaks, all pretence of deference and subservience vanish. Where so many of the earlier letters

concerned the institutions of a newly explored civilization, these later ones convey the breakdown of the order Usbek took for granted. When Usbek defends suicide in Letter 74 as a legitimate choice—a position that was regarded as heretical by the church and therefore as a provocation on Montesquieu's part—it is without any foresight into the outcome of his own affairs. At the end Usbek scales the heights of reproach and anger as he fathoms the extent of the unrest in the harem. In Letter 148 Roxane writes that 'Horror, darkness, and terror hold sway in the seraglio'; she, too, speaks as a character from a tragedy. Only the reader is in a position to appreciate the dramatic irony created by the juxtaposition of the suicide and Usbek's earlier views.

Montesquieu and Orientalism

'Orientalism' has been a productive, if contentious, critical term since the appearance in 1978 of Edward Said's influential analysis. In his view, Orientalism is an imperial discourse devised by colonial powers, which extended their hegemony by casting the Orient as a world of inimical and alien values that needed to be civilized and tamed. Debate over Said's argument has generated important criticism and corrections to a picture that, while stimulating and conscience-raising, was distorted by tendentiousness.⁹ Although his account begins with the seventeenth century, the real starting-point of his views on the literary and historiographical treatment of the East and its peoples is the later history of nineteenth-century European empires. Reactions to Said's description continue to produce a more balanced picture of a long tradition of serious study of the Orient by explorers, ethnographers, philologists, and anthropologists who anticipated and then sometimes accompanied colonial expansion without necessarily being supporters of an imperialist ideology. From the seventeenth century, the expansion of trade with the East paved the way for travel writers who provided highly detailed accounts of oriental civilization, most specifically its Turkish and Persian variants. Barthelemy d'Herbelot's enormous *Bibliothèque*

⁹ See Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), esp. ch. 9; and Maya Jasanoff, 'Before and After Said', *London Review of Books*, 8 June 2006, pp. 14–15.

orientale (1697) provided a cultural handbook to the East culled from a wide range of sources. Despite Said's polemical exaggerations, not all Orientalists or Orientalisms were implicitly racist or tainted by the hegemonic culture's sense of superiority. Montesquieu himself does not fit easily into Said's paradigm. While he does play to popular perceptions of a brutal and uncultivated Orient, it is only to bring out the parallels more forcefully. An enlightened sensitivity to the distinctive shape and histories of other cultures informed his *Spirit of the Laws*, a seminal comparative study of systems of government and perhaps the most influential work of political and social theory to come out of the Enlightenment. Without being normative or prescriptive, Montesquieu famously argued that nations, governments, and peoples were the product of their environment.

Yet, whether or not we subscribe to the view that a colonialist ideology pervades all representations of this other, Eastern world, Said nonetheless provided a valuable service in focusing attention on the inescapable fact that a particular image of the East crystallized in the minds of writers and readers of Montesquieu's lifetime. No matter how scientific the observations of travel writing could be, from the early eighteenth century the Orient appears as a place of fabulous luxury and sensuous delight in fiction, painting, and the decorative arts. Antoine Galland's sensational and highly popular French version of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704–17) cast a spell. The compendious anthology of Scheherazade's tales fixed standard features of this orientalist mirage, from the image of grand vizirs to the odalisques of Ingres in the nineteenth century. Harems, eunuchs, secret apartments, and seductive visions were only extreme manifestations of the Regency's delight in pleasure. Hot on Galland's coat-tails, Louis XIV's expert on the East, Pétis de la Croix, published two further original collections that were sold as translations, *The History of the Sultan of Persia and his Vizirs* (1707) and *A Thousand and One Days, Persian Tales* (1710–12).

The discovery of the East created an intellectual need to re-evaluate the West. Travel—or at least the virtual travel of fiction—was not in one direction. Real-life visits by foreign travellers also had a powerful mystique. While a Turkish ambassador's appearance at the court embassy to Louis XIV proved to be a diplomatic fiasco, the occasion mesmerized writers and painters with an eye for the exotic. Several contemporary authors anticipated Montesquieu in making

their Orientals go west. Charles Dufresnay's *Serious and Comic Pleasures of a Siamese in Paris* (1707) was light on philosophy but generous in Watteauesque tableaux of pleasures. But other works, such as J. F. Bernard's *Moral, Comic and Satirical Reflections on the Manners of our own Century* (1711) and J. Bonnet's *Letter Written to Musala Concerning the Manners and Religion of the French* (1716), turn to the foreign traveller as a satirical commentator on local society. In the main, these writers played up the more sensational stereotypes of the East as the antithesis of western values. Their fictional Orient is a world where corruption and absolutism reign, where women, relegated to the seraglio, are oppressed, where luxury on an unprecedented scale saps moral strength. Such decadent visions undoubtedly encouraged among moralists of the eighteenth century and the Victorian period the disapproval Said associated with western discourse on the Asiatic. But for Montesquieu's readership, the escapism of the Orient appealed as part of the pleasure of literature.

We can only guess at the precise impulse that led Montesquieu to conceive his oriental fiction. Montaigne's reputation had lapsed during the height of French classicism, and he ceased to be reprinted for about fifty years from the 1670s; but, as we know from his notebooks, Montesquieu read and esteemed him and would certainly have known Montaigne's great essay *On Cannibals* of 1580. There he created a naive perspective from which to illuminate 'the opinions and customs of the country we live in', showing the 'savage' to be civilized and throwing the very meaning of 'civilized' into question. This was a clear influence. But Montesquieu's imagination may have been more immediately stimulated by a footnote in the *Critical Dictionary* in which Bayle wondered what the effect would be if a work written by a westerner attempted to convey the views of a Japanese or Chinese traveller who had lived in the great cities of Europe. It is equally possible that the figure of the philosophical traveller originates with an event recorded in the pages of Joseph Addison's *Spectator*. In April 1710 four Iroquois chiefs visited London on a mission for aid in their struggle against the French in Canada. Their appearance aroused public curiosity and also captivated the imagination of Addison, who in *The Spectator* provided a description of the sights of London and the mores of the English as seen through their foreign gaze. In *The Spectator* (No. 50, April 1711) Addison produced a cultural commentator and satirist of

western institutions in the fictional figure of Sa Ga Yean Qua Rash Tow, the visiting emperor of the Iroquois Indians and author of a satirical letter that was translated into French in 1714.¹⁰ Through their naive perspective, where facts were only half-understood or comically reproduced, the Iroquois offered English readers a different perspective on the political circumstance and cultural landscape of their country. Addison puts the technique of defamiliarization, where what we know is described in simpler terms as something alien, to good use. The Iroquois gather that two 'kinds of Animal', namely, Whig and Tory, are important; they wonder at the size of St Paul's and its religious purpose; and comment on the performance of a preacher or 'Man in Black who was mounted above the rest, and seemed to utter something with a great deal of Vehemence' (Jonathan Swift, who had hatched his own plan to write a work of *Indian Letters*, regretted sharing the idea with Addison who was quicker into print). Addison's account was a gift to an ironist like Montesquieu, and in the *Persian Letters* he launched the career of a new type of narrator who would be a mainstay of classic Enlightenment fictions like Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* (1734), Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762), and Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1771).

Montesquieu's Orientalism does not fall precisely into the style of writing about the Orient that was immediately available. The vogue for the Orient was inseparable from its image as a place of marvellous storytelling. By contrast, the *Persian Letters* scarcely indulge this tendency, with few tales spun solely for the sake of entertainment. Montesquieu's scrupulous attention to descriptive detail is not about realism. It attests to the sensitivity of the historian and student of cultures determined to create out of the novel a plausible narrative vehicle for the philosophical questions he wishes his readers to consider. In his descriptions of Islam, the seraglio, and even in the chronology of the Persians' outward journey Montesquieu drew on documentary descriptions. The most important accounts were by the explorers Jean Chardin (*Journeys in Persia*, 1711) and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (*The Six Journeys of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier . . . in Turkey, in Persia and in the Indies*, 1719). The travellers' itinerary is based on

¹⁰ Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), i. 211–15 (no. 50).

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