



The Persian Letters

Montesquieu

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Persian Letters is a literary work, written in 1721, by Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, recounting the experiences of two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, who are traveling through France.

The Persian Letters Details

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From Reader Review The Persian Letters for online ebook

El says

This book, "a sort of novel", is an epistolary story of two Persian travelers, Usbek and Rica, who travel to Europe. Usbek leaves behind five wives and a handful of eunuchs to watch over them. The letters are sent from and to a variety of the people, and each of them reflect on some form of culture, whether the men's perspective of Western civilization or Usbek's wives' opinions on their own society and their place within it.

What makes this particularly interesting for me is that while the novel is meant to be a satire (and I haven't had much luck with the "genre" - boo on *Candide*!) there is an extensive amount of information about Paris in the early eighteenth century and the end of Louis XIV's reign as seen through the eyes of Persian men and women. Discussion of sexual freedom, religion, government, marriage, suicide, etc. are covered, all of which is detailed in these letters from each of the characters, giving a nicely rounded vision of important issues in two very different societies.

This was a great read with *plenty* of notes on the text and appendices in the back of the book shedding light on some of the more obscure points and references made by Montesquieu.

Wayland says

Actual rating: 3.5/5

Alan says

A remarkable book. Its topics read as if written in 2010: Persian/ "Iranian" Islam trying to convert Armenian Christians and Zoroastrians because of the new Shah's edict. Hence, all the Armenians fled, emptying with a stroke of the pen "all the skilled workmen, and all the businessmen of Persia."

Then there are the gender issues, letters written by favorite wives in the seraglio to their husband in Paris; or, the chief eunuch's letters on the difficulty of guarding the seraglio, especially Roxanne. Then there's the historical, comparatist reflections, say on slavery in Rome versus slaves guarding the seraglio. Roman slaves were very productive, and could grow very rich: from tours of Roman tombs and Neapolitan tombs from the Roman era, I know this to be true; their wealth sometimes grew because Senators, for example, were debarred from money-making except as land-owners and patrons.

One of the fictitious letter-writers compares Roman slaves in their industry and eventual wealth--enough to buy their and their families' freedom--to the lazy luxuriousness of Persian slaves whose only "job" is to guard the seraglio.

This is a stunner, to read a work from 60 years before the Declaration of Independence that addresses many issues that populate our evening news, as well as some issues (Roman slavery) that would be discussed if we TV watchers were smarter.

The reflections on religion are astute and timeless. For instance,

"It is observable, that the members of the minority religions commonly make themselves more useful to their country, than those of the established religion; because, being excluded from all honours, they can only render themselves considerable by their opulence; they are led to acquire it by their industry, and to embrace

the most toilsome employments in the society." What better argument for varieties of religions, and against majority religions, whether Islam in Iran or Evangelicalism in the US?

Justin Evans says

The nice thing about reading early 'novels' is that they so often have nothing in common with a typical contemporary novel. That's definitely the case for PL, of which only the first dozen and the last half dozen pages are connected in any kind of narrative. Not only that, the narrative is immensely dull, unless you're the sort of person who gets off on descriptions of Harem life. Such people are, I'm sure, less common now than they were in the 18th century. A general warning: if you're prone to crying with rage any time a European shows curiosity in Oriental (sic) culture, you'll have to be very, very careful with this book. Some of it smacks of crazy ethnocentrism. On the other hand, the book is much more critical of French society than it is of 'Persian' society.

The meat of the book consists in letters written to and from various 'Persians,' seeing France and some other parts of Europe for the first time. Like all good satire, it takes the normal (well, normal for 18th century French novel readers), views it from another perspective, and finds it to be both hilarious and horrifying. If you've read other 18th century moralists, you'll know what to expect: freedom, intelligence, stoicism, nature good; tyranny, love of money, theology bad.

But I oversimplify, because easily the best thing about the book is how free-floating it is. I found it virtually impossible to tell when Montesquieu wanted his authors to agree with the letter writers and when to disagree. Which had the awful, depressing effect of making me think about things. For that I knock off two stars, because thinking about things is way too hard work for me.

Ceyda says

Kadın-erkek, din ve siyaset konuları üzerinde yoğunlaştırmış, dönemine göre oldukça özgün okunmaya değer bir kitabı bir kitap.

Mohammadjavad Abbasi says

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Laurence R. says

Lecture extrêmement intéressante. La figure de l'étranger dans la littérature du XVIII^e siècle m'intéresse beaucoup et j'ai aimé celle du Persan dans ce roman épistolaire!

Ahmed says

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Ali says

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Hadrian says

An epistolary book, perhaps a novel, of some one hundred fifty-odd letters of a Persian travelers to France during the time of King Louis XIV and Louis XV and what they find.

They find much to write about. Montesquieu, through them, gives free reign to writing about government, conflict between church and state, coffee salons, fashion trends, monasticism, social services, the reigns of the kings, and so on. Scattered between these letters are complaints from the eunuchs back home about the

instability of the harems, and their eventual dissolution.

With that, there are too many ways to read these letters. Are they a classical satire of king, religion, and country, enough to get Montesquieu in trouble? (He makes sure to get a good joke in at the late Sun King's expense). Is it a study of the 'exotic' and foreign harem and the treatment of women in society, just enough to see what his beliefs and prejudices are? Is it a distant relative of classical humanism? It's been almost three hundred years since this was published. There are likely books about all of these perspectives already.

Jim says

Montesquieu may not be known to you, but he is largely responsible for the system of checks and balances in the U.S. Constitution between the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of government. The Founding Fathers of our country were deeply influenced by Montesquieu's **The Spirit of the Laws**, which he wrote later in life.

The Persian Letters, however, was written a quarter century earlier and was one of the most popular books of its time. Montesquieu has, in effect, created an epistolary novel about two Persians who spend some ten years in Europe from 1711-1720, closely observing the strangeness of French institutions and customs from the point of view of Persians of the time.

It was a rough time in France, roughly comparable to our own recession due to the Mississippi Bubble and the "system" of John Law, who had been appointed Controller General of Finances of France under King Louis XV. Law was brilliant but exceedingly unorthodox, with the result that many fortunes were lost. In Letter 146, the narrator Usbek writes:

I saw contractual honour dismissed, the most sacred conventions annihilated, every law of the family overthrown. I saw debtors full of avarice, proud and insolent in their poverty, worthless instruments of the ferocity of the law and the harshness of the time, pretending to pay their debts, not doing so, but stabbing their benefactors instead.

More shamefully still, I saw others buying notes for almost nothing, or rather picking up oak-leaves from the ground and putting them in the place of the subsistence of widows and orphans.

I saw an insatiable lust for money suddenly springing up in every heart. I saw the instantaneous development of a hateful conspiracy to get rich, not by honourable work and unstinting behaviour, but by ruining the king, the state and other citizens.

At the same time that Usbek is observing France, we are observing his seraglio back in Persia falling to pieces, as his prolonged absence from his wives results in the disorder of his married life.

This is an interesting book to dip into from time to time, not only to see what was troubling France in the early 1700s, but to see a highly original mind at work with a penetrating intellect in matters relating to culture and governance.

Algernon says

How to sell a book 300 years old to a modern reader? What is the appeal today of the epistolary musings of a couple of Oriental travellers having a first contact with Western civilization at the end of King Louis the 14th? Here are some points that I hope will tickle your interest:

1 - The Persian Letters were not written as history, but as a contemporary satire of French civilization, using ridicule and common sense to expose the more unsavoury mentalities and practices of fellow countrymen. Think of Montesquieu as the 1721 version of The Colbert Report or The Daily Show:

I saw a survey here on Goodreads asking what I would do if I had a time machine. One answer would be to go back to early 18 century, pick up Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brede et de Montesquieu, and bring him back to 2012 to do a tour of the talk shows. I'm sure he would be quite at ease and dazzling in his commentaries.

2. According to political scientist Donald Lutz, Montesquieu was the most frequently quoted authority on government and politics in colonial pre-revolutionary British America, cited more by the American founders than any source except for the Bible. So, if you are not ready to tackle his magnum opus (**De l'esprit des lois**), you might check this lighter material first, one that incorporates the basic tenets of his philosophy in a more entertaining format. Here's a quote that might feel familiar:

All the people of Europe are not equally subject to their princes: for instance, the impatient humour of the English seldom give their king time to make his power heavy. Passive obedience and non-resistance are no virtues in their esteem. They say upon this head very extraordinary things. According to them, there is but one tie that can bind men, which is that of gratitude: a husband, a wife, a father and son, are not bound to each other, but either by the love they bear to one another, or by mutual services: and these different motives of acknowledgment are the origin of every kingdom, and of all societies. But if a prince, very far from making his subjects live happy, endeavours to oppress and ruin them, the foundation of obedience ceases; nothing ties them, nothing attaches them to him, and they return to their natural liberty.

Letter CIV

3. At the time of its publication, The Persian Letters had a success comparable to Twilight and Harry Potter, spawning countless imitations. While it is not technically the first novel to be written entirely in epistolary form, it was the one that made the biggest splash. Some of the appeal may have been in the piquant details about life in a harem (quite tame by modern standards) or in trying to identify the local celebrities lampooned in the text. But I believe the major selling point was the outsider view, the contact of two civilizations that have evolved on parallel tracks : Persian and French. Given that today we see a lot of willful misunderstandings and distortions about the Muslim versus the Christian heritage, a lecture of the attitudes held by both the Frenchmen and the Orientals might show we were more tolerant three centuries ago.

4. Montesquieu is one of the founding members of the Enlightenment movement, a firm believer in progress, education, science, diversity, justice and the basic decency of humans in their natural state. The parable of the Troglodites in one of the first letters illustrate this point of the difference between a society built solely on greed and one built on respect, fairness, moral rectitude, hard work.

5. You can start a lively debate with direct appliance to the modern day from any of his letters on such diverse subjects as:

- world demographic evolution (Letter CXXX and onward),
- the distribution of wealth (Letter XCVIII),
- economic theory (Letter CVI)
- science as the new religion (Letter XCVII),

- creationism (Letter CXIII)
- religious tolerance (Letter LX)
- good governance (Letter LXXX)
- celibacy (Letter CXVII)
- the right to take your own life (didn't note the number of this letter)
- polygamy (Letter CXIV)
- divorce (Letter CXVI)
- modesty (Letter CXLIV)
- and so on ...

6. While Montesquieu doesn't take a clear stance on women liberation and the injustice of locking them in gilded cages, reading between the lines of the letters dealing directly with Uzbek and his five wives, and considering the final outcome of trying to impose authority from a distance, using brute force, he could still be considered one of the first authors to speak up against genre discrimination.

Before I get to the numerous quotes I selected from the text, I should say a few words about why I didn't give the book the maximum rating, and why it may not work for anyone. The language, especially in the first 20 or 30 letters is archaic, chockfull of thee, thy, art, mayest, sayest, etc. I got used to it eventually and stopped noticing the dusty style about a third of the way in. And for readers who expect a plot, characterization, action: this is not it. Excluding the harem pieces, most of the book is in essays and satirical pieces.

First quote is about curiosity and a thirst for knowledge:

They who love to inform themselves, are never idle. Though I have no business of consequence to take care of, I am nevertheless continually employed. I spend my life in examining things: I write down in the evening whatever I have remarked, what I have seen, and what I have heard in the day: every thing engages my attention, and every thing excites my wonder: I am like an infant, whose organs, as yet tender, are strongly affected by the slightest objects.

Letter XLVIII

Next, one about the anti-intellectual attitude:

With regard to those who take pride in their ignorance, they would willingly have all mankind buried in that oblivion to which they are themselves consigned. When a man is destitute of any particular talent, he indemnifies himself, by expressing his contempt for it;

Letter CXLV

A plea for religious pluralism:

I know not, Mirza, but it may be good for a state, that there should be several religions in it. It is observable, that the members of the tolerated religions commonly make themselves more useful to their country, than those of the established religion; because, being excluded from all honours, they can only render themselves considerable by their opulence; they are led to acquire it by their industry, and to embrace the most toilsome employments in the society. Besides, as all religions contain precepts useful to society, it is good that they should be observed with zeal.

Letter LXXXV

Once more, for religious tolerance:

I acknowledge that history is full of religious wars; but we must take care to observe, it was not the multiplicity of religions that produced these wars, it was the intolerating spirit which animated that which thought she had the power of governing. It was the spirit of proselytism, which the Jews contracted from the Egyptians, and which from them hath passed, like an epidemic and popular disease, to Mahometans and

Christians. It is, in short, the spirit of enthusiasm, the progress of which can be considered only as a total eclipse of human reason. [...] He who would have me change my religion, no doubt, desires me to do so, because he would not change his own if he was forced to it: he yet thinks it strange, that I will not do a thing which he himself would not do, perhaps, for the empire of the world.

Letter LXXXV

One quote that prefigures the principles that lead to the United Nations:

It seems, Rhedi, there are two kinds of justice entirely different, one which regulates the affairs of private persons, which reigns in the civil law; another which regulates the differences that arise between people and people, which tyrannizes in the law of nations: as if the law of nations was not a civil law, not indeed of a particular country, but of the world. [...] The magistrates ought to administer justice between citizen and citizen, every nation ought to do the same between themselves and another nation. In this second distribution of justice, no other maxims ought to be employed but those in the first.

Letter XCV

How to put down a bigot :

When two persons who were present denied him any of his principles, he presently cried out it is certain, we have so determined it, and we are infallible judges. And how came you, said I to him then, to be infallible judges? Do not you perceive, replied he, that the holy spirit hath enlightened us? That is happy, returned I; for from the manner of your talking to-day I perceive you have great need to be enlightened.

Letter CI

On the legality of war:

There are but two kinds of just wars: one which is waged to repulse the attack of an enemy, the other to succour an ally who is attacked. It would not be justice to enter into a war upon the private quarrel of a prince; unless the case was so heinous as to merit the death of the prince or the people who committed it. Thus, a prince should not engage in a war because he hath been refused an honour which was his right, or for any unsuitable demeanor towards his ambassadors, and such similar cases; no more than a private person ought to kill him who refuses him precedence. The reason is this, as a declaration of war ought to be an act of justice, wherein the punishment should always be in proportion to the fault, it should be inquired whether the party against whom war is declared merits death. For to make war against any person, is to be willing to punish him with death. In the law of nations the severest act of justice is war, since the effect of it is the destruction of society.

Letter XCV

This is uncannily accurate about the progress of weapons of mass destruction:

Thou talkest much to me in one of thy letters, of the arts and sciences cultivated in the west. Thou wilt be ready to regard me as a barbarian: but I know not if the benefit derived from them hath made amends to mankind, for the bad use to which they are daily applied. I have heard say, that the single invention of bombs, hath destroyed the liberty of all the people of Europe. The princes being no longer willing to intrust the guard of towns to the citizens, who would surrender them at the first bomb, made that a pretext for keeping a large body of regular troops, with which they afterwards oppressed their subjects. Thou knowest, that since the invention of gun-powder, there is no place impregnable; that is to say, Usbek, that there is not any longer an assylum upon earth against injustice and violence. I always tremble, lest they should arrive at last at the discovery of some secret which may furnish them with a shorter way to destroy mankind, and to depopulate whole nations and whole kingdoms.

Letter CV

In a lighter mood, but again accurate regarding the fashion slaves:

The caprices of fashion among the French are astonishing; they have forgot how they were dressed in the summer: they are even more ignorant how they shall dress this winter: but, above all, it is not to be believed how much it costs a husband to put his wife in the fashion. What should I get by giving thee a full account of their dress and ornaments? A new fashion would destroy all my labour, as it does that of their works; and before thou hadst received my letter, the whole would be changed. A woman who quits Paris, to go and pass six months in the country, is as antiquated at her return, as if she had been forgotten thirty years.

Letter XCIX

On the distribution of wealth:

The propagation of mankind is vastly promoted by a mild government. All republics are certain proofs of this; and above all others, Switzerland and Holland, which are the two worst countries in Europe, if we consider the nature of their land, and which are nevertheless the best peopled. Nothing invites strangers more than liberty and wealth, which always follow the former: the first is searched after for its own sake; and we are led by our wants into the country where the latter is to be acquired. The species increase itself in a country where the plenty of it supports the children without diminishing the substance of their fathers. The equality of citizens, which commonly produces an equality in their fortunes, brings plenty and life into every part of the body politic, and extends them through the whole. In countries subject to an arbitrary power it is not the same: the prince, the courtiers, and some private persons, possess all the riches, whilst all the rest groan beneath extreme poverty.

Letter CXXII

I left for last my favorite, and sadly, it is a lesson we haven't learned yet:

There are but two kinds of just wars: one which is waged to repulse the attack of an enemy, the other to succour an ally who is attacked. It would not be justice to enter into a war upon the private quarrel of a prince; unless the case was so heinous as to merit the death of the prince or the people who committed it. Thus, a prince should not engage in a war because he hath been refused an honour which was his right, or for any unsuitable demeanor towards his ambassadors, and such similar cases; no more than a private person ought to kill him who refuses him precedence. The reason is this, as a declaration of war ought to be an act of justice, wherein the punishment should always be in proportion to the fault, it should be inquired whether the party against whom war is declared merits death. For to make war against any person, is to be willing to punish him with death. In the law of nations the severest act of justice is war, since the effect of it is the destruction of society.

Letter XCV

Dana Safian says

Mehrnoosh Fallah says

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Tayebe Ej says

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