MONTESQUIEU'S *PERSIAN LETTERS*

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Introduction

Like Fenelon's *Adventures of Telemachus*, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* achieved the feat of becoming a classic, one of those timeless texts still quoted in anthologies, whose citations are known to all and whose character names, Usbek and Rica, exist independently of the work that bears them. A work that has become timeless, when it was first a book written just because, a satirical book discussing contemporary time and a great political reflection book on immediate history, that of the end of Louis XIV's reign and the Regency.

Published in 1721, the *Persian Letters* is indeed a text that skilfully intertwines exotic fictional elements and a chronicle of the decade that just passed. Both stories, the main character's personal story and the kingdom's public history, are steering towards a catastrophe, Law's bankruptcy and what it means for the hopes of renewal placed in the Regency.

Part 1 – Montesquieu and the *Persian Letters*

Montesquieu was born in 1689, died in 1755 and therefore is still a relatively young man in 1721, but has already had time to grow up and study law, which will enrich his thought. He had time to stay in Paris, reflecting on history and the economy. The book he publishes anonymously in Amsterdam, let's recall that there is no freedom of the press in France, is described as an epistolary fiction.

The text is a collection of letters written by two Persians in exile in France and by their correspondents. The main character, Usbek, is forced to leave Persia due to political circumstances. He leaves his harem behind, in the hands of his terrible eunuchs, and goes to Paris with his young friend Rica. Their letters bear witness, first, to their astonishment as strangers to the French way of life. That is the satirical dimension of the book. A stranger's gaze allows us to see ourselves with the eyes of another, enabling us to be astonished at what we are most used to. To talk about our everyday realities with an exotic vocabulary brings out its strangeness. For example, clergymen are referred to as dervishes who have taken vows of obedience, poverty and chastity and do not respect any of the three.

The point of view of a stranger makes it possible to be astonished by the trend of gaming, women's coquetry, street congestion and onlookers' inquisitiveness. We can find there the very brilliant legacy of a mockery tradition of which the 17th century has a few examples, like La Bruyère's *Caractères*.

Part 2 – The *Persian Letters'* political dimension

There is also an important political dimension in the *Persian Letters*, which is seen both in the satire and the serious dissertations. Even if it is strictly fictional, the novel often sardonically mirrors reality to let us ponder on the exercise of power. The Persians arrive in Paris in 1712, and their letters are a testament to Parisian life up until 1720. It is, therefore, immediate political history that all readers in 1721 would have freshly remembered and that they can re-read, appraising the controversial interpretation in Montesquieu's writing. We are witnessing the very last years of Louis XIV's reign, darkened by the despotic tendency of absolute monarchy, by religious intolerance and by a deep economic crisis. And we observe the evident relief welcoming the news of the king's death in 1715.

Above all, the reader can enjoy a harsh and willingly caricatured chronicle, which is the real excitement of the text, of almost contemporaneous events: the speculative frenzy that seized Paris and the Court under Law's system and the bankruptcy that soon followed in 1720. Montesquieu morally condemns the frenzied speculation, an unstable time ripe with reversal of situations that sees valet fathers making a fortune and marrying their daughters to ruined noblemen, for example.

Montesquieu's analysis of this historical time sees the monarchy's transformation reaching a climax. To him, monarchy must be based on the safety of property, on landholding legacy, on the persistence of lineages. And what he fathoms is that the monarchy has turned into despotism where even what seemed the most stable is subjected to the whims of the prince and his minister, whose discourses are nothing but air.

In letter 142, Law is portrayed as a huckster, son of Aeolus, the god of wind, who takes the money of the good inhabitants of Betica, that is to say of France, in exchange for skins full of wind before disappearing in the air, leaving the ruined population in inexpressible dismay.

Part 3 – The *Persian Letters'* novelistic dimension

Finally, the *Persian Letters* also include a novelistic dimension where exotic fiction, with its erotic and dramatic fantasy, holds a significant place. This is what we call a "seraglio novel". As Usbek's absence lengthens, his harem's discipline comes undone, despite the eunuch's supervision. Usbek, in Paris and green with jealousy, gets news of what is happening with a long delay, due to the slowness of mail circulation. Remotely, he tries to restore despotic order in his harem by relying on the violent action of the eunuchs. But it is in vain and the last letters of the compilation recount the collapse of the seraglio.

In the last letter, almost like the parody of a drama, Roxane, his favourite, reveals to him that she has cheated on him, that she has always hated him and announces that she will commit suicide after having poisoned the eunuchs guarding the seraglio. This devastating ending, in the throes of passion and in an oriental setting is eminently novelistic. But at the same time, it is to be related to the catastrophic description of France's economic collapse, like a metaphor inviting the readers to reflect on despotism, on the risks of giving all the power to one single person, and on their damaging impacts.