

"Orientalism" and "The Persian Letters": How Europe Speaks to Itself through its Vision of the Other

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To demonstrate how "The Persian Letters" forms part of the literary and scholarly ensemble of texts that became codified by the end of the Eighteenth Century into a discourse of Orientalism is beyond the scope of this paper. What I intend instead, is to apply two of Edward Said's concepts in "Orientalism", that of strategic location and textual attitude to Montesquieu and the text of "The Persian Letters".

In *Candide*, Voltaire, no great friend of Montesquieu, attacked a prevalent attitude of his time, that of believing that books could adequately describe actual reality such that it could be applied to that same reality as a tool for its comprehension (Said 93). This circular reasoning, its privileging of a text over actuality, and the authoritative power it lends the text is the meaning of Said's concept of "textual attitude" (94).

When "The Persian Letters" were published anonymously in Holland in 1721, it went through at least ten editions in one year (Introduction, *Persian Letters* 18). Coming on the heels of translations of "A Thousand and One Nights" and numerous other travelers' accounts of the Orient, it helped to build up the fascination of the East by concentrating on the cruelly or strangeness of Persian customs, often adding to the effect by means of what was then considered to be a flowery Eastern style

as in L.16 or L.42" (21).

Not only did *The Persian Letters* encourage numerous other "imaginary critics of European affairs" (18), but Montesquieu himself used works by Chardin as a basis for his description of Persian customs and political life in both the "Letters" and "Spirit of the Laws," an historical and theoretical political work of monumental influence on both his period and the Nineteenth Century. What Montesquieu was after in citing Persian customs and institutions in both instances was a depiction of political and personal despotism with its accompanying eroticism and unbridled passions which he then used to critique European, and specifically French, political ideas of authority and governmental practices. The circularity and power of the textual attitude is all too evident in this context. Montesquieu used a body of texts on which to base his depiction of despotism (generic in meaning and specific in description); his depiction in turn became a further elaboration in meaning and significance of those same Persian customs; in their turn, his texts became the basis of other texts which carried within them and gave increased power to such notions of Oriental despotism and sensuality. As Said remarks, "something patently foreign and distant...acquires a status more than less familiar...a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing" (58).

In this fashion both works, which not only exhibited Said's textual attitude and amplified its use and influence, also became part of a growing body of work which made "the Orient an integral part of European material civilization and culture" (3) and functioned under Colonialism as "a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Ibid).

What is so pernicious about a textual attitude with reference to Orientalism is the way in which our experience of the Orient is "contained and represented by dominating frameworks" (Said 40). These bounded representations take on ontological weight and density and become in turn a display and mechanism of power over it, a power strong enough to silence actual Oriental voices, to "deny autonomy to it", since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it" (32). Said's point is that the Orientalist discourse is double-edged, by speaking authoritatively and negatively about the Orient in essentialist terms, it defines the Orient to itself as Other and opposes to it an essentialist description of the West as "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values (and) without natural suspicion" (49).

In this context it is interesting to explore Montesquieu's "strategic location" (20), his position towards his material and the uses he makes of Persian customs.

"The Persian Letters" are a picturesque tale of Usbek and Rica, two young, noble Persians exploring Europe, mainly

France, as intellectual tourists. Woven in and around letters about French manners and morals, is the narrative of Usbek's seraglio which, in his absence, finally rebels against the authority of the guardian eunuchs and die rather than resubmit to their despotic rule.

The tale of the seraglio is an analysis of despotic power, its rule by fear and the complexity of the passions which it engenders and dominates. Montesquieu further elaborates this analysis of despotism and makes reference to the seraglio in "The Spirit of the Laws" and identifies it as the degenerate form of (European) monarchy. In "The Persian Letters" with its many references to European monarchies, the politics of Louis XIV and passing of feudal socio-economic practices, the analysis of despotism with its extremism and its terrible "simplicity" (SL 5,4) functions as a reminder to Regency France of the dangers of the politics of absolutism.

What then is Montesquieu's position towards his material? He uses it to form a critique of French social and political life. He places the example of the Orient at the service of an ongoing Eighteenth Century discourse on the nature and extent of legitimate political authority. His Persian characters intelligently question the rationality of religious, state, military and cultural practices and by their questioning and descriptions uncover much of the absurdity, irrationality or frivolity of European life. Their innocent and unforgiving gaze becomes the mirror through which Europe might see itself. Montesquieu's target in "The Persian Letters" is without doubt

Europe of the Eighteenth Century. Where then, is the connection to Orientalism? The Persian gentlemen of "The Persian Letters" are generic types. As such, they can be apprehended without "difficulty or ambiguity" (Said 66). As types, it is not surprising that they accept their own customs unproblematically and turn a piercingly questioning gaze on European practices. Through their eyes Montesquieu can create a satirical and comedic critique of European life. He embellishes the distance between his Persians and his European audience by describing common European practices within Persian terms. In this manner, the Bible becomes the European Koran and the Pope a grand Mufti (PL, L.24). In one stroke, the distant and strange is made intelligible and the close and obvious are given the exotic aspect of otherness. However, the style is a ruse. It is only a chimera of distance. Explanation by analogy does not unlock the meaning of things oriental or persian in their own terms. They continue to be understood within a dominating European frame of reference. And the Persians remain, for all their words, exotic and unknown with one exception, the narrative of the seraglio. By framing the sundry and disjointed letters about European life within the ongoing narrative of the seraglio, Montesquieu maintains the dramatic tension of the unfolding story while focusing the attention of the reader on the significance of the drama. And this drama has its own internal logic and maintains its exotic distance. Stylistically, we seem to be seeing Persia through Persian eyes. Once again the ruse. We are

seeing Persia through European eyes. There is still more to this that meets the eye. The seraglio, a complex of exotic erotic and despotic practices, is depicted in its essential otherness, that is, it is stripped of its actual interconnecting web of socially and historically specific relationships. Montesquieu can now use the seraglio as a mediating frame through which to chart the internal logic of despotism and relate that analysis back to Europe. However, the strength and power of the analysis necessitates an acceptance of the objective truth of the actual descriptions of Persian customs and values. By the very process of setting the generic seraglio as the stage on which to play out the despotic drama, he has legitimated a view of Oriental despotism and exotic sexuality which forms part of the very core of the Orientalist discourse of Oriental character.

The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe...In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra...settings, in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heros; terrors, pleasures, desires. (63) To this list I would add the Seraglio with its eroticized authority, its passionate heat and its sexual violence.