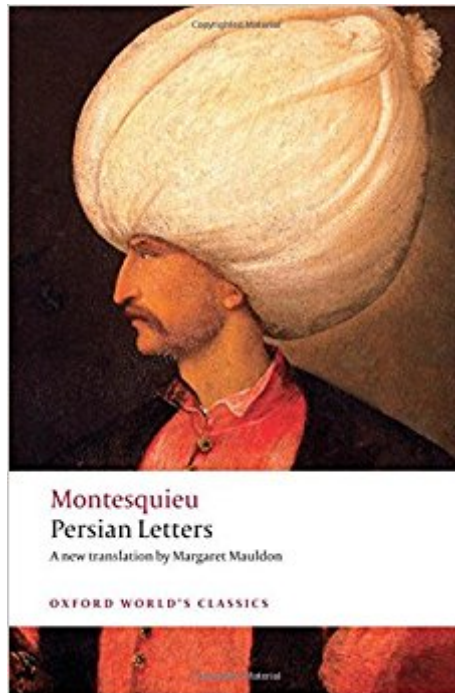




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Persian Letters (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

Persian Letters is a classic of European literature by Baron de Montesquieu, the brilliant thinker who had a huge influence on the Enlightenment. Through the astute observations of his two fictional Persian travelers in Europe--Usbek and Rica--Montesquieu asks fundamental questions about human nature, the manners and flirtations of polite society, the structures of power, and the hypocrisy of religion--all in a witty, inventive satire that combines travel literature and the epistolary genre. Indeed, this pioneering epistolary novel appeared almost twenty years before Richardson's Pamela. This is the first English translation based on the new, definitive edition of the original French text, revealing this lively work as Montesquieu first intended. The book features an engaging and comprehensive introductory essay, covering a wide range of topics, including the novel's fictional techniques and innovations; travel literature as a genre; historical context and Enlightenment ideas; Orientalism; and other issues. The editor has included full explanatory notes, a useful list of characters, and an invaluable appendix featuring excerpts from Montesquieu's most important sources.

About the Series: For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

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Customer Reviews

Andrew Kahn is University Lecturer in Russian at Oxford University. Margaret Mauldon is the distinguished translator of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, and other works.

Montesquieu's fascinating portrait of the radically different social, cultural, political and religious viewpoints and perspectives between Muslim travellers from the Eastern, Islamic influenced cultures of the old Persian Empire versus the very different values espoused by the young, emerging European nation-states of Western Europe rooted in the divergence of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and the Humanist movement of the European Enlightenment. Very interesting comparison and contrast between socio-political, economic and political contrasts between these two starkly different cultures as narrated by a variety of characters and set in the early 18th century.

Any book that has the staying power that this title has had will have merit. Published nearly three hundred years ago (in 1721), *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu is an epistolary novel that traces the fictional correspondence between two eighteenth-century Persians and their countrymen as they travel through the occidental world for the first time, eventually settling in Paris for a decade during the remaining years of Louis XIV's reign. The book illustrates what we would now call today culture shock for the two main characters as they try to make sense of their new surroundings and the colorful people that enliven their day-to-day sojourns into European life at the onset of the Enlightenment. This compellation has more than a few witticisms and biting criticisms of the times. Reading it today, three-hundred years later, it is obvious that Montesquieu used the fictional characters as a cover for his own criticisms. Though which critiques actually parallel his thoughts is open to question, this ambiguity, I think, actually making the piece more enjoyable to read. I cannot verify the accurateness of Montesquieu's portrayal of these Persians--would they have really have reacted the way they had?--but a quick glance at the introduction to any modern reprinting of the text will tell you that Montesquieu used the best available resources at the time to capture what they would have likely reacted. Sometimes, you have to wonder though if he is working off imaginative stereotypes more than anything. The character development of the Persians is slight and the plot that Montesquieu throws us is light until the last few letters when events seem to pick up and then rush towards an interesting finale. However, I think it is better to judge the book on its playful musings and witticisms. I can imagine that much of what this Frenchman wrote would have been shocking, maybe even scandalous at the time. The most entertaining features of the book come

from the main Persian's communiqu  with his seraglio back home. His many wives under lock and key in his desert harem, their hinted-at misadventures in lesbianism and infidelity, and the dictatorial African eunuchs who relentlessly keep watch over them--all of that fun stuff kept the book moving forward, and, consequentially, was my favorite part as well. Another entertaining element to the piece was, of course, Montesquieu's musings on everything from government, virtue, law, morality, taxation, metrology to religion, particularly the Catholic Church. The best quotes from the book come from his thoughts on religion. One of my favorites: "I believe in the immortality of the soul periodically. My opinions depend entirely on my physical condition. According to whether I have greater or less vitality, or my digestion is functioning well or badly...I know how to prevent religion from disturbing me when I am well, but I allow it to console me when I am ill." Speaking of quotes, that is one thing that I feel I ought to warn against. I imagine that I am not the only one who will be reading this text in anticipation of Montesquieu's treatise *The Spirit of the Laws*. I found myself enjoying the book much more when I read it as literature and not when I was hunting for witty quotes to be used later on for the inevitable research paper I will have to write for my political theory class. I think it is best to compare the novel to something from its own era, and the person's writing that first comes to mind to someone who is largely ignorant of that time period in French literature is, naturally enough, Voltaire. Like me, you will have probably have read Voltaire before tackling Montesquieu, which there is good reason for since I believe that Voltaire is much more readable than Montesquieu. If we compare *Candide* to *Persian Letters*, *Candide* comes out the winner easily: stylistically, for its imaginativeness, and hilarity. That said, I did enjoy the *Persian Letters* and recommend it for anyone who wants an entertaining reflection on early eighteenth-century France.

Author criticizes Enlightenment era European society from the safety of an outsider's perspective.

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