

Deuxième mot: en condamnant le voile, peut-être Montesquieu s'inscrit-il déjà dans une lignée qui, par la voix surtout de Rousseau, condamnera le masque comme ce qui introduit l'artifice et la fausseté dans le monde humain. Le masque est le meilleur signe de la représentation. Ainsi, même si Montesquieu avait pu accepter le voile en le subsumant sous le concept occidental de des sexes, il le montrerait peut-être comme un facteur déformant la fréquentation des sexes. Après tout, si le faux et bon Ibrahim de la lettre 141 mérite notre respect, n'est-ce pas parce qu'il permet à ses douze femmes de mener une vie sociale – innocente – avec les hommes de leur ville? Par là c'est le principe même du sérali, de la vie de famille en tant que vie absolument privée, qui devient impossible. Montesquieu sait bien à quoi il s'attaque – même s'il ne sait pas très bien pourquoi.

Montesquieu's political fictions: oriental despotism and the representation of the feminine

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This paper takes as its point of departure the relative paucity of post-structuralist studies of Montesquieu. If the political writings of Rousseau have attracted this form of critical approach, it is undoubtedly because of the reflections on truth and on language which they articulate; by contrast, the *Esprit des lois* is justifiably acclaimed as introducing empirical or historical methodology into political science. I suggest, however, that a reflection on the problematics of truth and language can be discovered in Montesquieu. This paper sketches out a broadly deconstructive approach to this reflection through a reading of certain aspects of the representation of oriental despotism in the *Esprit des lois*, the *Lettres persanes* and *Arsace et Ismérie*.

Commentators of Montesquieu have generally concurred that the *Esprit des lois* introduces an empirical or historical approach to political science; because natural and cultural factors are associated with politics, Montesquieu is often portrayed as a founder of social science. Although in book II, he takes up Aristotle's tripartite division of forms of government, Montesquieu presents the types as real rather than ideal. Drawing on the history of the Italian city-states, Montesquieu presents democracy and oligarchy as a single form, whereas

for Aristotle, who differentiates on the basis of the number of rulers, they are separate. He also lends substance to the types with the introduction of the three principles, the socio-psychological forces at work in each form of government, and, finally, by relating each form to its aetiology.

For many readers, the representation of despotism, virtually synonymous with oriental despotism, departs from scientific project and veers into mythology. This anomaly has led critics to endorse the view that the representation of oriental despotism is intended as an allegory of French absolutism, and should therefore not be read literally. There are several objections to this interpretation. Firstly, oriental despotism functions not only as an allegory of certain contemporary realities: the Versailles of Louis XIV, the erosion of aristocratic power, marginalisation of the parliaments and so on, but also as a *repeussor*: if absolutism persists, France will ultimately resemble the Orient. The second objection is that the representation of oriental despotism is one of the moments in the *Esprit des lois* for which what Georges Benrekassa terms 'causalité globale' is best developed: the form of government is tied to a series of arguments invoking nature and culture as causal factors.

I suggest that though the representation of oriental despotism disrupts Montesquieu's scientific project, this is not merely because he succumbed to a popular fiction of the Orient. I follow Alain Grosrichard in viewing the representation of despotism as being inextricable from that of sexuality, and in particular of a figure of 'oriental woman', which is tied to the figure of truth-as-woman, yet which ultimately destabilises truth and the causal structures which it underpins.

The sense that the representation of oriental despotism transgresses the boundary between fact and fiction is reinforced by the resemblance between the *Esprit des lois* and the *Lettres persanes*; they draw on a common source – the close association between empirical philosophy and the work of travel writers such as Chardin and Rycart. However, we should note that through the structure of 'double blindness' (the Persians see France better than it can see itself but remain blind to the vicissitudes of their own domestic arrangements), the *Lettres* articulate a critique of the philosophy of experience. It is not incidental that this blindness centres on the figure of oriental woman; in the *Esprit des lois*, too, the representation of women in oriental despotism and polygamy is marked by paradox and the overturning of power structures.

Book XIV introduces the idea that forms of government are related to types of human nature, and that these are determined by physiological differences themselves caused by climate. The natives of hot climates tend to be passive and dominated by sensuality. In the *Essai sur les causes*, similar claims are made for the physiology and character of women; one might speak of a feminisation

of the Orient, but also of epistemological disturbance, since sex (presumed to be determinate) and climate (variable) produce similar effects. Book xv discusses slavery, contrary to human nature yet justified by a 'raison naturelle'. In a similar way, domestic slavery appears to contradict its own logic: harems become 'lieux de délices' for those who are enclosed. Moreover, polygamy and the harem do not fulfil their function; they do not satisfy but generate desire, and yet also exhaust heterosexual desire and result in homosexuality and sterility. Although Montesquieu initially suggests that women are incarcerated because of their relative lack of power, he also suggests that it is the 'empire' of women and sensuality in oriental societies which demand their enclosure. (This argument seems to extend to all women.) Harems, which initially seem to protect the 'truth' of woman in both senses – their fidelity and their female identity – ultimately threaten sexual difference, as the master of the harem is contaminated by the plurality of women, or lack of 'woman'.

I suggest that this instability derives from the complex epistemological status of the figure of oriental woman. Though rooted in the desire of European travellers to see and know, it is the source of fascination because of the interdictions attached to it, i.e. the impossibility of seeing or knowing. Thus, representations of oriental women occur at the intersection of fact and fiction. We should note that this figure resembles that of truth as a veiled woman, a supersensible entity lying beyond phenomena, desirable, yet inaccessible. (The empirical concept of truth is a variation on this dominant model.) The desire for truth as woman is also a desire for the truth of woman, for women who, unlike incontinent oriental women such as Usbek's wives, remain true. In Montesquieu's works we can discover two related models: truth as woman and woman as lie (also a conventional figure). I examine one instance of each model.

Arsace et Isménie represents the harmonious union of truth and beauty, eros and political power. The dénouement depends on a scene of feminine unveiling coupled with a phallic investiture in which Isménie/Ardisire is to endow her husband, Arsace, with a sword. This recalls the moment in the *Lettres persanes* in which Usbek attempts to communicate his phallic mystique to a eunuch ('je te mets la fer à la main'), yet here, the complement to phallic power is castration and division. This difference is in part attributable to the fact that whereas *Arsace et Isménie* represents monarchy, Montesquieu's preferred form of government, and its domestic analogue, the couple, the *Lettres persanes* represent despotism and polygamy. The dénouement of the *Lettres persanes* feminine unveilings – the literal unveiling of Zélis and the figural unveiling of Roxane ('le voile de sa perfidie'). This expresses scepticism about the truth of woman and indeed about truth, i.e. about the possibility of unveiling. The figural veil of lies deconstructs the literal veil and its truth claims, including

the claim to literality (the literal veil itself is ideologically (over)determined). This destabilisation of truth has wide-reaching consequences in that truth underpins empirical and historical discourse.

Although Voltaire rejects Montesquieu's separation of despotism and monarchy and indeed Orient and Occident, he nevertheless perceives a residue of difference, located in sexuality and the status of women. For Montesquieu, 'tout est extrêmement lié'. The causal connections tying despotism to cultural practices lend the appearance of theoretical consistency, but are actually the site of repeated disturbances engendering doubt as to the status of despotism. In fact, these doubts are engendered as early as books viii and x, which discuss the corruption of the principle of despotism, fear. Montesquieu states that 'le principe du gouvernement despotique se corrompt sans cesse parce qu'il est corrompu par sa nature [...] par un vice intérieur'. Few critics have attempted to interpret the corruption of fear; one exception is Alain Grosrichard. Without rejecting his interpretations, I propose another reading, taking into account the fact that Montesquieu leaves the question of the relation between type and principle (for some readers, abstract and concrete, real and ideal) in suspense. Types of government are said to change through their principle; this historical dimension does not characterise the relationship of despotism and fear, since they seem to evolve into themselves: despotism is historical only in the radical sense that it subsists in a state of constant change. Montesquieu suggests that as a type, despotism is not corrupted (altered), because it is already corrupt, i.e. different to itself; its truth is neither stable nor unitary but consists in difference. For this reason, the language of scientific classification falters, because despotism resists identification with its own categorisation, drawing attention to the rhetorical dimension of political classifications. Our awareness of this rhetoricity in the case of despotism may lead us to reject it as the fictional moment in a scientific study, yet I argue that this is precisely the importance of despotism within the *Esprit des lois*.