

The Persian Letters

Montesquieu's

1721

Charles–Louis de Sécondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755), was born into a family of noble judges near Bordeaux. He published *The Persian Letters* anonymously because he feared that his criticisms of the recently deceased Louis XIV might get him into trouble with government officials. The novel made him an overnight sensation. He sold his position as a judge and devoted himself to travel and writing. In *The Persian Letters*, he uses a fictional correspondence between two Persians to reflect on the meaning of government and social customs. He paid great attention to the treatment of women and the place of wives in society.

The king of France is an old man. We have no instance in our history of a monarch that has reigned so long. They say he possesses to an extraordinary degree the talent of making himself obeyed. He governs with the same ability his family, his court, his state. He has often been heard to say that of all the governments of the world, that of the Turks or that of our own August sultan pleased him most, so greatly he affected the oriental style of politics.

I have made a study of his character, and I find contradictions which I am unable to reconcile: for example, he has a minister who is only eighteen years old, and a mistress who is eighty; he is devoted to religion, and he cannot endure those who say it must be rigorously observed; although he flees the tumult of the city and has intercourse with few, yet he is occupied from morning until night in making himself talked about; he loves trophies and victories, but he is afraid of seeing a good general at the head of his troops, lest he should have cause to fear the chief of a hostile army. He is the only one, I believe, to whom it has ever happened that he was at the same time overwhelmed with more riches than a prince might hope to possess and burdened with a poverty that a private person would be unable to bear.

He loves to gratify those that serve him; but he rewards the efforts, or rather the indolence, of his courtiers more liberally than the arduous campaigns of his captains. Often he prefers a man whose duty it is to disrobe him or hand him his napkin when he seats himself at dinner, to another who takes cities or wins him battles. He believes that the sovereign grandeur ought not to be limited in the distribution of favors; and without investigating as to whether the one upon whom he heaps benefits is a man of merit, he believes that his choice renders him such; so that he has been seen to give a small pension to a man who had run two leagues, and a fine government to another who had run four.

He is magnificent, especially in his buildings. There are more statues in the gardens of his palace than there are citizens in a great city. His guard is as strong as that of the prince before whom all thrones are overturned; his armies are as numerous, his resources are as great, and his finances as inexhaustible.

Paris, the 7th of the moon of Moharram, 1713.

Taken: <https://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/271/>

Source: Merrick Whitcomb, ed., *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, vol. 6, *French Philosophers of the Eighteenth Century* (University of Pennsylvania, 1899), 2–3.