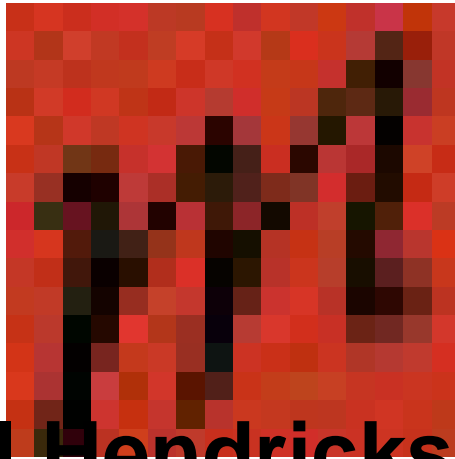


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Randal Hendrickson and Stuart Warner, Persian Letters (podcast)

- Lectures critiques - Automne 2022 -

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Randal Hendrickson and Stuart Warner, *Persian Letters* (podcast)

Part 1 : "[Montesquieu's literary art](#)"

Part 2 : "[In the master's workshop](#)"

Part 3 : "[Collapses](#)"

Part 4 : "[The view From the darkened West](#)"

This "Podopticon" project, a series of four Apple Podcasts extolling *Lettres persanes*, was apparently conceived by Randal Hendrickson, who briefly introduces these interviews but does not otherwise identify himself. They are marked as recorded in August and September 2021, and run about an hour each. Stuart Warner is a professor at Roosevelt University in Chicago and (in collaboration with Stéphane Douard) a recent translator (St. Augustine's Press, 2017 [1]).

They seem to target listeners with little or no prior knowledge either of *Lettres persanes* or of Montesquieu, and offer in the ensemble an informal but pretty thorough presentation of the work's form and content. In the process, Warner makes a number of interesting points, for example that Zachi's first letter (21 March 1713), which relates a breakout of Usbek's wives to the countryside, is written the day after, or perhaps even the very day of, Usbek's departure - a clear indication of a certain advantage taken without delay of the master's absence. Another example is his underscoring of many parallels between the story told in letter 135 and the destruction contained in letter 150. (Since Warner and Hendrickson use the posthumous edition of 1758, they refer here rather to letters 141 and 161.)

As the series progresses Hendrickson tries to correct any errors that may have been made along the way. He doesn't quite get all of them ; *président à mortier*, for instance, does not mean the chief magistrate of the the Bordeaux parlement ; but these are generally minor points.

There are also, along the way, a few very strange claims made about the book. In particular, Warner claims that the Persians setting out for Paris could have made 100 miles per day crossing the seas from Smyrna to Livorno (an astonishing claim), and thus should have reached Livorno in ten days rather than the forty Usbek records (letter 21) ; this is given as an example of ridiculous distortion by Montesquieu, who proves in *The Spirit of Law* that he was in no way ignorant of the maritime world. (A few minutes' googling on my part, however, turned up a relation of a convoy that left Livorno on 15 May 1587, put in at Naples and departed from there on 16 June, and reached Smyrna on 26 July : about 72 days. The same ship was back to Livorno on 13 October, about 78 days later. Which suggests at the very least that the guess of ten days for this trajectory was far more outrageous than Usbek's forty.)

Warner unhappily drags up, however briefly, the old rag about Montesquieu's wife's limp. There is also some overly simplistic description of Usbek's "lack of self-awareness", another old saw that probably has been largely buried by the critical literature. Warner plays fast and loose with the notion of themes, which seem to be convenient hitching posts for any fact wants to mention. These matters will not concern Montesquieu scholars, who are unlikely to encounter them.

But there is no pretension to scholarship as such in this project, and there is of course little room for a broader discussion of Montesquieu and his thought. Almost the whole burden of characterizing his importance for the presumed student public is, alas, borne by the term separation of powers, which hardly summarizes him nor even

appears in *L'Esprit des lois*.

[1] See [here](#).