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**Persian Letters, trans.  
Raymond N. MacKenzie,  
Indianapolis, Hackett, 2014**

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Only a few years after the Margaret Mauldon's translation (Oxford University Press, 2008) comes another, the eighth English translation in all, [1] of *Lettres persanes*. Unlike Mauldon, the only translator since Ozell to work from the original edition of 1721 - by way of the critical edition, volume I of *Ruvres complètes*, 2004 - MacKenzie reverts without explanation to the 1758 edition. Although he alludes in passing to the 'definitive French critical edition', he takes no further cognizance of it.

In order not to repeat everything I have said in an earlier article devoted to limited comparisons among the various translations, [2] I will discuss this new one mainly with respect to its most recent predecessor, in the process drawing partly on the examples I used before.

Much of MacKenzie's rather slim annotation seems to derive from the Vernière edition of 1960 ; indeed, some of the hoariest notes come straight out of Vernière, including his constant reference to the supplementary letters of the '1754 edition' - which in fact were published in 1758 - and the identification of 'La C. du G.' in letter 137 as *La Connaissance du globe* instead of Madame Dacier's *La Corruption du goût*.

This is too bad, for the 2004 edition would have enabled the translator to avoid a certain number of errors that have bedeviled most of his predecessors, some of which I pointed out in the article mentioned. In particular this category includes false homonyms, the old translator's nightmare, 'human nature' for example for *nature humaine*, whereas it really means humankind, [3] and 'empire' for *empire* as synonym of power. There are simpler mistakes, like rendering *propreté* as 'cleanliness', and more recondite ones like 'death's head' for *caput mortuum* (letter 137), which is actually an (al-)chemical term for a precipitate or residue.

It is a reasonable test to see how a translator handles some of the persistent, awkward problems. It is, for example, very hard to find English equivalents for French words like *doux* (and *adoucir*, etc.) when they do not refer to sweetness or softness, and perhaps even worse *mou* (or *amollir* or *mollesse*), especially when applied to people. What we can say, nevertheless, is that in both cases 'sweet' and 'soft' just will not do. In letter 103, Usbek writes to Rhedi, who in the previous letter has deprecated the arts :

Tu crois que les arts **amollissent** les peuples et par là sont cause de la chute des empires. Tu parles de la ruine de celui des anciens Perses, qui fut l'effet de leur **mollesse** [...].

Quand on dit que les arts rendent les hommes efféminés, on ne parle pas du moins des gens qui s'y appliquent, puisqu'ils ne sont jamais dans l'oisiveté, qui de tous les vices est celui qui **amollit** le plus le courage.

[...] il s'ensuit que l'oisiveté et la **mollesse** sont incompatibles avec les arts.

Here is Mauldon's version :

You believe that the pursuit of the arts **emasculates** nations, and hence brings the downfall of empires. You mention the ruin of the ancient Persian Empire, caused by **indolence** [...]

When people say that the arts make men effeminate, they are not, at any rate, referring to those who pursue them, for they are never idle, and of all the vices it is idleness that **saps willpower** the most.

[...] it follows that idleness and **effeminacy** are incompatible with the pursuit of the arts.

And MacKenzie's :

You think that the arts make people soft, and thus cause the fall of empires. You refer to the ruin of the ancient Persians, which was the result of **softness**. [...]

When people claim that arts make men effeminate, they cannot be referring to the people working in the arts, because those people are never lazy - and laziness is the vice that most **saps** courage.

[...] It follows, therefore, that laziness and **softness** are incompatible with the arts.

Despite the liberties which Mauldon takes, her solution is the more imaginative. While she has recourse to the notion of effeminacy in two places where Rhedi did not, the first of them does at least rely on his mention of effeminacy in the second paragraph. Still, 'effeminacy' for *mollesse* in the last line is neither accurate nor justified. In MacKenzie's case, 'softness' aside, 'laziness' is simply not the same idea as *oisiveté*, however related the two might be in certain contexts.

Not all infelicities or even inaccuracies are easily perceptible to the reader, and they may have so little inflection on the meaning as to be hardly worth correcting. Mauldon translates *elles ont des revers terribles* (letter 9) as 'They devise terrible revenges' and MacKenzie as 'Their reprisals are terrible'. These renditions completely mistake the meaning of *revers* (a reversal, as in letters 99 and 126 ; it is found in this sense in *Cinna* and *L'École des femmes*) ; both translators fudge, counting on the notion of revenge, which the context happily covers. Similarly, Mauldon translates *elles me font faire de fausses confidences*, in the same letter, as : 'they arrange for me to be given secret confidential information', which is both awkward and wrong. MacKenzie ('They confide in me, but their confidences are falsehoods') gets the meaning, but only by paraphrasing so as to deliver a definition rather than really translating. There are innumerable such quandaries posed by Montesquieu's text, and not all are important or really likely to impede the understanding of the text, though they might in any kind of close reading throw the reader off.

Here are a couple of further examples in Rica's letter about *un des hommes du royaume qui représente le mieux* (letter 72). Mauldon refers to him as 'one of the most impressive presences in the kingdom', which may be true but is not an accurate *translation*. MacKenzie's version ('one of the men who best represents our nation') is just an unfortunate guess, mistaking the meaning of *représenter*, which in this case is not about representation in the usual sense, and adding on the completely extraneous notion of 'nation'. This same gentleman '[...] fait sentir à tous les instants la supériorité qu'il a sur tous ceux qui l'approchent' ; *si cela est*, Rica responds, *je n'ai que faire d'y aller ; je la lui passe toute entière et je prends condamnation*. Mauldon renders this reply as : 'I accept my fate and willingly admit his superiority' : the gist is all right (the antecedent of *la* in *je la lui passe* is indeed [*s*]a supériorité), but neither *je la lui passe* nor *je prends condamnation* is correctly rendered, and 'fate' is a quite extraneous addition. MacKenzie captures the notion of concession with 'I concede everything to him in advance' but at the same time completely blows the rest by finishing up : 'and I accept my condemnation', which doesn't even make much sense.

Some more sandtraps are to be found in letter 43 about the alchemist. Esteeming himself newly rich, he says to Rhedi : *établissons d'abord l'équipage*. Mauldon's 'Let's begin by buying a carriage and pair' gets it right, as does MacKenzie's 'Let's get started by buying a coach, and the horses to go with it' : but Mauldon's version is more concise, and more graceful. A little later, Rhedi comments that [...] *tout cela se fit promptement, parce que mon homme ne marchandait rien, et ne compta jamais : aussi ne déplaça-t-il pas*. Mauldon gets the first part all right, though less elegantly, with 'it was all done very quickly, because my man did not bargain over anything, did not keep track of his expenditures' ; but then she gets the conclusion all wrong : '[...] and never moved from one spot'. For the

first part, MacKenzie follows her version almost word for word, [4] but cleans up the last clause with '[...]' and never paid in cash', thus suggesting a plausible but peculiar meaning of the verb *déplacer*. [5]

The alchemist explains to Rhedi how he began the day : *j'ai fait d'abord ce que je fais depuis vingt-cinq ans, qui est d'aller visiter mon oeuvre*, concluding with : [...] *et je me trouve aujourd'hui un heureux adepte*. For *visiter mon oeuvre* , Mauldon gives us : 'inspect my *opus*' and MacKenzie : 'inspect my work' ; but because neither has grasped that *oeuvre* has a highly specific meaning in alchemy (the philosopher's stone), they equally fail to nail the conclusion : for an *adept* is the alchemist (or 'philosopher') who has found the secret. So they limp home with 'I have succeeded in my quest' (Mauldon), and 'I find myself today a most fortunate adept' (MacKenzie), neither of which, and for good reason, is very clear.

Another curious character in letter 123 brings into play some non-standard vocabulary. [*M*] *martyr de sa justesse*, writes Rica, *il était offensé d'une saillie*. The problem this poses for the translator is illustrated by the difference in construal which the passage provokes. Mauldon's '[A] martyr to his own precision, he was offended by a flash of wit' is understandable, because *saillie* can have this use (particularly in literary texts that stress conversation, as *Lettres persanes* often does ; *saillie* is indeed used this way in letters 52 and 59). But the sense here seems to be not the metaphorical definition but the primary one, which MacKenzie depends on for : 'A martyr to his own precision, anything odd or irregular bothered him'. This seems justified by the comparison which continues the sentence : [...] *comme une vue délicate est offensée par une lumière trop vive* ; yet still, with the expression 'odd or irregular', he has missed the metaphor based on something projecting out from its background. [6]

Here is another example with a bit more context :

Ismaël, un de tes eunuques noirs, vient de mourir, magnifique seigneur, et je ne puis m'empêcher de le remplacer. Comme les eunuques sont extrêmement rares à présent, j'avais pensé de me servir d'un esclave noir que tu as à la campagne, mais je n'ai pu jusques ici le porter à souffrir qu'on le consacraît à cet emploi. Comme je vois qu'au bout du compte c'est son avantage, je voulus l'autre jour user à son égard d'un peu de rigueur, et de concert avec l'intendant de tes jardins, j'ordonnai que malgré lui on le mit en état de te rendre les services qui flattent le plus ton coeur, et de vivre comme moi dans ces redoutables lieux qu'il n'ose pas même regarder ; mais il se mit à hurler comme si on avait voulu l'écorcher, et fit tant qu'il échappa de nos mains et évita le fatal couteau. [Letter 39, the head black eunuch to Usbek]

Mauldon :

Ismael, one of your black eunuchs, has just died, Magnificent Lord, and I have no choice but to replace him. As eunuchs are extremely scarce at present, I had thought of using a black slave you have in the country, but until now I have been unable to persuade him to become a eunuch. As I can see that, after all, it's to his own advantage, I attempted the other day to use a little force with him, and, with the agreement of the keeper of your gardens, gave orders that he should, in spite of himself, be put in a condition to render you those services which are dearest to your heart, and thus be able to live, as I do, in that formidable place which now he dare not gaze upon ; but he began to howl as if someone were trying to flay him, and struggled so, that he escaped from our grasp and eluded the deadly knife.

MacKenzie :

Ishmael, one of your black eunuchs, has just died, magnificent lord, and I see no alternative but to replace him. Considering that eunuchs are very hard to come by these days, I thought of making use of a black slave of yours who is here in the country, but I have so far been unable to persuade him to let himself be consecrated to this

employment. Since I knew that this operation would be to his advantage in the long run, I wanted to exercise a little rigor with him. So in concert with your chief gardener, I gave orders that, even if it was against his will, he was to be put into the proper condition necessary to serve you in guarding what you love most, and to join me in those awe-inspiring places where otherwise he would dare not enter. But he began screaming as if we were about to burn him alive, and managed to slip out of our grip and avoid the fatal knife.

Overall this is a bit of a draw, there being some curious anomalies in both translators' passages. It is hard to fathom why Mauldon dodged the slight euphemism in the expression : *je n'ai pu jusques ici le porter à souffrir qu'on le consacraît à cet emploi* ('I have been unable to persuade him to become a eunuch'), substituting a degree of 'clarification' that hardly seems warranted. On the other hand, MacKenzie writes 'Since I knew that' for *Comme je vois qu[e]*, a shift in tense and verb that little affects the meaning but is still unnecessary. I give Mauldon a mark for 'I attempted the other day to use a little force' (*je voulus l'autre jour user à son égard d'un peu de rigueur*) instead of MacKenzie's 'I wanted to exercise a little rigor', because - and this is a subtler point - translators often miss the fact that *vouloir*, especially in the past tense, often seems to denote an attempt and not merely an intention.

Toward the end of this segment, MacKenzie manifests several little bits of slippage. For *les services qui flattent le plus ton coeur*, Mauldon comes much closer with 'those services which are dearest to your heart' than he is with 'to serve you in guarding what you love most', both because of the addition of the notion of guarding, which was already implicit, and of the romantic banality of 'what you love most'. Likewise, *ces redoutables lieux qu'il n'ose pas même regarder* is 'that formidable place which now he dare not gaze upon' (Mauldon) rather than 'those awe-inspiring places where otherwise he would dare not enter' (MacKenzie), since seeing and entering are different, and since 'awe-inspiring' suggests magnificence more than the danger which the eunuch seems to be suggesting.

Another fairly subtle point has to do with an eternal translator's dilemma, that eminently flexible pronoun *on*. When Mauldon writes : 'as if someone were trying to flay him' she gets it right except, if I may be picayune, for the 'someone'. The reason is obvious to anyone who has translated French to English : by trying not to overuse *on* - for the simple reason that 'one' in English will not bear the heavy use that *on* often gets in French, it is easy to miss the shift that really suits the circumstances here, which would be 'as if we were trying'. For here, even if this is relatively infrequent, *on* clearly means 'we', the eunuch and the gardener. On the other hand, MacKenzie obviously gets the wrong semantic register for *écorcher* when he writes *comme si on avait voulu l'écorcher* as 'as if we were about to burn him alive' : not too important, but burning and the knife do not go well together.

Any given passage can give only a glimpse and may not be quite fair, i.e., representative, to the translator. Both of these translations read smoothly most of the time and convey the essential gist even when, viewed up close, they appear not to be spot on.

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[1] The previous ones are by John Ozell (1722 plus several revisions), Thomas Flloyd (1762), John Davidson (1891), J. Robert Loy (1961), George R. Healy (1964), and C. J. Betts (1973). The latter appears still to be in print.

[2] Philip Stewart, "Les Lettres persanes en sept traductions anglaises (1722-2008)", *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, nouvelle série, n° 134 (2013), p. 103-126.

[3] 'On dit la nature humaine pour dire le genre humain' (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, 1694, art. 'Nature').

[4] I use 'follows' metaphorically, with no implication that he was actually copying.

[5] Furetière (1690, art. « [Déplacer](#) ») gives a similar example, but lacking an explicit definition, of the verb *déplacer* used intransitively : 'Il a acheté

ce cheval trente louis, il en a gagné dix autres à le revendre sans déplacer.'

[6] Furetière's main definition is 'Partie d'un bâtiment qui avance sur la rue, qui n'est pas à plomb sur les fondements. [...] On ne permet plus de faire maintenant des *saillies* sur les rues.'