

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3324>



"I am not writing a dedicatory epistle..."

- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: lundi 27 avril 2020

Creation date: 13 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

I am not writing a dedicatory epistle and I seek no protection for this book [1] : people will read it if it is good, and if it is bad, I do not care whether they read it or not.

I have selected out these first letters to test the public's taste ; I have many more in my files which I could offer subsequently.

But it is on condition I will not be known : for if my name came to be known, at that moment I shall fall silent. I know a woman who walks rather well, but limps whenever she is watched. The failings of the work are enough, without my also offering to the critics those of my person. If people knew who I am, they would say : his book is unsuited to his dignity ; he ought to put his time to better use ; that is not worthy of a man of consequence. Critics never fail to make such remarks, because they can be made without much mental effort.

The Persians who write here were staying in my house ; we lived in common. As they considered me as a man from another world, they hid nothing from me. Indeed men transplanted from so far away could really have no secrets : they communicated most of their letters to me ; I copied them ; I even happened upon a few which they would have taken care not to share with me, so mortifying were they for Persian vanity and jealousy.

Therefore my only role here is as translator : my only care has been to fit the work to our customs. I have spared the reader as much as I could of Asiatic language, and saved him from endless sublime expressions that would have borne him into the stratosphere. [2]

But that is not all I have done for him. I have suppressed the long compliments of which the Orientals are not less prolific than we are, and omitted countless numbers of the kind of trifles that do not readily bear the light of day, and ought always to remain between two friends.

If most of those who have given us collections of letters had done likewise, their work would simply have disappeared.

There is something that has often surprised me, which is to find these Persians sometimes as well informed as I am myself of the nation's behavior and manners, even being familiar with its finest circumstances, and noticing things which, I am sure, have escaped many Germans who have travelled in France. I attribute this to their long stay here, besides the fact that it is easier for an Asian to learn about French behavior in a year than it is for a Frenchman to learn about Asian behavior in four, because the French are as unguarded as the Asians are reticent.

Custom has permitted every translator and even the most vicious commentator to embellish the commencement of his translation or his commentary with an encomium of the original, and underscore its utility, its merit, and its excellence. I have not done so ; the reasons for this will easily be intuited : one of the best is that it would be quite boring, in a place that is already quite boring in its own right, by which I mean a preface.

[Letter 1](#)

[1] It is generally a high-ranking protector who is addressed in a dedicatory epistle. This quasi-introduction, which bears no title in the original edition, is attributed to a translator who remains anonymous : as was customary, no French edition bore the author's name during his lifetime.

"I am not writing a dedicatory epistle..."

[\[2\]](#) "[...] qui l'auraient ennuyé jusque dans les nues" (in the original) is highly ambiguous ; it is possible that *envoyé* may have been meant in lieu of *ennuyé*.