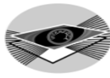

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Montesquieu's Political Analysis of the Woman Problem in the *Persian Letters*

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Abstract

This paper discusses why Montesquieu sees the woman problem as particularly important for political philosophy through an interpretation of significant passages in his Persian Letters. It defends two claims. First, contrary to a common view that in Montesquieu's ideal political community, men and women each perform tasks that are suitable to their natures, it shows that the true ideal pursued is a gender-free equality. Second, the optimistic picture presented of Parisian politics and mores in Montesquieu's times in the Persian Letters is not meant as an endorsement or justification of French society. Instead, they are presented positively only insofar as they are potentially transitional stages towards genuine equality. These two claims will be defended as follows. Section 1 introduces the terms by which Montesquieu understands and articulates the woman problem: nature and convention, the standard for evaluating political regimes, and what he means by the "springs" of these regimes. Section 2 turns to a close analysis of the un/equal love relations between men and women in Persia (representing despotism), Paris (monarchy), and a love story symbolizing republican regimes. In that section it becomes clear that a republic and the gender equality it entails constitute the desirable, if practically infeasible, ideal in Montesquieu's estimation. Section 3 concludes with a close reading and comparison of three letters in the novel, which suggest both Montesquieu's moderate optimisim concerning reform within monarchy and bleak prospects for improvement within despotism.

Keywords: Political/Private Parallel, 18th Century European Politics, Love, Gender, Feminism

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Equality between the sexes is nowadays by and large taken for granted as a legimitate social and political demand. But the acceptance is not universal, and even those who agree on the desirability of equality do not necessarily agree on the particulars concerning how it is to be realized. This paper will argue that Montesquieu endorses a specific kind of equality of sexes through an interpretation of key passages in his epistolary novel and seminal work on the woman problem, the Persian Letters (hereafter PL).[1] The interpretation will establish two points in particular. First, contrary to a common view which understands Montesquieu's ideal political community to have men and women performing tasks suitable to their sexes, it will argue that his ideal of equality allows for fluidity between "masculinity" and "femininity."[2] Second (both as evidence in support of the first and as a claim in its own right), Montesquieu does not idealize (and thus does not justify) the relation between men and women in Parisian society as portrayed in the PL. The praise of Parisian society made through his characters, the Persian travelers Usbek and Rica, is meant to show that Paris is more likely than Persia to potentially become a transitional stage towards the ideal equality Montesquieu envisions. The praise of Parisian society therefore cannot be seen as an endorsement of the inequality of sexes per se.

The PL on the woman problem is worth investigating first because, as

1 Roman numerals denote the letter number. For example, PL XXX refers to the letter numbered 30 in the novel. Quotations of the work are from Healy's translation (Montesquieu 1999).

2 McAlpin, 2000, for example represents this common view. Recent scholarship on the woman problem in the PL also ask, Was Montesquieu a misogynist, an anti-feminist, or a (proto-)feminist? This paper takes the stand that insofar as he champions the cause of women and argues that the promotion of their status in political communities is healthy and good for the latter, he can be said to be a pioneer of feminist movements, regardless of whatever bias he has towards women. This point will be made more clearly in the main part of this paper; see also the conclusion.

will become clear below, Montesquieu presents a notion of equality that could be a useful resource in contemporary thinking concerning gender politics. But it is also interesting because for Montesquieu, the status of woman in society is not an isolated issue, but actually a key for unlocking the fundamental character of any society (see e.g. The Spirit of the Laws [hereafter SL] VII.8, XIX.6).[3] These remarks throw light on the main theme of the PL: the predominant remarks on women in the latter (even if made mostly by men) open up as important analyses of society and politics as a whole. An implication of this view is that the status of women is not merely their own problem, their own disadvantage, injustice suffered by them alone. As will be seen below, even men, who often oppress women and are initially beneficiaries of the inequality, do not end up being happy or psychologically healthy. To anticipate a main part of the argument why this is so, inequality between sexes cancel the conditions for romantic love, a relation natural to humans and constitutive of their happiness (SL I.2).[4] As far as I know, this is not adequately treated by commentators on the PL. It is with the above two issues in mind that the present study is undertaken.

In this paper, section 1 will begin by briefly explicating the notions in terms of which Montesquieu thinks and formulates the woman question: nature and convention, happiness and justice. Section 2 then turns to interpretating a number of letters in the *PL*, showing how the romantic relations between men and women illustrate the workings of the political regimes under which those relations take place. The analyses of the letters, coupled with the problematic formulated in section 1, will show that Montesquieu was an advocate of gender equality, not inequality. Finally, section 3 turns to a close reading of three letters and argues that although both Paris and Persia are riddled with various forms of inequality, the former has a better chance of realizing equality and is to that extent — but only to that extent — praiseworthy.

3 VII.8 means Book 7, Chapter 8). Quotations from the SL use the translation by Choler, Miller, and Stone (Montesquieu 1989).

4 Thomas (1978, p. 44) notices this, but she restricts her observation to only despotisms (for Montesquieu's use of this term, see 2.1 below). Nor does she explicitly connect the despot's unhappiness with the suffering of women. See also McAlpin (2000, p. 54).

1 Formulating the Question

1.1 The Descriptive Study of Gender Behavior.

Montesquieu's framework for analyzing society in general, and men and women in particular, is the old dichotomy nature and convention. His use of these terms both inherits something from tradition and adds something new. "Nature," roughly speaking, refers to a stable, unchanging characteristic that marks something as what it is. In the present context, one asks: is there something like human nature? Furthermore, can we also meaningfully speak of masculine and feminine natures? Montesquieu answers yes to both: insofar as nature is concerned, there is a constellation of common and differentiating characteristics that define men as men, women as women, and both together as humans.[5] There are, generally speaking, two major differences that differentiate them. Women are physically weaker than men, but they are compensated by their beauty (PL XXXVIII). And so women tend to get what they want by their gentle charm, while men often resort to violence or force. These differences concerning beauty and strength can further bring out differences in psychology and intelligence. For example, Montesquieu believes that women are by nature sexually modest due to their less aggressive temper (which is traced to their physical weakness: SL XVI.12, cf. VII.17).

So far Montesquieu is traditional both in his conception of nature and even to a large extent in how he sees nature manifested in men and women. One new element he adds is that nature need not be restricted to classes. Not only is there a nature of humans, and natures of men and women, there might also be natures of individuals. This is especially relevant for the study of society since, while this cat right in front of me and any other cat might have few natural differences worthy of investigating, humans exhibit such a degree of variety that speaking of individual natures not only makes sense but might also be necessary. Montesquieu affirms the individuality and diversity of humans.

5 Nyland (1997, pp. 392-393).

According to him, this is because they have intelligence, which provides them with freedom to change and modify their surroundings in the way they see fit; and this produces diversity (*SL* I.1). Our intelligence, in other words, allows us to create conventions. "Convention" here is used as an umbrella term covering habits, mores, value judgments, laws, institutions, political arrangements, and the like. To deliberately complicate the dichotomy, it is the nature of humans to have conventions. As Nyland(1997, p. 383-387) explains, Montesquieu understands human behavior to be a joint effect of nature and conventions. While nature is that which is stable and unchanging, conventions operate as the factor of change: they emphasize or subdue what is natural. For example, one can assert that men and women are naturally different while denying that this is politically relevant. And one could go on to set up political conventions that minimize or downplay sexual difference.

The understanding that conventions can strongly modify nature without ever completely eliminating it has two implications. First, even if nowadays Montesquieu's view of "masculine" and "feminine" natures might be labeled as sexist by many people, this does not entail that his political and social view are equally sexist. Second, insofar as conventions are capable of subduing or emphasizing different aspects of nature, a careful and judicious observation of a variety of cultures and countries — that is, the empirical study of humans — is inevitable. If we fail to do this, we might mistake a conventional difference or character for a natural one.[6] Thus the importance of studying human societies descriptively: part of the purpose is to correctly distinguish what belongs to nature and what to convention, what does not change and what is changeable.

Despite the multiplicity of conventions, political ones have special significance because they influence most strongly the behavior of individuals governed by them (SL XI.5). Presumably, this is because political arrangements are arrangements about who or what has the ultimate decisive power concerning what sorts of issues in what sorts of ways, and to the extent that this power is authoritative, it lends a unity

6 Cf. Kra (1984, p. 284).

or unifying chracter over its subjects. In other words, Montesquieu does not conceive of a "society," completely separate from the "state" and autonomous with its own principles of operation, where the latter merely makes the operations of the former smoother or more difficult. Instead he sees that political power structures are strongly connected with determinate, specifiable ways of life, and that the "state" in a deep sense "shapes" the self-understanding of "society," such that life under a despot is not simply being ruled and oppressed by that despot, but that that life itself can also somewhat be called "despotic." And to the extent that the relationship between the sexes reflects a way of life, there are also types of relations that correlate with regimes. In other words, the descriptive question might be formulated as follows: Which kind of relationship between the sexes occur under which kind of regime? We will see, in section 2, that corresponding to the three major types of regimes, despotism, monarchy, and republic, there are also three kinds of love between men and women.

1.2 The Normative Question.

That descriptive study is meant as a necessary preparation for answering the crucial question: which regime is superior or more desirable than the other two? Evaluation presupposes standards or criteria by which regimes can be compared. Here, a second non-traditional dimension in Montesqieu's nature-convention dichotomy seems to emerge. Traditionally, the preferable regime is deemed to be the one that is more natural or in accordance with nature. In other words, the convention that promotes human nature the most is the most desirable convention. Nature is the standard of judgment. Montesquieu, however, does not see the standard as nature simply. The standard in question is related to but not identical with nature.

To see what this means, let us turn to the story of the Troglodytes (*PL* XI-XIV), told by the more mature and married Persian Usbek, on his way to Paris. He tells the story because his friend Mirza back home asked whether "men were made happier by the pleasures and satisfactions

of the sense or by the practice of virtue" (X). Usbek's story proceeds in three stages: the lawless Troglodytes, the early lawful Troglodytes, and the later lawful ones. The lawless, earliest Troglodytes had "no principle of equity or justice among them;" they followed only their "savage nature," in other words each only looked after him- or herself. This "society," if one deserving of the name at all, could not deal with natural disasters and diseases, and disputes among them could never be settled. The earlier lawful Troglodytes were markedly different. Two from the earliest generation were "just and lovers of virtue." They decided to live "in a remote part of the country" and to lead a life helping each other. They educated their children with a view to virtue. Virtue here consists in being motivated to consider the effect of one's action on the community as a whole, i.e. civic or communal virtue. This brought about peace and moderate prosperity. And despite their peaceful temperament, they could defend themselves against enemies when necessary. This was a time of happiness and virtue. However, one day they became too rich, a society that was too large and complicated. While these later Troglodytes were not lawless, they were powerless: they felt that they needed a leader to tell them what to do. They went to an elder who was known for virtue and asked him to be their king. He refused. From his point of view, their need for a king is an indication that virtue has now become a burden for the Troglodytes. Virtue without a king means that everyone needs to take up responsibility and deliberate and decide for him- or herself what the right thing to do is. The story abruptly ends at this point.

Mirza, in his request, recalls Usbek saying that "justice is innate," that is, natural, "in humans," but the story itself suggests that Mirza did not remember this very accurately. (Montesquieu uses "justice" and "virtue" interchangeably to mean civic or political virtue.) The lawless Troglodytes show a *savage* side to human nature, a side that makes social life impossible. It even suggests that justice is either not natural to humans, or that those who do not practice it self-destruct like the Troglodytes, and justice "appears" natural since only those who practice it survive.

The accidental character of justice to humanity seems further hinted at when Usbek offers no explanation of how the two virtuous Troglodytes emerged. Were they tired of fighting? Did they reflect on the long-term futility of acting selfishly? According to Usbek's narrative, it *just so happened* that two Troglodytes "naturally" desired virtue. The number "two" is noteworthy. Justice, as a relation between humans, cannot be expressed when one is alone. (Usbek, in another letter, speaks of justice in similar terms: it is "the proper relationship between two things," *PL* LXXXIII.) And even then, a place remote and free from the savage Troglodytes was needed to practice justice: without new land, they would become subject to the violence of others. Moreover, even the description of the virtue of the early, lawful Troglodytes is not unambiguous. Usbek constantly implies that self-interest is lurking behind their virtuous conduct. The founding fathers of the lawful Troglodytes had to teach their children the goodness of justice. As the story also implies, thieves, robbers, and petty informers still existed in their community (cf. also Schaub, 1997, p. 34). In other words, they are superior to their lawless ancestors because they can overcome natural disasters through cooperation, but they are still not completely free of human conflict. Finally, the increase in wealth and size seems to diminish their motivation to consider others.

The Troglodyte story, in short, shows that the question of the best regime cannot be evaluated according to the standard of nature. This is because human happiness requires justice: Usbek or Montesquieu leaves no doubt that the lawful Troglodytes are superior to the lawless ones. But justice is not natural and is even to some extent against nature: it never completely eliminates the calculations of self-interest that is also the source of savage behavior. There is a disparity, then, between human nature and the requirements of human happiness.[7] If we cannot be happy by simply following what our natures impel us to do, then in a way political community always contains an element of heteronomy,

7 Swaine, 2001 claims that the tension between human nature and justice is a core theme of the PL. According to him, Usbek's own contradiction, namely the fact that he is enlightened but incapable of applying his knowledge to his own life, dramatizes the very same issue. This is an important insight, and the issue of self-knowledge is clearly to some extent related to the woman question. But it is a topic in its own right and will only be briefly touched upon in the conclusion.

the idea that most people do not or cannot rely on themselves to be happy. The latest Troglodytes' request for a ruler suggests that before them, politics strictly speaking did not exist, insofar as a relationship of ruling-ruled did not exist. They demanded politics because virtue has become a burden: politics seems to be the surrogate of their agency. From Montesquieu's point of view, the question of political philosophy is then a question of how to negotiate the boundaries between leaving people to their own devices and enforcing just behavior and conduct through force. The two generations of lawful Troglodytes in this way reflect the tension between virtue and freedom.

The standard for evaluating society, then, also emerges in this tension. Human happiness, in Montesquieu's view, has two elements. The first is the non-natural component of justice, the motivation for the common good that must be instilled in one way or the other, so that living together with other humans, a necessary condition for happiness, becomes possible. But secondly, the practice of that justice must be felt psychologically as not difficult or not taking too much toil on oneself. As the founding fathers of the Troglodytes, and later the virtuous elder, put it, justice should not be "something costly to achieve nor painful to exercise." Stated differently, Montesquieu always asks: is this regime good for the community as a whole (are people practicing justice)? And second, is it good for the lives of the individuals living under it (do they feel happy)? If applied to the woman question we are concerned with here, the normative question might be formulated as follows: is the man-woman relation, to the extent that it embodies or reflects a regime type, good in the sense of these two required conditions?

Obviously a regime can fulfill one criterion while failing in the other. A hedonistic society, for example, might satisfy the second criterion and be found wanting in the first. The proper assessment of any political society dow not allow for a straightforward and easy answer.

2 Regimes, "Springs," and Ways of Life

What lends unity to each type of regime is its principle or what Montesquieu calls its "spring" (SL Foreword and III.1). By "spring" he means that which animates the workings of that regime type and makes the presence of that regime felt throughout its members. The notion of spring provides the essential link between regime type and its corresponding way of life: it is both the abstract principle that explains the political machine and the concretely felt motivation by which individuals act, think, and talk. It therefore affords Montesquieu a mechanism to go back and forth between the individual and the collective level. So "spring" makes it possible to explain the political meaning of romantic relationships, as will be seen below.

2.1 Despotism.

The defining character of despotism is the absolute rule of a single person, that is, rule without laws (SL II.1, 5). If there are "laws" in a despotic state, they are only laws by name. In essence they reflect only the will of the despot and can be changed and abandoned by him whenever he wishes. The essence of despotism is the absence of the rule of law; but its spring, that which reverberates throughout the regime in this absence, is fear (SL III.9-10; PL CIII). The exercise of absolute power requires recognition on the part of the despot's subjects. Effective control of the subjects' behavior also requires that they realize the permanent possibility of losing what they possess at any moment, of being punished — in a word, it requires the threat of violence and coercion.

The vital importance of fear as the spring of despotism can be seen in Montequieu's following remark, "In despotic states, each household is a separate empire" (IV.3). This initially looks like a contradiction: if despots wield absolute power, how can he allow his subjects to exercise absolute rule over their households? Shouldn't he be the real person in charge, being free to take from families whatever he wants and to give them whatever he wants? However, this very contradiction or

tension shows the crucial role fear plays. Fear requires ignorance to be an effective motivator of behavior. The object of fear is something uncertain, unknown, or unpredictable. Children are easier to scare than adults precisely because they do not yet know as much, are not as yet experienced with the world. Since social interaction facilitates the exchange of information and knowledge (SL IV.3, PL XXXIV), it tends to weaken fear. Therefore despotism discourages social interaction; and one way to achieve this is through the isolation of households from one another. The isolation can be achieved by making the patriarch of each household the absolute authority within his family. Two implications follow from this. First, the defining character of despotism, absolute power, cannot truly be what it is, precisely because fear, the spring that allows for the exercise of absolute power, limits absolute power to some extent. Second, if despotic states tend to produce miniature despotic states at the level of the household, then to a significant extent the analysis of households under despotism is simultaneously an analysis of the regime as such. It is in this way that Usbek's harem in the PL allows us to read it both domestically and politically (see also Robin, 2000, p. 350).

We see features of despotism in his harem in at least three ways. To begin with, Usbek has absolute rule over his harem. His commands are obeyed simply by his sending letters of instructions back to his eunuchs and wives. He changes his commands at will without any regard for rules or laws of any kind, often as a reaction to suspicious signs of disloyalty from eunuchs or unfaithfulness from his wives (PL XXI, XXII). Even when his rule breaks down at the end of the novel, his wives revolt and the harem descends into chaos, most of them are still punished. One of his wives, Roxane, who was unwilling to be punished, can only commit suicide instead of escape. Second, he similarly uses the tactic of fear to control and manipulate his harem. While he clearly does that with the eunuchs, it is slightly more complicated with his wives. Not only does the chief eunuch actually complain that Usbek is not harsh on them enough (PL XCVI), but Usbek himself occasionally expresses tender affection towards them (LXV). The general attitude, however, is still one of scaring and threatening, as even the letter just cited ends with a thinly veiled threat, where Usbek claims "I will not

employ violent means...until I have tried all others." Third and finally, Usbek, perhaps instinctively, understands the need for ignorance to maintain order in the harem. In XXXIV, after some initial observations of Parisian women's behavior, he praises the fact that Persian women do not know of the freedom they might enjoy, which keeps "the female virtue" (namely sexual modesty) intact. He furthermore instructs the eunuchs to keep his wives isolated from each other, to lower the chance of their collective revolt against the eunuchs.

As a political arrangement, all subjects are in service of satisfying the despot's desires. Women are at a natural disadvantage under this regime, because it is easier for men to frighten women than women men, due to the natural inequality between their physical strengths. (One could say that despots tend to be males or masculine, while everyone else is emasculated — even physically so in the case of eunuchs.) The master-slave relation between the despot and his subjects is reproduced in the man-woman relation (Nyland, 1997, p. 403). Usbek's wives are reduced to things-for-Usbek. In letters LXXIX and XCVI, the eunuchs report their "purchases" of new wives for Usbek. The letters describe in detail their examination of the women's bodies, so Usbek, who is far from Persia and is yet to see them, can get a sense of the beauty of his latest "possessions" (cf. SL VII.9), not to mention the inequality implied in polygamy. Nature, however, can be chased away with a fork, but it always comes back. Even before the harem falls apart, Usbek's wives are aware of the loss of their freedom (e.g. PL III; XLVII); Montesquieu also depicts them becoming resourceful in finding ways to satisfy their sexual desires in the absence of their husband. One wife, Zephis, experiments with lesbianism (PL IV); another, Zachi, acted against harem rules and let the white eunuch into her room (XX); a third, Zelis, resorts to a private fantasy of pleasures (LXII). Homosexuality, affair with a castrated man, retreat to fantasy — all these events are meant to suggest the unnatural condition women are forced into in the despotic household.

Women are clearly unhappy under despotism. But even the despotic

husband is unhappy as well.[8] Women under slavery are not good for men. Two observations suggest this. First, Usbek's striking admission that he does not love his wives (PL VI). He feels a deep apathy towards them. Kettler, 1964 suggests that he is defective in his human qualities, since the attraction between sexes is natural (see SL I.2). That might be true, but it is not satisfying: why is Usbek defective, or why did Montesquieu make him so? Is his defect representative of any husband in a harem, or something peculiar to him as who he is? Shklar, 1987 applies Usbek's own reasoning in the PL CXIV to himself and argues that polygamy caused his apathy. I think we can even be more precise: not polygamy itself, but the degradation of women that it causes, makes love impossible.[9] Insofar as love requires mutual consent, and consent presupposes agency, love does not exist in the harem, since women in it have no choice at all. Letter III hints at this. Zachi recalls all the different contests Usbek held among his wives before departing for Paris. The terms of the contests indicates how utterly the wives were subject to his whims. There is another reason for claiming that the deprivation of women's agency is the crucial factor instead of polygamy: Shklar's account could not explain why, despite his inability to feel love, Usbek shows a clear liking towards Roxane, the one who ultimately committed suicide in defiance of Usbek's rule (XXVI). His feelings towards her is readily explained, however, once one realizes that, unlike the other wives, Roxane has always asserted her independence and autonomy in front of Usbek. She even resisted his sexual advances in the past. In short, her unwillingness to be degraded into a thing makes love possible.

Second, Usbek is not simply unable to love, he is also tormented by jealousy. He is constantly worried about his wives becoming unfaithful; the letters sent to eunuchs are always instructions of vigilantly monitoring the women's activities. The novel constantly reminds the reader of his anxiety and stress. But his jealousy is not the jealousy of love, but that over his possessions (Kra, 1984, p. 273-4; the distinction between the two kinds of jealousy is discussed in the SL XVI.13).

8 While commentators mostly skim the surface of this point, Kra (1984, p. 274) is an exception.

9 Montesquieu makes a similar point concerning ancient Greek pederasty. Greek men pursued boys because women were also degraded (althought not because of polygamy). Since they were treated as lacking agency, men could not find love in them and had to turn to boys instead (SL VII.9).

In this sense, Usbek ends up as unfree as those he despotically rules over: his happiness becomes dependent upon their condition remaining inhuman, remaining contrary to human nature. Zelis's letter (LXII) makes Usbek's predicament clear: the sole means he can rely on to infantilize his wives, fear, does not guarantee him what he wants. He himself becomes tortured by fear.

In sum: fear turns the natural inequality of physical strength into a political one. Women's status as slave reflects in general the situation of all subjects under the despot. And this situation is both unjust and unhappy: while it is unjust for the women in the harem, it creates unhappiness for both men and women, even in surprisingly similar ways. The natural attraction that exists between the sexes is then replaced by making wives into commodities not meant for display but for private enjoyment. As fear takes over, jealousy replaces love.

2.2 Monarchy.

Monarchy, represented in the PL by Paris (or France in general), is the rule of the single person in accordance with laws (SL II.1 and 4; PL CII). This means that the king does not wield absolute power, his authority does not originate in himself, but is derived from his ability to enforce and protect the laws that are more permanent than the individual kings that successively uphold them. The subjects of monarchy enjoy freedom. They use their freedom, however, in a way that can also be characterized as the spring of monarchy: they freely pursue honor (SL III.5-7; PL LXXXIX-XC). Honor is "the prejudice (le préjugé) of each person and each condition," or more straightforwardly, the opinion that one oneself is superior to others. This opinion motivates people to strive for ranks and distinctions, in other words, for public recognition and confirmation of that superiority.

Honor can be read as a response to the question posed by the Troglodyte story. That story suggested a disparity between the requirements of the common good and one's self-interested motivations; honor makes the

latter an unwitting means to the former. Political virtue, which will soon emerge as the principle of republics, is devotion to the common good simply (it was partially realized in the earlier lawful Troglodytes); honor is not identical with that devotion but brings about a similar result: the pursuit of self-aggrandizing actions turns out to be good for the public. According to Montesquieu, the person who devotes herself to the common good simply and the person who pursues honor differ from each other like "the good person" differs from "the good citizen."[10] While the good person is always good regardless of the regime she happens to live in, the good citizen is only good in a monarchy, because only by the workings of that kind of regime do her actions contribute to the common good. Honor under monarchy thus might be said to be Montesquieu's version of the invisible hand.

An important consequence of this is that monarchies encourage liberty and equality of opportunity between the sexes (SL XI.7). This is because doing something honorable means to do something beyond expectations, and one does this by one's own accord; the very condition for the pursuit of honor is self-determination. Honor is in this sense gender-blind. However, if the operation of fear tends to make men oppress women, the operation of honor tends to be in favor of women. Insofar as women are naturally weaker, doing something honorable is more difficult and beyond expectations to a larger degree. If a man and a woman both perform the same task usually perceived as honorable, say, risking danger to help another, the woman is admired much more than the man. And indeed the liberty enjoyed by women is one of the first things Usbek and Rica (the unmarried young Persian and Usbek's friend) notice when they arrive in Europe. European women show their faces in public (PL XXIII); they participate in and host social gatherings (XLVIII); they are cultivated, intelligent, and charming both physically and intellectually (XXXIV). Compared with Persia, Paris is obviously less repressive and allows the realization of human potential to a greater degree. Monarchy is clearly better than despotism insofar as individual happiness is concerned.

10 This distinction likely originated in Aristotle's *Politics* Book III.

The appeal of Paris, however, is soon cast under a shadow by Rica. His descriptions of the city are not entirely free of irony, ridicule, and sarcasm. The reader sees Parisians arguing against each other, filing divorce cases, and acting. They might not be actually happy in the final analysis. Why? It seems to have something to do with honor. The pursuit of public recognition means that one is attached to some external, visible feature that can be cognized and approved by others. Honor thus motivates a strong concern with external appearances. In PL C Rica describes Parisians anxiously following the fashion trends, due to fear of not keeping up with the times. In another letter (XXX), he notices how they treat him differently if he doesn't wear his exotic Persian clothes and wears the local, ordinary French ones instead. His letters slowly but firmly build up to the point that the liberty enjoyed by individuals becomes more of a burden than a blessing. In Rica's own ironic judgment, "if man is a social animal, then Parisians are the most social of all," insofar as whatever they do is predicated on the possible change of opinion that might occur (LXXXVII). Free striving for honor becomes unfreedom; to the extent that public opinion is as unpredictable as the despot's will, the despot's whims are replaced by the caprice of public opinion.[11] Honor under monarchy, the initially attractive solution to the plight of the last generation of Troglodytes, burdens the Parisians no less than virtue burdened that mythical tribe.

Honor, then, is a double-edged sword. In SL XXVIII.22, Montesquieu discusses gallant love, defining it as "the desire to please and be pleased." It is an "illusion of love" (emphasis added) that occurs more often in monarchies. The desire to please or flatter is the constitutive of the workings of honor. Women, in the desire to please, would make use of their charm and beauty. This leads to French women engaging in deception (and ultimately, perhaps self-deception as well) concerning their ages (PL LII). They are in denial about the inevitable loss of beauty that accompanies aging. Another parallel between Persia and Paris thereby shows up. While in the former, women are treated as things, as

11 Schaub (1995, p. 136) notes this as well. However, she argues that Montesquieu sees the "despotism" of public opinion as a "civilized fear" which, in putting emphasis on the interdependence between humans instead of a master-slave relation, is a good thing or at least better than the despot's reign of terror.

beauty items, in the latter they are treated as humans that still have little more to offer than beauty and charm.[12] The natural difference between the sexes is in both regimes socially and politically reinforced, if only in opposite directions (slavery versus freedom).

The second point showing that things are not as well as they seem, Montesquieu suggests, is the Parisian women losing their sexual modesty, an issue that concerns men as well. His argument contains a problematic premise, namely that women are by nature modest (see SL XVI.12, PL XXVI, and previous section). Given this assumption, lack of modesty cannot be due to feminine nature, but to men or convention (SL VII.8; Nyland, 1997, p. 399). It is difficult to say what to make of this, but perhaps the following might suffice for our purposes: regardless of whether women are naturally modest or not, monarchy tends to encourage sexual license. How does this happen? Again, the spring of honor. Honor comes from comparison: I am not just good, but need to prove myself better than others, to have things that others do not have. The need to win by comparing encourages luxury spending. Just as honorable actions are defined as doing what is beyond one is required to do, luxury is the possession of what is beyond the necessary things to have (SL VII.4). Luxury spending, however, breeds new desires. From a psychological point of view, Montesquieu argues, one cannot let one desire out and control others. If people are encouraged to pursue trivial, non-necessary desires, it is practically difficult, if theoretically possible, to make them not pursue the fleeting moments of sexual desire. As he puts it in SL VII.14: “incontinence...is always followed by luxury, and always follows luxury. If you leave the impulses of the heart at liberty, how can you hamper the weaknesses of the spirit?”

The loss of sexual modesty is bad for two reasons. First, it loosens the traditionally strong bonds created and solidified by marriage and family. Second, it comes back to injure the natural pride men have. At first sight, the Parisian men seem to adjust to the new situation quite well,

12 There is therefore little doubt that even the linguistic similarity between parisien and persane was intended by Montesquieu to reflect the two places as almost being two sides of the same coin. See also Kra (1984, p. 276-278) for a discussion of literary devices Montesquieu uses to draw the reader’s attention to the parallels between the two places.

since most of them do not behave in a jealous, possessive way towards their wives, and the jealous ones are actually ridiculed by others (*PL* LV). If they are cuckolded, they tolerate their wives, or simply commit adultery themselves (XXXVIII). So it appears that they support the principle of liberty to the extent of holding only views that do not harm it. However, the thought that "the universal appeal of women's beauty should be enjoyed by everyone and not just me" bespeaks a troubled state of mind underneath. As Rica astutely notes, the freedom French husbands allow their wives have little to do with their understanding, tender love, or trust of any kind towards them, but actually only with "the poor opinion they have of them" (LV). In short, they react to their deep distrust of women, the thought that they are weak against the temptations of sexual desires, by giving up the relation altogether. A third parallel where monarchy seems to show a despotic face: the possibility of love is similarly lost here because women are reduced to children once more.

It looks, then, that if monarchy partly solves the problem of the unnaturalness of justice through the mechanism of honor, that very mechanism suppresses the despotic unhappiness that might be lurking under the extravagance, splendor, and free-spiritedness of Parisian society. The inequality between sexes under despotism is clearly bad, while that under monarchy is only ambiguously good. For equality of the genuine kind, one has to turn to the republic regime.

2.3 Republic.[13]

As Shklar (1987, p. 37) notes, there is only one happy couple in the PL: Apheridon and his sister Astarte. He fell in love with her since childhood, and their story, as told in Letter LXVII, consists mostly in the obstacles that had to be overcome for them to be and stay together. The obstacles might be classified into three sorts, the political, the religious, and the economic. Apheridon's family believes in Zoroastrianism, according

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13 For purposes of this paper I do not distinguish, as Montesquieu does in the SL, between the two subtypes of republic regimes, namely democracy and aristocracy (II.2-3).

to which incest is permitted. But, even though their own religion was not an obstacle, another religion coupled with political power was. His father did not allow the marriage between him and Astarte out of fear of the "Mohammedans" (the Islamic rulers), who ruled over Persia and prohibited incest. So his father first separated them and then sold her as a servant for a sultana in a harem. Apheridon's feelings, however, did not at all diminish because of time and space. Eventually, he found where she was, but by that point, she was in a mock marriage with a eunuch, as the sultana was jealous of her beauty. Apheridon then attempted to convert her back from Islam into Zoroastrianism. They had two long conversations, after which he leaves the Zoroastrian text Avesta for her to read. Having recalled her old faith through reading the text, she rekindles her love for her brother, and they escaped from the harem. As staying in Persia was no longer viable, they settled in Georgia. But their seclusion in that place led eventually to financial problems, and Apheridon had to go back to Persia to seek help from relatives. Unfortunately, not only did he fail to find help, but during his absence the Tartars kidnapped Astarte and sold her to Jews. Again Apheridon found her, but he did not have money to buy her back. So he first sold himself and their daughter as slaves to an Armenian merchant, so he could use the money paid thereof for her freedom. However, after Astarte was released, she sold herself as a slave to the same merchant in order to be together with him. Upon hearing their story, the merchant took pity on them, and promised to set them free after a year of diligent service. Apheridon ultimately ends up as a businessman in Smyrna and lived happily as a free man with his family at the end.

The couple, similar to the early lawful Troglodytes, exemplify justice or political virtue, the spring of the republic regime. Political virtue consists in the devotion to the common good (SL III.3-4).[14] Both Apheridon and Astarte put the other before oneself as shown in their reaction to the slavery the other is suffering. Their individual happiness, as they conceive of it, is inseparable from their togetherness and unity. In the republic, therefore, freedom and virtue appear harmonious, as

14 There is a difference, however, according to McAlpin, 2000: the Troglodytes had political virtue while still treating women as things instead of persons. But this difference is immaterial to my argument.

both Apheridon and Astarte do the virtuous deeds of their own accord. Moreover, political virtue seems to be conducive to, if it does not necessitate, equality of the following kind. As Schaub (1995, p. 107-8) perceptively notes, the equality under question is based on similarity instead of complementarity. In the latter kind of equality, husband and wife play gendered roles in the family unit, each respecting the other's sphere of influence and knowledge. But Apheridon and Astarte's relation is not of this sort. Schaub notes three points in the story that suggest this. When Apheridon and Astarte were serving the Armenian merchant, Apheridon reports that "I was delighted when I was able to do my sister's work," an indication of the interchangeability between their assigned tasks. As hinted at before, the specific gendered natures have become fluid on account of the power of human intellect to adapt and adjust. Apheridon's and Astarte's ability to do each other's work thus show their transcending natural differences. Second, when Apheridon attempts to convert Astarte back to Zoroastrianism, they converse on equal terms, and he fully respects her power to make up her own mind. Thirdly, the most striking feature of the story –– incestuous love –– appears not to be endorsing incest per se, but also similarity.[15] Their bond of love is rooted in an unbreakable blood relation. If we read their togetherness as a miniature model for how republics work, it could be said that Montesquieu endorses the spirit behind the noble lie endorsed in Plato's Republic, if not the lie itself: the harmony between virtue and freedom is only possible if members of a community can see each other as kins. To Schaub's observations we may add a fourth: the remarkable absence of jealousy. Even when the marriage with the eunuch was a mock one, the Tartars' kidnapping of Astarte presumably involved rape (even if not explicitly mentioned in the text), but Apheridon did not show any signs of torment over that, which would be a sign of male jealousy over the female as a possession. This lack of jealousy, especially when compared with the situations in both Persia and Paris, seems to have something

15 Kettler, 1964 and Shklar, 1987 interpret incest as a sign that the story suggests that "...the rules of society do nothing to make us good or happy" (Shklar, 1987, p. 37). This is simplistic in light of the fact that Zoroastrianism, which allows incestuous love, is also a "rule of society" just like Christianity and Islam are rules of society. I suggest instead that what Montesquieu draws our attention to by basing this love story on incest is not the Rousseauan view that societies disregard our happiness, but rather that the ingredients of human happiness are themselves in tension –– human happiness both needs and rejects what makes society possible (cf. 1.2 above).

to do with the equality based on similarity as well. Apheridon, in his whole account, never mentions how beautiful he thought Astarte was. Those who did think her beautiful, and Apheridon never says whether he agrees with them or not, were the Tartars and the sultana, namely those who inflicted harm on her. One might say that Apheridon's love is not based on Astarte's physical beauty, which, as mentioned before, is one of the key natural differences between men and women. In other words, the absence of jealousy seems to have something to do with the suppression of or abstraction from visible natural differences. Equality based on similarity is not completely natural.

While the happiness of this family is meant to suggest the desirability of such a man-woman relation and the republic regime it represents, the unnatural character of the equality makes the realization of it look difficult if not impossible. And other parts of the story reinforce this point. To begin with, the eventual happiness was never totally in the lovers' control, despite the heroic effort to overcome those obstacles. Apheridon needed a lot of luck to find Astarte twice; Astarte might have been dead after being kidnapped; the merchant's pity was necessary to make them free. Read allegorically, Astarte's conversion scene might indicate the necessity of religious reform for the realization of a republic. (That both Islam and Christianity in Montesquieu's time regard women as inferior is mentioned several times in the novel, e.g. PL CXLI, XXXVIII.).[16] In any case, it is not completely up to humans to realize republics even if they wanted to.

A second indication of the difficulty lies in the following fact. While in the PL, a despotic kind of love happens under despotic regimes, and monarchic love happens under monarchic regimes, republican love between Apheridon and Astarte did not happen in a republic regime. Their story first unfolded under despotism (Persia), then a lawless country that does not even have a despot (Georgia), and finally, their journey ended in Smyrna, a commercial city with European influence among the ruins of other cities in Turkey (PL XIX). Does Montesquieu

16 Incidentally, the pity of the merchant seems to be an exemplification of Montesquieu's famous assertion that commerce is good for the promotion of gentle characters such as the merchant exhibits (SL XX.1-2).

wish to suggest that there are no real life examples of republics, that an improbable tale of incestuous and heroic love is the closest we can have to imagining what a republic might look like?

This is very likely his intention. To see how this is the case, we need to turn to the SL. It appears that real examples of republics existed, at least in Europe –– for example Greece (more precisely, Athens) and Rome. If this is so, why couldn't Montesquieu invent a love story that takes place in those regimes? One answer might be that he thought that in ancient republics, the relationship between the sexes was unequal. But why did that happen? It seems that, according to his account, the inequality was a byproduct of the need to restrict luxury spending. There was one thing that the ancient republics understood, according to Montesquieu, namely that luxury weakens political virtue. This was also hinted at in the Troglodytes story: the later Troglodytes wished to be ruled by laws and a king, and part of the reason seems to be their wealth. An argument can explain why this is so. Luxury spending tends to increase competition between citizens, which leads to inequality of wealth. Unequal wealth, in turn, produces class divisions that make it difficult for citizens to see each other as brethrens (SL VII.2, 8-9; Nyland, 1997, p. 398-9). And the notion "my fellow citizen is my family" is indispensable for making the practice of justice psychologically easy. Couple this with the ancient view (erroneous, in Montesquieu's estimation) that women are idle and most likely to indulge or encourage luxury spending, and the result is a rigorous disciplining of women in history.

This historical analysis of ancient republics signals two points worthy of mention. First, the difficulty of realizing the republic is compounded by the ambiguous effect of commerce. On the one hand, Montesquieu recognizes its potential to make humans more gentle and more sociable. The need to conduct peaceful, constant transactions with foreigners breeds customs of trust and hospitality (see note 16).[17] On the other hand, its development tends to encourage or require the demand for luxury items, which corrupts civic virtue. Apheridon and Astarte's poverty indirectly led to the kidnapping by the Tartars: virtue cannot survive or

17 A detailed examination of this argument in the SL XX.1-2 must be left for another occasion.

thrive without "equipment," as Aristotle would put it, that is, moderate wealth. No wonder their happiness ends with Apheridon becoming a businessman. Second, the very fact that Montesquieu refrains from setting Apheridon and Astarte's story in a historical republic indicates that the "republic" he has in mind might not be identical with the ancient one. He might be instituting a new ideal that has not even been conceived of so far.

It might be said that Montesquieu still uses the old word "republic" because his new ideal shares something of the same with the old ideal, namely the understanding that politics exists primarily for the sake of virtue and only secondarily for the sake of freedom. He wishes to say, let me suggest, that virtue is compatible with two modifications of ancient republics. The first modification is a more friendly, if not completely laissez-faire, attitude towards commerce. One indication of this is that Apheridon ended up being a merchant and was even able to tell his story to someone like Rica because of his profession. If ancient republics were correct in seeing the negative aspects of commerce, Montesquieu wishes to emphasize its positive side. The second modification is naturally equality between men and women. Montesquieu's own assessment of the ancient republics' treatment of women is not without ambiguity. He says that in Greece, "...women's virtue, simplicity, and chastity were such that one has scarcely ever seen a people who had a better police in this regard" (SL VII.9, emphasis added). In the same chapter, however, he says that "in republics women are free by laws and captured by the mores (libres par les lois, et captivées par les mœurs)." This suggests, however, that republics at the very least pay lip service to the freedom of women. The practice of ancient republics, then, is somewhat inconsistent: they recognize women's equal footing with men in theory, while treating them discriminately in practice. No wonder that even marriages in ancient republics are reduced to friendship (amitié, cf. note 9 above), a remark not without a tinge of irony. Montesquieu seems to be saying, in other words, that the inconsistency of ancient republics compels us to modify the model that fits the spirit of the republic better, and that model is exemplified in Apheridon and Astarte.

To say that a new ideal of the republic is desirable, however, is not to say that it is practically possible. We have already seen the difficulties hinted by Apheridon and Astarte's story above. However, are there promising signs showing that an approximation of the ideal is nevertheless possible? The PL provides an answer to that as well.

3 Liberation of Women and a New Image of Humanity

The story of Apheridon and Astarte itself alludes to the need for religious reforms and new views towards commerce if equality between sexes is to be realized.[18] But what about political reforms? More precisely, are there possibilities within monarchy and despotism that point to radical changes of regime into the new republic ideal just discussed? Montesquieu, let me suggest, indicates such signs in monarchy (or his contemporary Paris) in PL CVII. To further grasp the significance of this letter, two other ones should be consulted: Rica's fiction of a harem revolution showing the parallel diagnosis under despotism (CXLI), and Roxane's suicide letter that closes the novel (CLXI).

A comparison of those latter two letters with the former one shows little hope for change under despotism. Roxane's suicide is, at its best, a moral victory. She has no other options to assert her autonomy. Her words and deeds form a powerful indictment of despotic rule without transforming it in any way. If her deception of Usbek and consequent arrangements of sexual encounters with men outside the harem count as a revolution, that transformation of "the frightful harem into a place of delight and pleasure" was short-lived. Her restoration of human nature (as she claims to Usbek, "I reformed your laws by those of nature") is and must remain secret in the context of despotism.

What about Anais, the heroine in Rica's fiction? The story is roughly something like the following. Anais, after being killed by Ibrahim, her savage husband, went to heaven because of her virtue. In heaven, she

18 See also Letters XXIV (more on religious reforms) and CXXXII (economic ones –– presented as a critique of John Law's currency reform.

undertakes to save Ibrahim's other wives by sending one of her heavenly husbands disguised as Ibrahim to replace the original one. Once the new Ibrahim takes charge of the harem, he immediately releases the eunuchs and lets the other wives show their faces in public. Anais' revolution is different, then, from Roxane's in its scope and intent. Anais emancipates her fellow wives; Roxane emancipates only a few of her fellow wives. Roxane emphasizes the legitimacy of pleasure on the grounds of nature; Anais or her heavenly husband Ibrahim make the revolution one of public recognition, with no appeal to nature. As Schaub (1995, pp. 99-100) notes, however, Anais's victory is no less ambiguous than Roxane's is moral. At the end, The heavenly Ibrahim only emancipated one harem, leaving the others unchanged (cf. also McAlpin, 2000, p. 56). He even realizes that "the customs of this country was not for him," and eventually leaves the country after setting Anais' fellow wives free. It is not unreasonable to think that they will soon return to their old condition without the protection of the heavenly Ibrahim. In sum, not only is women's condition under despotism bad, but it is also not prone to improvement. The prospects are bleak indeed.

Paris or France then looks promising by comparison. In PL CVII, Rica observes that women have a lot of influence politically in France, even though on the surface this does not appear to be the case. In other words, while Roxane limits her revolution within the domestic, and Anais at her best needed a man to politicize her domestic revolution, French women are themselves already part of politics. It seems that the encouragement of self-expression by the workings of honor under monarchy allows participation of an informal sort by women (SL VII.9). Informal, because they do not hold office; and therefore difficult to discern. But they are secret gears in the huge machine that is French politics. As Rica/Montesquieu puts it, "...anyone at court...who observes the action of the ministers, magistrates, and prelates, unless he knows the women who govern them, is like a man watching a machine work without knowing about the springs that drive it" (emphasis added).[19]

19 Whether this description of Montesquieu's French is historically accurate does not affect my argument here; however, it is worthy of mention that Nyland (1997, p. 399) cites historians who accept this description as true of those times.

Publicly, women are ruled by men; but behind the curtains, women, as a collective political power, rule men instead.

How is this involvement of women in politics possible in France at all? A long answer is required and cannot be taken up fully here. However one thing bears mentioning: whether it is Roxane, Anais, or politically active French women, a psychological transformation must precede the political one. Both Roxane and Anais exhibit courage in the face of despotic terror. Roxane's language bespeaks heroic qualities. She twice speaks of her "spirit (esprit)" instead of her soul (âme); she never submitted to the fate of being married to someone she does not love; and she conceives of her life as an endless battle for freedom. Faced with Ibrahim's threats, Anais reacted in a similar way: her "force d'esprit," which we might translate "strength of mind," makes her scorn them. In addition, Anais showed compassion and thoughtfulness. After living a life of pleasure in the heavens, she finally came to her senses. With her "truly philosophical mind" she began reflecting on her situation on earth. This is what incited her pity for her fellow wives and resulted in her plan to save them.[20] In short, the masculine qualities (manliness, the spiritedness to fight for freedom, and a strong and philosophical intellect) are integrated with the feminine qualities (compassion, pity, sympathy) to produce revolutionary forces. To repeat a point made before: the natural difference between men and women again does not, for Montesquieu, imply a necessary division of labor in convention. This fluidity is exemplified in French women as well: by becoming bearers of a more comprehensive humanity, they are qualified to participate in politics. This is why, according to Rica, women do not become a minister's mistress merely for the sake of sleeping with him; they do so in order "to be able to submit five or six petitions every morning." They exhibit a "natural goodness" in their eagerness to help out and to be known as helpers throughout the country. In other words,

20 I note in passing that Anais symbolically occupies the position of the Christian god, whose son (her husband) descends from heaven for the sake of humankind: the compassion of the Christian god is therefore seen as something positive in Montesquieu's estimation. If the unfavorable bias towards women in Christianity is something that needs to be overcome, the humanitarian love of Christianity can be the ally of political reform.

the courage that Roxane and Anais must gather to counter despotism is not lacking, but tempered with civility among French women: a “public spiritedness,” to use Schaub’s apt phrase (1995, p. 105; 123-4), a humanitarian benevolence transfigured and elevated from their erotic desires.

It almost looks as if women are already behaving like republicans, that is, people with justice or civic virtue, and this is indeed borne out by Rica’s description: women in French politics is “like a republic within a monarchy.” While Roxane and Anais have to fight for women first, French women can afford to exercise their capacity to care for the common good, both men and women alike. Even more interestingly, the socially defined hierarchy between them do not seem as rigid as the distinctions and ranks among men. Due to the very fact that women’s influence in France is not socially specified with clear-cut determinations of rights and duties, this suggests that the communication and exchanges between women, and even between women and men, take place on a less unequal (if not truly equal) terms than those that would usually result from tightly-defined hierarchical relations. They can afford to ignore the unequal norms prevalent in monarchy precisely because they exert their influence privately, behind the curtains as it were.

Strangely enough, despite all the seemingly positive descriptions of France, Rica is repulsed by what he sees. Some like Nyland (1997, p. 401) consider this to be Montesquieu’s opinion as well. Others (such as McAlpin, 2000) simply ignore the fact that the tone of the letter is almost derogatory and fail to explain it altogether. While I do not think Rica’s disgust can be identified with Montesquieu’s own view without qualification, I would suggest that Montesquieu intentionally exaggerates the negativity to encourage the reader (the majority of whom would be his contemporary French fellow citizens) to think what might be wrong in France. In other words, he exaggerates to create the distance necessary for reflection on one’s own conventions. It should not come as a total surprise that Rica, as open-minded as he is, might still find the situation where men are secretly controled by women

rather unpleasant and even loathesome. After all, he is coming from Persia where males rule over females, his youth and open-mindedness notwithstanding. But even this prejudice is not completely unjustified. France shows signs of the worrisome possibility of a reversal of inequality, but this time in favor of women instead of men. That would be as undesirable as the other inequalities. Moreover, while they could be going in a desirable direction of republican equality, they also could be reinforcing the negative tendencies in monarchy. If the "republic within a monarchy" expression suggests that monarchy is tending towards equality, it could equally suggest that there is an internal divide within a country and even might lead to a "battle of the sexes" situation. In light of these considerations, Rica's repulsion is perhaps best read as a cautious warning from Montesquieu to his fellow citizens: France is in a transitional, but only transitional, phase towards equality, a phase that is not without dangers.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me raise three general points. First, Montesquieu's diagnosis of the potential of monarchy towards equality suggests that he certainly puts women at the center when thinking about political and social reforms. If the political revolution is tending towards equality, equality is not something to be realized, as if it only exists in the future and "is not yet here." In a crucial sense, it must "already be here," if not comprehensively, at least in a significant portion of society. This portion is identified by Montesquieu in a transformation of women. Furthermore, he suggests that the revolution of women's self-understanding precedes the political revolution towards republics. Insofar as feminism involves the understanding that the situation of women is crucial for society as a whole, that their revolution always has consequences reaching beyond themselves, Montesquieu's very thinking can be said to be feminist or proto-feminist.

More generally speaking, for Montesquieu, the "ideological" revolution,

the revolution in how we understand ourselves, is the crucial condition for the success of political, religious, or economic revolutions. Precisely because the historical oppression of women has led women themselves to think of themselves in a biased way, curing this bias becomes all the more necessary before anything else. Roxane and Anais are liberated from those opinions of themselves. Montesquieu himself opens his *magnum opus* by stating that his intention is to cure people of prejudices. What are prejudices (*préjugé*)? He says that it is "not what makes one ignorant of certain things, but what makes one unaware [alternatively, "ignorant"] of oneself" (*SL* Preface).[21] Precisely through showing the reader the self-understandings, self-misunderstandings, and self-deceptions of all kinds of characters –– women and men, east and west –– the *Persian Letters* practices philosophy in the old Socratic sense: making us aware of who we are as humans. The novel itself is meant as such an ideological revolution: Montesquieu is himself the heavenly Ibrahim writing on behalf of women.

Finally, the situation of French women illustrate an interesting notion of equality in the context of contemporary gender (and more generally identity) politics. It was said before that the republican equality relies on abstraction, namely the disregard of the natural sexual differences. However, as the analyses of the republican regime and French politics show, there is another way of conceiving of republican equality: not abstraction, but integration. Instead of bypassing differences for the sake of what we share in common, women under French monarchy suggest a mobilization of those differences into a more inclusive view of humanity. More concretely, not all differences are to be tolerated for the sake of avoiding antagonism, but some of them should be actively promoted because of their potential to unify and produce cohesion in society. Accordingly, this more comprehensive conception of humanity that accompanies Montesquieu's new vision of politics need not be abstract. Put more bluntly, he does not "de-sex" humanity but "androgynizes" it. The androgynous vision might turn out to be the human nature we look to realize through conventions.

21 It is useful here to recall that préjugé was part of the very definition of honor (see 2.2 above). Montesquieu then is suggesting that monarchy works by a blind spot in one's understanding of who one is.

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