

*Fear and Loathing in the French Enlightenment:
Despotism and Republican Citizenship in Montesquieu's Lettres Persanes*

Megan Gallagher
University of California, Los Angeles
Department of Political Science
mgallagher@ucla.edu

Draft prepared for the 2013 WPSA Conference— please do not circulate without permission.

Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the passions play an important and as yet underappreciated role in republican political thought. I introduce a theory of affective practices in order to read Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, which has been interpreted as an exercise in, or commentary on, Enlightenment Europe's encounters with "the other." By employing the language of the passions in fictional genres, Montesquieu explores the ethical and political potential for the development of a republican form of citizenship. Specifically, the text envisions a republican politics that challenge and unsettle a despotic regime. By invoking two negative passions, namely fear and disgust, Montesquieu imaginatively engages the (fictional) self and the other in the production of new configurations of republican citizenship, via the character of Roxane, and contrasts it with despotic subjection. I argue that Montesquieu's *Lettres* constitutes part of a critical program directed against despotism in pre-revolutionary France and, more broadly, that republican political thought would be enriched by attending to the passions.

What is the quality of mine offence,
Being constrain'd with dreadful circumstance?
May my pure mind with the foul act dispense,
My low-declined honour to advance?
May any terms acquit me from this chance?
The poison'd fountain clears itself again;
And why not I from this compelled stain?
- Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece* (ln. 1753-1759)

I. *Introduction: Reviving Republican Passions*¹

Republican political thought is fundamentally concerned with civic virtue. This remains the case whether we look to ancient Rome, the humanism of the Italian renaissance, or the early modern English tradition represented by Bolingbroke and Harrington. We find frequent mentions of civic virtues in contemporary discourses of republicanism as well – the historiographical work of the Cambridge School, the neo-republicanism of Philip Pettit, and the constitutional patriotism advocated by Jürgen Habermas. Yet the actual substance of virtue, and its relationship to republicanism, frequently goes undefined. Virtue is treated as something of an animated corpse, going through the motions but rather detached from the proceedings. I argue that to enliven virtue, we must consider its relationship to the passions and their place in republican thought. Whereas liberalism will come to replace the burden of virtue with the burden of dispassionate judgment, republicanism clings to the potential of its citizenry's virtuosity and the idea that

¹ This paper is a draft of a chapter in my dissertation, in which I argue that the revival of interest in republican civic virtue that we are experiencing in political theory requires a substantive account of political feeling. Civic virtue's claim on republican practices derives not from juridical principles but from ethical and emotional commitments to extra-legal concepts such as duty, responsibility, and honor. Yet the contemporary literature on republicanism largely fails to account for this dimension and suffers from what I call an affective deficit. Building on the theory of "emotives" developed by historian William Reddy in *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (2001), and through a series of close readings of republican political theory from the eighteenth century, I develop in the dissertation a distinct theory of "affective practices" – the ways in which feelings of devotion to one's country are cogitated upon, judged, enacted in the body and communicated to others – so that we may understand how the passions are employed in the pursuit, maintenance, and critique of republican politics by its defenders and detractors alike. For comments on an earlier draft, I thank Kirstie McClure, Libby Barringer, Emily Hallock, Althea Sircar, and members of the UCLA Early Modern Research Group, especially Barbara Fuchs, Sarah Kareem, and Malina Stefanovska.

something akin to character is required to participate in politics. The revival of interest in republican civic virtue that we are experiencing in political theory and the history of political thought requires a substantive account of political feeling. In spite of this, the history of republican thought and the history of the passions are two threads that rarely find themselves intertwined.

The literature of the French Enlightenment, however, provides a crucial exception to this general observation. The long eighteenth century is ideal conceptual territory for considering the intersection of passions and republicanism, considering both the period's deserved reputation as both the age of sentiment and burgeoning romanticism and its entanglements with republican politics. Moreover, the specific flexibility of fiction as a genre, as compared to the philosophical treatise, permitted the exploration of both republican ideas and the associated passionate experiences. In pursuing this argument, I develop a close reading of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*. Standard readings interpret the text as an exercise in, or commentary on, Enlightenment Europe's encounters with "the other." I suggest that this is only part of what the work accomplishes. By employing the language of the passions in fictional genres, Montesquieu explores the ethical and political potential for the development of a republican form of citizenship. Specifically, the text envisions a republican politics that challenges and unsettles a despotic regime. By invoking a pair of negative passions, namely fear and disgust, Montesquieu imaginatively engages the (fictional) self and the other in the production of new configurations of republican citizenship. Ultimately, I argue that Montesquieu's text constitutes a key part of a critical program directed against despotism in pre-revolutionary France.²

² For a persuasive reading of the *Lettres Persanes* as an example of a "fantasm, a purely fictional construction onto which Europe's own sexual repressions, erotic fantasies, and desire of domination were projected," rather than a predominantly political allegory, see Ali Behdad, "The Eroticized Orient: Images of the Harem in Montesquieu and His Precursors," *Stanford French Review* 13.2-3 (1989), 109-126.

In the paper's second section, I return to the relationship of republican political thought and theories of the passions in eighteenth-century thought. Drawing on the recent and growing literature on affect and the passions, I introduce a theory of "affective practices" to describe and analyze the ways in which specifically political feelings are cogitated upon, judged, enacted in the body and communicated to others. I suggest that while most theories of the emotions are primarily interested in subjective experience, the idea of affective practices is more encompassing, as it is also concerned with the public display and exchange of emotions. Affective practices are intersubjective and other-regarding.³ To that end, I suggest they are an appropriate theoretical tactic for considering republican passions, which are necessarily with civic responsibility and the greater good.

In the third section, I begin to apply this idea to Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*. I read the epistolary novel as an early attempt on Montesquieu's part to theorize republican alternatives to living in a condition of fear endemic to despotic regimes. Though the seraglio is often read (rightly so) as the site of despotic, barely governed passions and despotic regimes are characterized in the *Laws* by the subjects' fear of their ruler, I argue that Montesquieu does not therefore favor the elimination of the passions as part of the "solution" to despotism.⁴ Rather, he theorizes a transmutation of affective practices, from self-regarding fear to other-regarding honor, the "spring" of republican government.

³ I do not impose strict distinctions on "affect," "emotion," and "passion." In general, I use "affect" in the context of "affective practices" and thus to reference a combination of corporeal and cognitive functions that involve communicating with others. I use "emotion" colloquially but sparingly, given its highly psychologized associations in modern parlance. I use "passion" to refer to individual "feelings" in an early modern context where they would likely be referred to as such by contemporaneous figures. Passions might include love, desire, hatred, or sadness, for example.

⁴ Behdad calls our attention to the fact that Montesquieu uses seraglio and harem interchangeably. According to their original meanings in the Persian, the former refers to the Sultan's palace in its entirety and the latter refers exclusively to the women's chambers. I use the broader term *seraglio* throughout in order to indicate a parallel with the despotic *state*. "The Eroticized Orient," 114n.13.

We witness this transmutation most particularly in the relationship between the despotic Usbek⁵ and his favored wife, Roxane, whose suicide clearly parallels that of the Roman, and republican, heroine Lucretia. In the paper's fourth section, I interpret the suicide of Roxane (and her simultaneous destruction of the rest of seraglio) as analogous to Lucretia's suicide. Roxane's death, I argue, is also the means by which Montesquieu introduces a new set of affective practices into a despotic polity. These practices are specifically other-regarding and potentially republican. The conclusion performs its eponymous role in the fifth section.

II. *Affective Practices in Enlightenment Thought*

There is, as numerous commentators have pointed out, a long-standing confusion attached to the language of the passions in early modern thought.⁶ The confusion is rooted in the plurality of meanings attributed to a wide range of overlapping but not synonymous terms across languages, as well as the anachronistic imposition of modern definitions onto early modern discourses. As David Schalkwyk points out, what would often be termed an "emotion" in the twenty-first century was more likely referred to as a "passion," or "agitation of the soul," in the early modern period – particularly through the seventeenth century.⁷ The language used to identify varieties of feeling and, arguably, the entire perspective of western thought underwent a significant shift in the period between Descartes and Rousseau.⁸

One of the most widely used vocabularies in the eighteenth century is that of *sentiment*, which comes to English via Medieval Latin and Old French from the Latin verb, *sentīre*. Lewis

⁵ I return below to the quandary that Usbek is not only, or always, characterized by the despotic tendencies he demonstrates toward the seraglio.

⁶ See Jock Macleod, "Rousseau and the Epistemology of 'Sentiment,'" *Journal of European Studies* 17 (1987), 109-112; David Schalkwyk, "Is Love an Emotion? Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra*," *symplokē* 18.1-2 (2010): 99-130.

⁷ Schalkwyk, 103.

⁸ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments," *Philosophy* 57.220 (1982), 159.

& Short define the latter as “to discern by the senses; to feel, hear, see, etc.; to perceive, be sensible of.”⁹ Likewise, of affect (*affectus*), the OED informs that its classical Latin meanings include: “mental or emotional state or reaction (especially a temporary one), physical state or condition (especially a pathological one), influence or impression, permanent mental or moral disposition, eagerness, zeal, devotion, love, intention, purpose,” while post-classical Latin adds “evil desire” to the list. Thus from the very linguistic root, there is an ambiguity: is the subject active or a passive receptor of impulse and information? Does “feeling” involve making judgments or acting upon cognitively processed decisions?

Here, the etymology of *emotion* is instructive. The word comes to us in English from the confluence of classical and post-classical Latin declensions of *ēmovēre* (to remove, expel, to banish from the mind, to shift, displace) and Middle French’s *esmocion* and *esmotion* (agitation of mind, excited mental state, movement, disturbance, strong feelings, passion).¹⁰ Though an obscure usage now, until the end of the eighteenth century, *emotion* was not primarily used to characterize the subjective experience of emotions that are constitutive of one’s sense of an interior self or personality. That usage was not unheard of but it was not dominant. Rather, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *emotion* was used to refer to “political agitation, civil unrest; a public commotion or uprising,” “movement; disturbance, perturbation,” including physical movement. In the OED, weather is frequently attributed with emotions, as are nations of people, or factions such as the French nobility. In *Tatler* Number 24, Joseph Addison wrote of “Accounts of Publick Emotions, occasion’d by the Want of Corn.”¹¹

In the introduction to one of the most widely read contemporary works on emotions

⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “*sentiment*.” Third edition. Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “*sentio*.” Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “*affect*.” Third edition.

¹⁰ The word was common throughout much of Europe by the early modern period: Spanish had *emoción* by 1580, Italian had *emozione* by 1648, and German had *Emotion* by the early seventeenth century.

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “*emotion*.” Third edition.

theory, Sara Ahmed suggests that “one could characterize a significant ‘split’ in theories of emotion in terms of whether emotions are tied primarily to bodily sensations or to cognition,” with Descartes and Hume as examples of the former and Aristotle an example of the latter.¹² This is correct in the broadest sense but historically inattentive. Though dangerous to generalize, it is fair to note that throughout much of the early modern period, treatises on the emotions emphasized their dual nature. It is that case that some emotions were considered to have either cognitive or physiological (or biological) elements, depending upon what aspect of the soul they were believed to have originated in, the rational or the sensitive.¹³ As Adrian Johns writes, “the *metaphysical* passions were restricted to the rational soul, and were familiar to divines as the affections appropriate to religious contemplation, while the *physical* passions affected the sensitive soul through material, effluvial mechanisms.”¹⁴

Yet after Descartes, “the passions could no longer be conceived as impulses of the material organic soul, any more than the conflict between passion and reason could be represented as a struggle between the organic and intellectual souls. And once this landscape was abandoned, the need for a new analysis of the passions, consonant with Cartesian metaphysics, was soon felt.”¹⁵ According to the Cartesian model of perception, the passions were an unavoidable filter through which information passed from the world to the individual.

The “information” with which this paper is concerned is, of course, republican political thought. One method of understanding the precise manner in which this information is filtered is to employ the theory of “emotives” developed by historian William Reddy. Reddy’s account

¹² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge), 5.

¹³ The latter was also referred to as the irrational or appetitive.

¹⁴ Adrian Johns, “The Physiology of Reading: Print and the Passions,” in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 401.

¹⁵ Susan James, “The Passions in Metaphysics and the Theory of Action,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Volume I, eds. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 918.

relies on his readings of recent work on the emotions in cognitive psychology and anthropology, but it is primarily indebted to J.L. Austin's theory of the speech act, as outlined in *How to Do Things with Words*, and the poststructuralist instantiation of the signifier and the sign as articulated by, among others, Jacques Derrida. Reddy's first move is "to propose a concept of 'translation' as a replacement for the poststructuralist concept of 'sign.'"¹⁶ His purpose in doing so is to escape the criticism frequently aimed at poststructuralism, that one can never reach an "original" signified that is not somehow also signifier and thus, everything becomes discourse.¹⁷

To shift to the language of translation accomplishes more than a mere terminological sleight of hand. Translation, as it does engage the potential of infinite regress, "is something that goes on, not just between language and between individuals, but among sensory modalities, procedural habits, and linguistic structures."¹⁸ Drawing from cognitive psychology, Reddy imagines "a conception of the individual as a site where messages arrive in many different languages or codes, and where some of the messages are successfully translated into other codes, while others are not... This way of thinking about cognition points toward a novel understanding of the relation between feeling and utterances, since the latter must always constitute translations into speech of the former."¹⁹ Attention is a cognitive function that serves as a "translator," which tends to "thought material," the thoughts, emotions, ideas, and all manner of cognitive fodder that "[exist] in many codes, linguistic and extralinguistic."²⁰ Translation of thought material

¹⁶ William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78.

¹⁷ Reddy recognizes that Derrida, and other poststructuralist thinkers, responded to this criticism (see especially page 76). He is primarily interested in making a lateral move to the language of translation that the discourse of signified and signifier allows and his approach remains poststructuralist in significant ways.

¹⁸ Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 80.

¹⁹ Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 80.

²⁰ Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 87.

necessarily “involves an element of indeterminacy.”²¹

Reddy defines an emotion as “loosely-connected schema of thought material” that is “activated” simultaneously but which “exceeds attention’s capacity to translate it into action or into talk in a short time horizon.”²² One feels an emotion or a feeling when flooded by thought material without the ability to translate immediately into a linguistic code. Reddy argues that this conception of translation leads to a new theory of subjectivity: the self as disaggregated. “Its disunity derives directly from the fact that it has constantly before it flows of signifiers in many different codes or languages, both verbal and nonverbal, in constant need of translation,” which are by definition incomplete and indeterminate.²³

The theory of emotives constitutes an alluring alternative to the reductionist tendencies often found within cognitive psychology, as well as speech act theory’s general inattentiveness to the physiological conditions under which constative and performative acts occur. It does however pose one significant difficulty when employed to understand the role of emotions in political discourse. Reddy’s theory, so far as it is developed within *The Navigation of Feeling*, is primarily intrapersonal. The translation that occurs is entirely within the sovereign subject who, if attuned to the act of “translation,” is also aware of the questionable status of his or her own subjectivity.

According to the theory of emotives, the individual remains “provisional.” Reddy explicitly contrasts what he calls “the disaggregated self” with the Cartesian subject and a “poststructuralists’ vision of an illusory self generated as a byproduct of a discursive structure.”²⁴ But in so doing, he overlooks (or perhaps is simply not concerned with) the radical individuating

²¹ Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 84.

²² Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 94.

²³ Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 95.

²⁴ Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 95.

effect of emotive theory. By uniting, however loosely, the disparate aspects of the self – physiology, emotion, speech – Reddy has simultaneously undercut the means by which individuals relate to other individuals. There is simply no accounting for translation between two people.

I suggest that, in addition to the tools provided by Reddy, we add *affective practices*. I define affective practices as the ways in which emotions are cogitated upon, judged, enacted in the body and, crucially, communicated to others, in the pursuit, maintenance, and critique of specific goals. Just as Reddy’s emotives and thought material are intentionally expansive concepts, so is the theory of affective practices. The key distinction, embodied in the language of practice, is the gesture toward habitual or regular practices of exchange and, moreover practices which can be done in concert with others. Whereas emotives can remain isolating and apolitical, affective practices require a shared life. In the following section, I develop this theory of affective practices in a reading of the role of despotism and fear in Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*.

III. *Fear and Self-Deception in Lettres Persanes*

Despotism remains an under-defined, and therefore contestable, concept within western political thought.²⁵ It is Montesquieu who is responsible for reviving the language.²⁶ While

²⁵ Consider that the most recent comprehensive study of the subject is a two-volume work published in 2001 not yet translated from the original Italian, *Dispotismo*, ed. Domenico Felice (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2001). Beyond that, one must turn to a 1951 essay by Richard Koebner, “Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 14, 272–302; or two works by Montesquieu scholar Melvin Richter, “The History of the Concept of Despotism,” in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), Vol. 2, 1-20, and “A Family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750-1917,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 4.3 (2005), 221-248.

²⁶ Alain Grosrichard traces the eighteenth century’s etymological revival of “despotism” in the excellent *The Sultan’s Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso Books, 1998), 4-

Aristotle considered despotism an appropriate regime for “natural slaves,”²⁷ he nonetheless emphasized a typology of forms of government that included aristocracy, constitutional rule, and monarchy (which have the capacity to devolve, respectively, into oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny). Montesquieu breaks with this formation in *L’Esprit des lois* and established a new triptych of monarchy, republicanism, and despotism.²⁸ To each of these regime types, he assigns a “nature” and a “principle,” or what Montesquieu scholar Melvin Richter has described as structure and operative passion, respectively.²⁹ For monarchies, the principle is honor; for republics, the principle is virtue. For despotic states, the principle, or operative passion, is fear, primarily fear of the prince, who rules according to his absolute and arbitrary will – in other words, according to his passions. This is not to imply that the passions have an exclusively negative connotation, but rather that the passions of the despot are self-regarding. The despotic ruler’s primary motivation is the fulfillment of his own desires.

In *L’Esprit des lois*, Montesquieu establishes a seemingly straightforward relationship between the despotic rule of a prince who governs according to his passions and the fear that consequently dominates the lives of his subjects. “In despotic states, the nature of government requires the most passive obedience... man is a creature that blindly submits to the absolute will of the sovereign.”³⁰ The “immense power” of the prince “is devolved intirely upon those whom

11. See also Diana Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu’s Persian Letters* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 19-39.

²⁷ See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a19-1254b20.

²⁸ David Young attempts to explain the deviation in “Montesquieu’s View of Despotism and His Use of Travel Literature,” *Review of Politics* 40 (1978), 392-405; as does Duncan Kelly in *The Propriety of Liberty: Persons, Passions, and Judgement in Modern Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 68-81.

²⁹ Richter, “A Family of Political Concepts,” 229.

³⁰ “Dans les Etats despotiques, la nature du gouvernement demande une obeissance extreme... L’homme est une creature qui obéit à une creature qui veut.” *De l’Esprit des lois [EL]*, ed. Victor Goldschmid (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), Vol. I, Book III, Chapter X, 151-152. The English translation of *SL* used throughout is from volumes 1 and 2 of *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu* (London: T. Evans, 1777). It therefore reflects spelling conventions (or lack thereof) of the eighteenth century. The books and

he is pleased to intrust with the administration. Persons, capable of setting a value upon themselves, would be likely to create disturbances. Fear must, therefore, depress their spirits, and extinguish even the least sense of ambition.”³¹

One of the more remarkable aspects of despotism as it is drawn in the *Laws* is the relative lack of governing that needs to be done in order to first establish and then perpetuate the despot’s rule. In his *Pensées*, Montesquieu observes that “[since] the passions alone are necessary to form [a despotic government], everyone is fit for that.”³² Yet having once done so, the despot himself is in no position to govern responsibly, subject as he is to his desires: “A man, whom his senses continually inform that he himself is every thing, and his subjects nothing, is naturally lazy, voluptuous, and ignorant. In consequence of this, he neglects the management of public affairs.”³³ He is, in essence, Plato’s tyrannical ruler in Book IX of the *Republic*.

Fear permeates society, operating not only as a hierarchical principle descending from the prince, but as a horizontal principle, contagious among subjects: “In despotic countries, where they are already in a state of political servitude, civil slavery is more tolerable than in other governments.”³⁴ The subjects’ passions operate in inverse proportion to the prince’s: they are “a

chapters correspond with those given in the citations for the French editions.

³¹ The “immense power” of the prince “y passe tout entire à ceux à qui il le confie. Des gens capables de s’estimer beaucoup eux-mêmes, seraient en état d’y faire des revolutions. Il faut donc que la *crainte* y abate tous les courages, et y éteigne jusqu’au moindre sentiment d’ambition.” *EL*, Vol. I, Livre III, Chapitre IX, 150-151.

³² Montesquieu, *My Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Henry C. Clark (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), §892. He continues “[but] to form a moderate government, it is necessary to combine powers, temper them, make them act, and adjust them; to give ballast to one, so to speak, in order to put it in a position to resist another. It is a masterpiece of legislation that chance very rarely achieves and that prudence is scarcely allowed to affect.”

³³ “Un homme à qui ses cinq sens dissent sans cesse qu’il est tout, et que les autres ne sont rien, est naturellement parasite, ignorant, voluptueux. Il abandonne donc les affaires.” *EL*, Vol. I, Livre II, Chapitre V, 141.

³⁴ “Dans les pays despotiques, où l’on est déjà sous l’esclavage politique, l’esclavage civil est plus tolerable qu’ailleurs.” *EL*, Livre XV, Chapitre I, 389. *SL*, Book XV, Chapter I. I owe the observation of society’s despotic effects to Franco Venturi, “Oriental Despotism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24.1 (1963), 134-135.

timid, ignorant, and faint-spirited people.”³⁵ Montesquieu likens the “tranquility” of despotic states not to peace but to “the silence of those towns which the enemy is ready to invade.”³⁶

According to one of Montesquieu’s most recent interpreters on the question of fear, Corey Robin, this is the Frenchman at his most hyperbolic.³⁷ He argues, “Montesquieu’s most dramatic account of despotic fear [in the *Laws*] did not reflect Montesquieu at his most searching or probing but, rather, the liberal imagination at its most political engaged and morally aroused.”³⁸ Rather, “Montesquieu formulated his theory of despotic fear with the avowed polemical purpose of rousing elite opinion in France against creeping royal absolutism.”³⁹ Fear, as depicted in the *Laws*, amounts to “political pornography.” Robin is correct in noting that the depiction of despotism and fear in the *Letters* departs significantly from the account in the *Laws*.⁴⁰ He is not the first to notice this; in fact, much attention has been paid to the character and quality of despotism, represented by the figure of Usbek, in the *Lettres*. It is frequently remarked in passing that the seraglio is a stand-in for despotic state and Usbek for the despotic ruler.⁴¹ The

³⁵ “... des peuples timides, ignorants, abattus...” *EL*, Vol. I, Livre V, Chapitre XIV, 185. *SL*, Book V, Chapter XIV.

³⁶ “Comme le principe du gouvernement despotique est la crainte, le but en est la tranquillité : mais ce n’est poing une paix, c’est le silence de ces villes que l’ennemi est prêt d’occuper.” *EL*, Vol. I, Livre V, Chapitre XIV, 186.

³⁷ Robin has published two variations of his interpretation of Montesquieu, a journal article and a revised chapter. I refer to both, though I do not want to imply that the pieces are interchangeable. I discuss the most significant shift below (his adoption of the vocabulary of “terror” in the latter publication) but most other differences are questions of emphasis rather than content. Corey Robin, “Reflections on Fear: Montesquieu in Retrieval,” *The American Political Science Review* 94.2 (2000), 347-360, and *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51-72.

³⁸ Robin, “Reflections on Fear,” 349.

³⁹ Robin, “Reflections on Fear,” 349.

⁴⁰ Strictly speaking, of course, the account in the *Laws* departs from that in the *Lettres*.

⁴¹ See, for example, Roger Boesche, “Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu’s Two Theories of Despotism,” *Western Political Quarterly* 43 (1990), 746; Mark Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 120; Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism and the Ancien Regime* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008), 278; and Patricia Springborg, “The Contractual State: Reflections on Orientalism and Despotism,” *History of Political Thought* 8.3 (1987), 415.

parallel provides a “condition of defamiliarization,”⁴² a distancing effect that permits Montesquieu (and his readers) to criticize Louis XIV (and the ensuing chaos of the Regency). This defamiliarization also, I suggest, allows the introduction of plural regimes of affective practices, which ultimately puts into question the hegemony of the despotic authority.⁴³

In the *Lettres Persanes*, Usbek, having left his wives and seraglio in the care of the eunuchs he employs, departs for Paris with his younger friend Rica and ultimately finds himself undone by the problems that ensue. While Rica’s letters generally serve as colorful, if sometimes cutting, commentary on Parisian (and, implicitly, western) life, the content of Usbek’s letters is downright existential. Something of a master at compartmentalization, Usbek “is a humanitarian and a rapist, a rationalist and a terrorist.”⁴⁴ He balances his duties to the seraglio and his new experiences in Paris (many of which he actively seeks out through his letters) on a knife’s edge. Consider the short turn-around between his relating to a friend the famous fable of the Troglodites, who forsake their virtue in favor of luxury, and his harsh rebuke of Zachi for permitting the white eunuch into her room.⁴⁵ For Judith Shklar, Usbek’s personality underlies the “general theme of the book, the universal power of self-deception.”⁴⁶ But it is more correctly termed, in the case of Usbek, the fragile power of self-deception. As Roxanne Euben notes,

⁴² Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 79. See also Genevieve Lloyd, “Imagining Difference: Cosmopolitanism in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*,” *Constellations* 19.3 (2012), especially 482-485, for a discussion of “Montesquieu’s use of wonder as a distancing strategy.”

⁴³ Reddy defines an “emotional regime” as “the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them; a necessary underpinning of any stable political regime” (129). I adapt this language when referring to regimes of affective practices.

⁴⁴ Robin, “Reflections on Fear,” 350. Unsurprisingly, the language of terrorism disappears in the post-2001 book.

⁴⁵ “Que feriez-vous, si, laissée à vous-même, vous n’aviez, pour vous defender, que votre amour pour moi, qui est si grièvement offensé, et votre devoir, que vous avez si indignement trahi? Que les moeurs du pays où vous vivez sont saintes, qui vous arrachent aux attentats des plus vils esclaves! Vous devez me rendre grâce de la gene où je vous fais vivre, puisque ce n’est que par là que vous méritez encore de vivre.” *Lettres Persanes*, ed. Jean Starobinski. (Paris: Gallimard, 2003 [1973]), Lettre XX, 85.

⁴⁶ Judith Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 31.

“[t]he wives’ rebellion at the end of the novel... represents not only the freedom of the women but the disintegration of Usbek’s identity, premised, as it has been, on his wives’ immobility, obedience, and seclusion...”⁴⁷ In governing through fear, Usbek receives only loathing in return, something of which he only gradually gains awareness. Usbek’s “whole life is an illustration of the distance between theoretical knowledge and personal conduct.”⁴⁸ As the seraglio descends into chaos in Usbek’s absence, his ability to maintain a divided self withers; he collapses under the weight of the despotic fear he had previously believed himself to wield.

It would seem, then, that the power of the passions ultimately overwhelms the liberal leanings Usbek acquires in his time in Paris. I want to suggest, however, that what is required is not the elimination or repression of the passions but a reorientation, a shift from a model of the emotive (inward-looking, pleasure-seeking or fear-ridden) to affective practices (outward-looking, other-regarding, political, and potentially cooperative). As Mary Shanley and Peter Stillman argue persuasively, because Usbek’s wives are essentially enslaved to him, there is no possibility of freely given love or affection between husband and wife.⁴⁹ In other words, though driven by passion and desire, Usbek cannot be motivated by love – and nor can his wives. There is only “the deviousness of thought and the perversion of feeling” necessary to perpetuate the system.⁵⁰ In the language I have adopted, Usbek, as master of the seraglio, can only experience emotives and self-regarding emotions and not engage in affective, other-regarding practices. In the following section, I offer an interpretation of Roxane’s suicide as an introduction of other-

⁴⁷ Roxanne Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 151.

⁴⁸ Shklar, *Montesquieu*, 34. For a critique of Shklar’s interpretation, see Lucas Swaine, “The Secret Chain: Justice and Self-Interest in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*,” *History of Political Thought* 22.1 (2001), 84-105.

⁴⁹ Mary Lyndon Shanley and Peter G. Stillman, “Political and Marital Despotism: Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*,” in *The Family in Political Thought*, ed. Jean Elshtain (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), especially 72-76.

⁵⁰ Aram Vartanian, “Eroticism and Politics in the *Lettres Persanes*,” *Romanic Review* 60 (1969), 25.

regarding practices; as a reference to the suicide of Roman heroine Lucretia; and as a republican interruption of Usbek's despotic control over the seraglio.

IV. *Roxane and "the poison'd fountain"*

Here I want to briefly make the case that a different set of affective practices, a set based in other-regarding actions and amenable to a republican sense of civic virtue, does in fact guide one of the text's central characters. Though ostensibly subject to the same treatment as the rest of his wives, Roxane is notably Usbek's favorite (and, perhaps not coincidentally, his newest) bride.⁵¹ She is also, I suggest, intended by Montesquieu to invoke a Roman heroine on the model of Lucretia and capable of "honorable" action.⁵² As related by Livy, Ovid, and a number of other ancient sources, the rape of Lucretia by the son of the last king of Rome impelled her to commit suicide at the feet of her father in defense of her honor and in order to recoup some of her virtue. Her death purportedly spurred the collapse of the monarchy and the creation of the Roman Republic.⁵³

The story is this.⁵⁴ Roman noblemen, including King Tarquinius Superbus, were whiling away an evening during their siege on the city of Ardea in 509 BCE by trading stories about their wives. Tarquinius Collatinus, husband of Lucretia and relation of the king, insisted that his

⁵¹ Shanley and Stillman suggest that Usbek respects Roxane because she initially refused his sexual advances and offer as evidence the fact that, of his wives, it is only Roxane that Usbek addresses using the formal 'vous' (75). I share the view, however, of Katherine M. Rogers, "Subversion of Patriarchy in *Les Lettres Persanes*," *Philological Quarterly* 65 (1986), 64. Though the linguistic show of deference is difficult to explain otherwise, it seems unlikely that Usbek truly appreciated Roxane's resistance, considering it involved her pulling a blade on him and resulted in him forcibly raping her. (I cite the passage below.)

⁵² I do not, however, go so far as Pauline Kra and find the *Lettres Persanes* to be "a feminist manifesto." "Montesquieu and Women," in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Samia Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 272.

⁵³ Livy's *The History of Rome*, Book I, §57-59, recounts the story of Lucretia.

⁵⁴ I rely here on the account given in the only full-length treatment of the Lucretia story by Ian Donaldson, who opens his book with a retelling drawing on the common facts of the ancient versions. *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 3-5.

wife's virtue was far greater than that of any other woman and proposed that the men visit them right then, to see what activities they engaged in when they did not expect to see their husbands. All of the wives, save Lucretia, were gossiping or wasting their time with one another, while Lucretia was with her servants, spinning wool. The son of the king, Sextus Tarquinius (usually referred to simply as Tarquin), is struck by the sight of Lucretia.

The basis of his reaction varies from text to text: Ovid attributes it to love; Dio Cassius to a desire to ruin her reputation (and, presumably, that of Collatinus); and Livy argues that he finds her chastity, not merely her beauty, overwhelming. (Indeed, according to Livy, the "contest" of the husbands was to find the most chaste wife.) Tarquin returns later in the night and attempts to seduce Lucretia, to no avail. He threatens to murder her and frame her for adultery (in some accounts, with a black slave). Eventually, she submits (believing his threatened course of action would bring more shame on her and her family than sexual violence alone) and he rapes her.

The following morning, Lucretia calls for an audience of her husband, her father, and Lucius Junius Brutus, who was presumed to be of a feeble mind, among others. She reveals Tarquin's attack and they swear to avenge her. At this point, she pulls out a concealed dagger and stabs herself in the chest. Crucially, while everyone else remains stupefied, Brutus removes the dagger from her chest and reaffirms his oath. Lucretia's body is displayed as a symbol of the Tarquins' tyranny and Brutus uses the opportunity to raise public opposition to the king and the entire royal family. The king is driven out and two consuls, including Brutus, are installed as heads of the new Roman Republic.

Lucretia's importance, as instigator or talisman of republican Rome, is a well-trod story in both political thought and literature.⁵⁵ Augustine contemplates Lucretia's guilt in *City of God*;

⁵⁵ To the best of my knowledge, the parallel between Lucretia and Roxane has not been mentioned, let alone explored, in the secondary literature. The relationship between Lucretia and republicanism has been

Dante meets Lucretia in Limbo; Chaucer praises her in *The Legend of Good Women*; Machiavelli muses on her in his *Discourses on Livy*; Shakespeare composes *The Rape of Lucrece*; Philip Sidney writes *The Old Arcadia*; and Thomas Middleton pens the popular *Ghost of Lucrece*. Botticelli, Dürer, Cranach, Veronese, Titian, Gentileschi, and Rembrandt, among others, have depicted either her attack or her suicide.⁵⁶ Montesquieu himself does not mention Lucretia in the *Lettres Persanes*, though she comes up three other times in his political writings.⁵⁷ So why connect her to Roxane?

In *Lettres Persanes*, Roxane plays one of the biggest roles yet she makes few appearances. Unlike the other wives, she does not write to Usbek until written to and she does not attempt to persuade him to return to Isfahan. In the only letter from Usbek to her (and to which there is evidently no reply), he laughingly recounts his “successful” rape of Roxane as if recalling a romantic courtship. The parallels to the story of Lucretia are overt the letter is worth recounting in some length:

Do you remember, when every other resource failed you, those you found in your own courage? You took a dagger, and threatened to sacrifice a husband who loved you, if he persisted in requiring of you what you prized more than your husband himself. Two months passed in the struggle between love and modesty. You carried your modest scruples too far; you did not even submit after you were conquered. You defended to the last moment a dying virginity; you regarded me

explored in reference to other canonical thinkers in Melissa Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli, and Rousseau* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001). Friedrich Balke, “The Image of Lucretia: On the Creation of Republican Charisma in Livy,” *New German Critique* 38.3 (2011), 35-50, is relevant here, though it primarily deals with Brutus and not Lucretia herself.

⁵⁶ I mention these artists and writers in particular because, of course, they pre-date Montesquieu. There is also a lively secondary literature surrounding a number of their interventions in the “Lucretia discourse.” On Augustine, for instance, see Dennis Trout, “Re-Textualizing Lucretia: Cultural Subversion in the *City of God*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.1 (1994), 53-70. On Sidney, see Debora Shuger, “Castigating Livy: The Rape of Lucretia and *The Old Arcadia*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51.2 (1998): 526-548. For a unique argument about renaissance (specifically Florentine) humanism that draws on a Lucretia text by Coluccio Salutati, see Stephanie Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁵⁷ In *EL XI.XV* and *XI.XXI* and *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence I*.

as an enemy who had done you a wrong, not as a husband who had loved you; you was above three months before you could look at me without a blush; your bashful looks seemed to reproach me with the advantage I had taken. I did not enjoy even a quiet possession; you deprived me of all those charms and graces that you could; and without having obtained the least favours, I was ravished with the greatest.⁵⁸

Here the politics of despotism play out as domestic melodrama.

Though Roxane is mentioned in letters between Usbek and his other wives, we do not hear directly from her until the novel's very end. In the last letter, we learn that Roxane is not, like Ubsek, weighed down by fear but has retained a sense of self and, especially importantly, a sense of honor: "though I have lived in a state of servitude, I contrived means to be always free: I reformed your laws by the laws of nature; and my mind has always continued in a state of independency."⁵⁹ As the seraglio falls apart, Usbek, if not the reader, is surprised to learn that Roxane loathes her despotic husband and has taken poison to escape him – indeed, the text closes with her death, by poison – she is writing to Usbek as she dies. In both the accounts of Lucretia and Roxane, a profound violation was more than they could bear. In Roxane's case, in spite of living under the sway of fear and despotic control, she had somehow created and maintained a distinct emotional regime with her lover in Usbek's absence. It is true that what drives her is hatred of Usbek – but she is hardly "timid, ignorant, and faint-spirited." Her actions

⁵⁸ All English translations of *The Persian Letters* are from *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu* (London: T. Evans, 1777). "Vous souvient-il, lorsque toutes les ressources vous manquèrent, de celles que vous trouâtes dans votre courage? Vous prîtes un poignard, et managâtes d'immoler un époux qui vous aimait, s'il continuait à exiger de vous ce que vous chérissiez plus que votre époux meme. Deux mois se passèrent dans ce combat de l'amour de la vertu. Vous poussâtes trop lois vos chastes scrupules : vous ne vous rendîtes par même, après avoir été vaincue : vous défendîtes jusqu'à la dernière extrémité une virginité mourante : vous me regardâtes comme un ennemi qui vous avait fait un outrage, non pas comme un époux qui vous avait aimée : vous fîtes plus de trois mois que vous n'osiez me regarder sans rougir : votre air confus semblait me reprocher l'avantage que j'avais pris. Je n'avais pas même une possession tranquille ; vous me dérobiez tout ce que vous pouviez de ces charmes et de ces graces ; et j'étais enivré des plus grandes favours, sans avoir obtenu les moindres." *Lettres Persanes*, Lettre XXVI, 94.

⁵⁹ "Non : j'ai pu vivre dans la servitude ; mais j'ai toujours été libre : j'ai réformé tes lois sur celles de la nature ; et mon esprit toujours tenu dans l'indépendance." *Lettres Persanes*, Lettre CLXI, 340.

believe the belief in the totalizing effects of despotism, the paralysis and the fear that purportedly accompany them – and the supposed absence of political solutions.

In spite of this, Roxane's suicide is often depicted as quixotic or futile and the same qualities are attributed to her that one might more readily assign to Usbek.⁶⁰ Diana Schaub, for instance, describes Roxane as “duplicious in her speech and deed, governed by passion.”⁶¹ This is, at a very basic level, factually correct: Roxane *has* lied to Usbek (at the very least, she has found a lover in his absence). But given Roxane's final words and their assertion of independence, the assessment rings false. Julia Douthwaite makes a more persuasive criticism of Roxane's self-destruction:

Montesquieu's Persian experiment comes to a conventional conclusion: death, at her own hand, of the misfit woman and the larger social system unperturbed. Roxane's suicide is often interpreted as a gesture of final freedom, indicating the symbolic death of the master and, by extension, the annihilation of the despotic oriental system. While Usbek's harem is effectively destroyed... I do not believe this ending suggests a universal condemnation of all sexual tyranny, but rather the logical climax of Usbek's moral and affective bad faith, the ultimate clash between his abstract political philosophy and the concrete reality of his domestic despotism... In fact the melodramatic dénouement of Montesquieu's novel passes on a profoundly conservative message about women's participation in society.⁶²

But does “the larger social system” remain “unperturbed”? It is this common assessment I have

⁶⁰ It is implied that Roxane has, by the use of poison, murdered the eunuchs charged with the wives' protection and thus brought about the fall of the seraglio.

⁶¹ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 54.

⁶² Julia Douthwaite, *Exotic Women: Literary Heroines and Cultural Strategies in Ancien Régime France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 100. This is in line with several other critical interpretations. See, for instance, Michael Mosher's assessment that Roxane's “rebellion fails” for the “obvious reason... that [Montesquieu] thought her rebellion was utopian.” “The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Critique of Republican Rule,” *Political Theory* 22.1 (1994), 27. Mary McAlpin argues that “Roxane exults in her adultery, sacrificing virtue to make a heaven out of hell. Unfortunately, as with Milton's satanic pronouncement, and Zuléma's male houris, the transformation Roxane attempts is a logical impossibility.” “Between Men for All Eternity: Feminocentrism in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 24.1 (2000), 56. For Inge Boer, “This ‘solution [Roxane's suicide],’ however, is fully in line with a recourse to male domination and control, where insubordination by women is punished so that patriarchal order can reestablish itself. “Despotism from under the Veil: Masculine and Feminine Readings of the Despot and the Harem,” *Cultural Critique* 32 (1995-1996), 55.

attempted to call into question here, primarily by juxtaposing the despotic/self-regarding regime that Usbek represents to the seraglio and the republican/other-regarding regime that Roxane's death offers the novel as a conclusion that also functions as an opening.

Douthwaite justifiably argues that the seraglio's destruction is almost the inevitable outcome, or "logical climax," of the pressures imposed upon Usbek's self-contradictions. But it is not necessary to read the *Lettres* as either-or scenario wherein Roxane's suicide *either* represents "a gesture of final freedom"⁶³ *or* "a universal condemnation of all sexual tyranny." If we turn to the *Laws*, we can see that Roxane's suicide represents something greater than an act of fruitless defiance. Montesquieu, uncharacteristically for the time, regarded suicide as typically an "effect of madness" and was sympathetic to its victims. However, he differentiated such deaths with psychological causes at their root from specifically political deaths, noting in repeated asides, "[we] do not find in history that the Romans ever killed themselves without a cause."⁶⁴ In other words, he differentiates between self-regarding and other-regarding deaths and finds the first tragic and the second honorable.

If not on a literal level, then on a figurative level, and much like Lucretia, Roxane's death provides an opportunity for action by others. Lucretia is not lionized because she herself founded the Roman Republic but because her actions prompted Brutus to overthrow the Tarquins and establish the consuls. Indeed, much of her significance comes not from her act of suicide but from the meaning her body conveys when displayed to her fellow Roman subjects. Similarly, Roxane's suicide has already occurred some indeterminate time before Usbek receives her letter,

⁶³ What, precisely, constitutes "final freedom," anyway?

⁶⁴ "Nous ne voyons point, dans les histoires, que les Romains se fissent mourir sans sujet..." *EL*, Vol. I, Livre XIV, Chapitre XII, 384. Elsewhere, "Du temps de la République, il n'y avait point de loi à Rome qui punit ceux qui se tuaient eux-mêmes : cette actions, chez les historiens, est toujours prise en bonne part, et l'on n'y voit jamais de punition contre ceux qui l'ont faite." *EL*, Vol II., Livre XXIX, Chapitre, IX, 296.

leaving the letter itself to bear the symbolic weight of actions. To emphasize the act of suicide in either the case of Lucretia or Roxane is to miss how they are *utilized* in their deaths, by Brutus and by Roxane herself, respectively, to greater ends – for “a cause.”

V. Conclusion: Fear and Loathing in the (Fictional) French Enlightenment

In reading Usbek as keeping with the depiction of the despotic leader in the *Laws* and Roxane as a character informed by the Roman heroine Lucretia, who maintains an alternative set of affective practices even when under the control of the despotic Usbek, I hope to have made two arguments, which I will point to here as tentative conclusions, both of which deserve further attention.

The first claim has been made implicitly throughout and is an argument in favor of continuity, rather than rupture, in Montesquieu’s thought. Attitudes toward the relationship between *Letters Persanes* and *The Spirit of the Laws* are mixed. Those who would have us read the *Laws* as the definitive Montesquieian statement argue that the *Letters* are a youthful diversion, informative but not representative of the mature thinker’s ideas, which are decidedly lacking any “youthful radicalism.”⁶⁵ Those who look to the *Letters* both focus on the ways in which it “prefigures” the later *Laws* and argue that by “read[ing] carefully,” we can “discover” and “piece together” “bits of evidence” of a “more discerning” Montesquieu.⁶⁶ I have attempted here to draw on both texts to establish a coherent set of political behaviors and affective practices within the story of the *Letters* that is frequently reinforced or developed by the vastness of the *Laws*.

The second, and principal, argument is that a thread of republicanism is woven throughout the *Lettres* and not simply as part of a youthful fancy on Montesquieu’s part, but

⁶⁵ Johnson Kent Wright, “Montesquieuan Moments: *The Spirit of the Laws* and Republicanism,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 35 (2007), 149.

⁶⁶ Robin, “Reflections on Fear,” 349, 350.

rather as a literary and political experiment in the co-existence of multiple kinds of affective practices within a text. By reading Roxane, and her afterlife in her letter to Usbek, as modeled on Lucretia, and in juxtaposition with Montesquieu's position on suicide, I hoped to demonstrate the possibility of an other-regarding regime in the wake of Usbek's despotic, self-regarding seraglio.

To those who would ask what is particularly *political* about the passions, I suggest, calling back to the etymology of "emotion," that the passions' apparently apolitical, or personal, nature is a modern convention rather than objective fact. I contend that further examination of the nexus of passions and republican thought hinges on the issue of virtue. An understanding of virtue which takes into account something as personal and subjective as individuals' emotions as motivating factors in their political behavior may be one way to avoid the imposition of values while still affirming the centrality of virtue in republican political theory.

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