
PERSIA AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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Persia was more of a concept than a reality in 18th century, but there is no doubt that precisely in this century this remote country began to deeply interact with the Enlightenment European thought, even beyond the objective knowledge provided by travelers, diplomats, translators, journalists, and adventurers. This important book edited by Cyrus Masroori, Whitney Mannies and John Christian Laursen collects a series of studies that for the first time, to the best of my knowledge, address the history of conceptual and cultural relationships between Persia and the Enlightenment on a broad spectrum and in a variety of perspectives. The volume ranges from political thought to religion, from issues of tolerance to the problem of despotism, from English fiction to travel stories, touching on crucial authors and works such as Bayle, Bayle, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, the *Encyclopédie* and the last *philosophes*, like Naigeon, D'Holbach, Maréchal, Volney. The general topic is clearly indicated by the editors: "What was the appeal of Persia to such a diverse intellectual population in Enlightenment Europe? How did intellectuals engage with the "facts" about Persia? In what ways did utilizing Persia contribute to the development of modern European identities?".

Given the great variety of contexts analyzed, the answer cannot be univocal, but it must take into account the particular perspectives highlighted by the authors.

Quite appropriately, the first chapter (Cyrus Masroori and John Christian Laursen, "The background: European knowledge of Persia before the Enlightenment") provides the reader with a very rich review of ancient, medieval and early modern sources which,

together with travel reports, gave Europeans a basic understanding of the reality of Persia, in its past and present history. A fundamental theme was undoubtedly that of tolerance, an Enlightenment theme *par excellence*, since Persia, like the Islamic world more generally, became for the authors of the eighteenth century an example of how different religions can coexist within the same state or rather Empire (the Ottoman and the Safavid ones). John Marshall's contribution, "Religious tolerance, intolerance, and absolutism in Safavid Persia and their representations in early Enlightenment European travel literature," describes how early Enlightenment engagements with Persia related to tolerance and tyranny. It was in reality a picture punctuated, sometimes and in some particular circumstances, by intolerance of and violence toward religious minorities. Marshall's piece is thus representative of the volume's overall assessment of the Enlightenment as a multifaceted dynamic narrative, far more complex than a naïve fable about human emancipation or an age of reason. From the European point of view, Jews and Christians obviously appeared to be the most sensitive cases, but the very example of Persia highlighted other lesser-known figures, such as the Ghebres (or Parsis), a religious minority of followers of natural religion. The attention paid to this non-Islamic minority, that often was the object of persecution, became for some authors of late Enlightenment, such as Maréchal, Boulanger and Volney, the occasion for a direct attack on institutional religion. It was no longer a question of tolerance, but of harsh criticism and total reject of any kind of positive religion. This is the focus of Erica J. Mannucci's contribution: "Peuplade estimable': late-eighteenth-century radical critics of religion and the Ghebres."

Other contributions put in tension the apology of tolerance or the attempt to understand the other with the Enlightenment discourse on power. For example, Montesquieu: he was the great author of the *Persian Letters*, representing these people like the "others" who can help us to look at ourselves from the outside and therefore to better understand our own reality. Montesquieu was, however, very critical (like many) of the so-called oriental despotism, of which Persia was for him one of the most representative examples (see Antonio Carlos, "The tolerant Persia in Montesquieu's *Persian letters*"). By contrast, Voltaire (on which see the essay by Myrtille Mericam-Bourdet's contribution, "Voltaire and Persia, or how to use Orient against Occident, ") defended the idea of Persian tolerance, that he saw at work in Muslim societies, while also using Persia as a case study

for defining what constituted a benevolent despotism. By identifying the ideological, political, and religious issues in Voltaire's historical discourse, Mericam-Bourdet is able to trace the dialogue that Voltaire had with the connoisseurs of Persia, and also with contemporary thinkers such as Montesquieu.

Obviously, the *Encyclopédie* is one of the central references, also for the discourse on Persia, with the religious, political, cultural problems that it entails. Whitney Mannies's piece, "Persia in the *Encyclopédie*," considers the portrayal of Persia in this quintessential Enlightenment text. The term *Perse* appears in approximately 752 discrete articles, and approximately 471 articles deal specifically and substantively with Persia. Overall, the *Encyclopédie's* treatment of Persia coalesces into five themes: Persia as a once-great kingdom; Persia as a source of European ideas; Persia as tolerant and diverse; the triumph of religious fanaticism over natural religion; and, finally, Persia's dissolution into despotism. With a detailed analysis Mannies shows how the authors of the *Encyclopédie* had articulated positions on these issues, that are difficult to be traced back to complete unity; however, the pluralism of points of view constitutes in this case a richness and not a limitation broadening the range of factual knowledge and ideological approaches to Persia.

A separate case of the Persia dossier is that regarding the Zoroastrian religion, which from Persia was transmitted to Christianity in the form of a famous "heresy": the Manichaeism to which Augustine first adhered and against which he then fought. Bayle is the great protagonist of the revival of the Manichean themes at the origins of the Enlightenment.

Marta Garcia-Alonso's approach in "Persian theology and the checkmate of Christian theology: Bayle and the problem of evil" discloses the ways in which Persian thought was brought to bear on European debates about theology and philosophy via Pierre Bayle's texts on the problem of evil. Garcia-Alonso shows how Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism were appropriated by this eminent voice of the early Enlightenment. Garcia-Alonso illuminates the centrality of Persian theological doctrines to European Christian debates about evil and the nature of God. According to Bayle, scripture cannot reconcile the existence of sin in a world that is the work of God. Using Manichean and Zoroastrian theologies, Bayle makes a case for rejecting natural theology and defining God in a philosophical way. Furthermore, the philosopher directs his critique toward the very

essence of Christian theology, represented by Augustine of Hippo. By this reference, the Persian roots of Bayle's critique take on a far-reaching significance. According to Garcia Alonso, the discussion about evil does not involve a dispute between reason in an absolute sense and religion, but rather commits only to the abandonment of the use of reason in the interpretation of religious revelation. Faith thus becomes a subjective belief, open to pluralism and toleration. However, Garcia-Alonso overlooks the fact that, while debating precisely on Manichaeism, Bayle emphasises a specific point of the conflict between philosophy and theology, that is, the incompatibility between a priori ideas and a posteriori facts. The Manicheans can account for the latter and therefore are victorious when factual experience (a posteriori) is at stake. However, their ideas on the duality of principles are in contrast with all the a priori ideas of reason. The dualism is factually strong, but metaphysically very weak, indeed unsustainable. Manichaeism can be a success story on the ground of experience, as it explains the presence of evil and the struggle with good, but it is profoundly irrational on a philosophical level. This discrepancy of the two planes is typical of Bayle's whole thinking and prevents him from reaching what he moreover would never have wanted to achieve: the system, in its full philosophical form.

The complexity and variety of the discourse on Persia is also revealed in the single-authored chapter by Cyrus Masrooris. This piece investigates "George Lyttelton's *Letters from a Persian: Persia and politics in eighteenth-century English fiction.*" Unlike most other authors of pseudo-Oriental literature, Lyttelton was a high-ranking politician who served in both houses of the British Parliament and as Chancellor of the Exchequer. *Letters from a Persian in England* is a unique example of Persia figuring in the political discourse of the Enlightenment, to be compared to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, even if Lyttelton's political engagements with actual issues of his country are more evident. The work had a substantial impact on English political fiction of the eighteenth century: A chain of pseudo-Oriental letters appeared in England after its publication, some written in direct response to the book. Contrasting a fictional Persia and a "factual" England, *Letters from a Persian in England* criticizes the political and economic conditions of England, advances attacks against Robert Walpole's administration, advocates freedom of the press, and rejects religious persecution. With the chapter by Rolando Minuti "Oriental patriotism? Eighteenth-century French representations of Nadir Shah," we go into detail on Persian

history during the 18th century. Minuti also concentrates on how the image of patriotism in a despotic nation challenged and altered European stereotypes of “Oriental” governments. Minuti’s contribution is an inquiry into the concepts of *patrie* and *patriotisme* in the French cultural context of the eighteenth century, and it identifies the varieties of meanings of *patriotisme* vis-a-vis contemporary events in Persia.

As can be seen even from this brief illustration, it is a continuous clash and at the same time interplay between Europe and Persia, West and East, Christianity and other religions, enlightened monarchy and supposed oriental despotism that animate the volume by projecting new and original views on the debates of the European eighteenth century. The conclusions that the editors C. Masroori and W. Mannies draw in their Introduction go beyond the Persia case and affect the current debate on the nature and objectives of the Enlightenment in general. Moreover, they illuminate the discussion on East and West, Orientalism and Westernism before that these labels become fixed in opposing categories.

The topic is well chosen: this volume came about precisely because the Enlightenment did not have a single vision of Persia. There are several theoretical frameworks available for studying the diverse and complex modes of relationship between modern Europe and the East. Said’s Orientalism is too focused on colonial and post-colonial issues, while the eighteenth-century debates on Persia precede the era of colonization and imperialism. Rather than using anachronistic categories, editors therefore find it more productive to adopt “engagements grounded in critical reflection and mutual recognition that, writes Dallmayr, ‘allow the other to gain freedom and identity while making room for cultural difference and diversity’” (p. 5, quote from Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: essays on cross-cultural encounter* (New York, 1996, p. 3),

The fruitfulness of this approach also allows to rethink the category of Enlightenment in general. The editors of this volume find Foucault particularly relevant to their project “in three interconnected ways: First, Foucault invites us to maintain a critical attitude toward the Enlightenment, engaging with it as a case of a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.” Second, as Foucault did, the editors have engaged the Enlightenment as an “attitude [...] a mode of relating to contemporary” issues instead of a “doctrinal heritage.” Finally, they have also seen the Enlightenment as a

moment when Europe was “compelled to face the task of producing” itself. Foucault saw the Enlightenment as an “attitude of modernity.” (p. 8).

An identity is sometimes more easily reached in comparison with the otherness and this is the reason why pursuit of an identity both invented and appropriated new mediations. The comparison, both imaginary and real, conceptual and actual, with Persia, either ancient or modern, must be seen as an attempt to extend the narrative of Enlightenment beyond its most natural geographical and cultural borders but also as the attempt to include the dimension of the other in one's own identity. The result is a complex interplay in which it is more productive to look for a combination of mutual enrichment than for a single pattern of dominance.

Inevitably, the intellectual history of Europe's engagement with Persia during the Enlightenment has to be extensive and multifaceted. Europeans engaged with Persia in response to diverse incentives and different motives. This volume makes an overall assessment of the Enlightenment as a multifaceted dynamic narrative far more complex than a naïve fable about human emancipation or an age of reason (p. 14). The book also aims to demonstrate how visions of Persia informed religious debates, political struggles, social criticism, and philosophical meditations. In the midst of that diversity, the reader can also see how these different discourses could claim membership in the same family, by using and emphasizing shared concepts. The editors and the authors have therefore striven to present what is common among the languages of the Enlightenment engaged with Persia, without committing the kind of gross generalization that ignores their differences. Instead of subscribing to a grand theory, this volume tries to appreciate the Enlightenment as “a complicated picture of the intellectual life of the period as a site of political and cultural contestation.” (p. 12, quote from Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon*, Cambridge, 1997, p.10).

The narrative of the Enlightenment that emerges from this volume rests on a broadly shared consciousness that meanings have been subject to constant negotiation such as reason, rights, freedom, and toleration. Almost all the authors argue that the debate about Persia and more generally Islam that transpires in the philosophers examined is structured in a way as to invite the reader's reflection and, ultimately, develop the values of tolerance and religious pluralism. In the end that this kind of pluralism extends also to the

value that was supposed to be singular or unique par excellence in the Enlightenment's discourse: *la raison*.