The *Journal des Scavans* and
*The Lettres Persanes*
Letter 108 of the *Lettres persanes* is an amusing indication of the merits as well as the shortcomings of the literary periodicals of the early eighteenth century. Usbek-Montesquieu first states that these publications seem very popular to him; then he gives an idea of the numerous books that they reviewed and abstracted: "La paresse se sent flattée, en les lisant: on est ravi de pouvoir parcourir trente volumes en un quart-d'heure." But he criticizes the journalists for talking only of the new books to the neglect of the old, and for being too careful not to pass judgment on the works analyzed for fear of bringing upon their heads the wrath of sensitive authors. The result, according to Montesquieu, is that they are very boring, for they begin by insipidly praising the subject of the books and then proceed to the praises of the authors. In complaining thus, Montesquieu had in mind those editors who expressed the policy (not always adhered to) of being entirely noncommittal about the works of which they gave an account. The *Journal des Sçavans*, for instance, during the first years of its publication, had apparently taken the liberty of judging the merit of the books it summarized; but it had to give this practice up because it found that "on s'en plaignit . . . comme d'un attentat sur la liberté publique, et qu'on dit que ce serait exercer une espèce de tyrannie dans l'Empire des Lettres, que de vouloir s'attribuer le droit de juger des ouvrages de tout le monde. C'est ce qui fit résoudre à n'user plus de critique dans le Journal, mais
au lieu de censurer les livres, de s'attacher à les bien lire pour en pouvoir donner un extrait plus exact au public."²

Montesquieu's criticism does not, of course, represent his serious opinion of the periodicals of his day; far from finding them boring, he read them regularly and with profit. His familiarity with periodical publications is revealed not only by his facetious criticism but also by the many notes from them still found in the Pensées and the Spicilège, two of the notebooks he drew from in writing his works. The sources presented here concern the Journal des Sçavans and the Lettres persanes and have been chosen to show how Montesquieu modified the material borrowed in order to shape it or adapt it to his artistic purposes.

Letter 89, dealing with man's desire for glory and the degree to which it motivates the subjects of different nations, shows that Montesquieu was already speculating about the principles of the republican, monarchical, and despotic forms of government that he was later to expound in the Esprit des lois. In singling out for greatest praise the behavior of republican subjects, he utilizes a passage from the Journal des Sçavans for the year 1685, one of the volumes that he had certainly read and abstracted, as can be seen from the Pensées.³

The various tokens of honor used by the Romans are there summarized from a Latin book on the prizes awarded by Rome for military achievements: "Pour les récompenses, comme le seul désir de la gloire rendait braves les Romains, si nous en croyons leur histoire, le prix des victoires les plus signalées, n'était ordinairement que l'honneur du triomphe, un surnom, une couronne de laurier ou de chêne, une louange ou une statue dans une place publique" (13 [1685]: 20).

In fashioning his own version of the passage, Montesquieu says: "Mais le sanctuaire de l'honneur, de la réputation et de la vertu, semble être établi dans les républiques et dans les pays où l'on peut prononcer le mot de patrie.⁴ A Rome, à Athènes, à Lacédémone, l'honneur payoit seul les services les plus signalés. Une couronne de chêne ou de laurier, une statue,
The single sentence from the *Journal des Scavans* lacks the scope and the stylistic qualities of the passage Montesquieu composed for his purpose. Concerned not merely with Rome but with other examples of the republican form of government as the ideal state, he constructed three sentences that express his admiration with a significant pattern of rhythm and sounds. The first sentence, entirely original, strikingly conveys Montesquieu’s feeling with a triad of anaphoric phrases, “de l’honneur, de la réputation et de la vertu,” with a concentration of *r* sounds, and with the alliteration of the *p*’s. The ternary rhythm recurs, with a meaningful counterpart and echo, at the beginning of the second sentence through the specific mention of the three most famous republican states of antiquity, arranged in ascending order corresponding to the length of their names: “A Rome, à Athènes, à Lacédémone.” The rest of the second sentence is a restructuring of the main clause of the original: “le prix des victoires les plus signalées n’était ordinairement que l’honneur du triomphe.” The changes, achieved by the personification of “honneur” and its function as subject of “payout” and by the substitution of the more general word “services” for “victoires,” result in a more concise clause punctuated with alliteration: “l’honneur payoit seul les services les plus signalés.” For his third and concluding sentence, Montesquieu borrowed two phrases: “une couronne de laurier ou de chêne” and “une louange ou une statue,” but he transformed them by slight syntactical and semantic changes. In the first phrase, he simply reversed the order of the two nouns; in the second, besides, he replaced one of the nouns with a synonym and dropped the conjunction. The switch of “chêne” and “laurier” results in the juxtaposition of “chêne” and “couronne” with a more notable echo effect and in the placing of “laurier,” a more substantial word, at the final, stressed position of the phrase. The other phrase, “une statue, un éloge,” continues, with the added emphasis of
the asyndeton, the binary rhythm of the first. Thus the modified phrases, "une couronne de chêne ou de laurier, une statue, un éloge," are perfectly fitted into the last part of sentence, Montesquieu's own thought, expressed by binary combinations with rhyme and assonance: "récompense immense . . . bataille gagnée . . . ville prise."

In this same 1685 volume Montesquieu found a curious little story about an extraordinary blind man who "jouait même aux cartes, et gagnait surtout beaucoup, quand c'était à lui à faire, parce qu'il connaissait au toucher quelles cartes il donnait à chaque joueur" (13 [1685]: 433). This oddity, reported with a sense of wonder, becomes the nucleus and the climactic point of Letter 32, in which Rica amusingly describes his visit to the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts. Without knowing that the Hospice is an institution for the blind, Rica observes that its inmates were quite cheerful and that some were playing cards and other games. He leaves the place at the same time as one of them who, having heard him ask for the way to the Marais, offers to take him there and expertly guides him through the hazards of Paris traffic. Upon reaching his destination, Rica wants to know more about his guide and asks him who he is: "—Je suis aveugle, Monsieur, me répondit-il. —Comment! lui dis-je, vous êtes aveugle? Et que ne priiez-vous cet honnête homme qui jouoit aux cartes avec vous de nous conduire?—Il est aveugle aussi, me répondit-il: il y a quatre cents ans que nous sommes trois cent aveugles dans cette maison où vous m'avez trouvé" (p. 85).

In this example the creative process is directed toward a comic effect. The astonishing idea of a blind man's skill at cards is developed into a little scene between Rica, moved by curiosity, and his blind guide, acting with self-assurance and pride. His revelation: "Je suis aveugle," springs a surprise that is prolonged in Rica's repetition of it in question form and with a change of subject: "Comment! . . . vous êtes aveugle?" and echoed with increasing irony in the rejoinder: "Il est aveugle aussi." But that is not the end of the word play; it
continues with: "il y a quatre cents ans que nous sommes trois cents aveugles."

Another strange idea derived from the *Journal des Sçavans* is exploited in Letter 51, a satirical treatment of the manners, laws, and government of Russia. In the summary of an English account of Russia, Montesquieu’s attention was drawn to a passage dealing with the marriage contract: "Il [l’auteur] en remarque plusieurs particularités fort plaisantes. Il dit qu’un des articles qu’un père fait toujours mettre dans un contrat lorsqu’il marie quelque fille est que le mari ne la fouettera jamais . . . " (7 [1679]: 265). Montesquieu rewrote the passage thus: "Quoique les pères, au contrat de mariage de leurs filles, stipulent ordinairement que le mari ne les fouettera pas; cependant on ne sçauoit croire combien les femmes moscovites aiment à être battues; elles ne peuvent comprendre qu’elles possèdent le cœur de leur mari, s’il ne les bat comme il faut" (p. 132).

The passage from the abridgment of the English book concerns only the article in the marriage contract. Montesquieu, with a concessive clause, subordinates this odd fact to another curious piece of information from other sources: the desire of Russian wives to be beaten by their husbands in order to have the assurance of being loved. The combination results in a witty statement that sets the legalized wishes of the fathers against the perverse and unnatural inclination of their daughters. Montesquieu thus achieves another example of incongruity and surprise similar to that of the blind men who behave normally. But the artistic exploitation of this source goes beyond the ironical contrast set up between Russian fathers and daughters. Montesquieu, resorting to the letter-within-a-letter device, which appears several times in his fiction, imagines that a Russian wife is writing to her mother to complain about her misfortune: her husband does not love her because he does not beat her! And she envies her lucky sister who gets a beating every day and recalls that, when she was a child, it sometimes seemed to her, that her father loved her mother too.
much! The letter-within-a-letter device involves, moreover, the process of comic dramatization observed in Letter 32. The blind man acting like a person with normal sight and the Russian wife who wants to be beaten speak and act for themselves, each motivated by pride, though in different situations.

Montesquieu's most substantial borrowing from the Journal des Scavans is in Letter 78. It is a strange anecdote about the value the Spaniards and the Portuguese attach to the mustache. It was drawn from an account of a Spanish book on Portuguese colonies in Asia, and is the second of two amusing stories about conquerors: "Ce qu'on raconte de Jean de Castro, qui était un autre de ces premiers conquérants n'est pas moins agréable que l'autre paraît surprenant. Ce bon homme se trouvant en un extrême besoin d'argent se coupa une de ses moustaches, et sur ce gage précieux demanda aux habitants de Goa vingt mille pistoles; elles lui furent prêtées, et peu de temps après il les rendit avec beaucoup de fidélité, et dégagea sa moustache" (5 [1677]: 215-16). Montesquieu relates the anecdote as part of a letter ridiculing the Spanish and the Portuguese concept of honor: "Quant à la moustache, elle est respectable par elle-même, et indépendamment des conséquences; quoiqu'on ne laisse pas quelquefois d'en tirer de grandes utilités, pour le service du Prince et l'honneur de la nation, comme le fit bien voir un fameux général portugais dans les Indes: car, se trouvant avoir besoin d'argent, il coupa une de ses moustaches et envoya demander aux habitants de Goa vingt mille pistoles sur ce gage; elles lui furent prêtées d'abord, et dans la suite il retira sa moustache avec honneur" (p. 201).

Montesquieu's version is more concise as a result of his eliminating certain details and changing the order of the phrase "sur ce gage"; but more significant, artistically, are the additions and adjustments he made in order to set the anecdote in a new context. He once again made use of a letter-within-a-letter, inserted this time in a letter by Rica to Usbek and plausibly attributed to a Frenchman traveling in Spain. The an-
ecdote occupies a conspicuous place at the end of the first part of the Frenchman's satire. He associates the mustache in a curious manner with eyeglasses, noting that gravity is the most salient national characteristic of the Spaniards and the Portuguese and that it is displayed in two principal ways: "par les lunettes, et par la moustache." After ridiculing the practice of wearing glasses as a vain show of learning, the biased French observer goes on with ironical logic to talk about the mustache, making a distinction between its intrinsic value and its possible usefulness to ruler and nation, and ending with a remarkable illustration. The general's deed in cutting off his mustache and the mustache itself assume mock-heroic proportions in the new, satirical setting created for the story by Montesquieu. The elaborate preparation for its ironical retelling is evident in the syntactical links quant à, quoique, comme, car that mark the flow of the irony in a carefully constructed period.

These examples of borrowing from the Journal des Sçavans show Montesquieu the skilled writer at two levels of literary creation: in the first example he structures a moving, expressive passage by modifying the syntax of a sentence that stimulated his feeling and imagination and combining it with ideas and words of his own. In the other passages he uses his creative imagination at the level of both style and structure. The extraordinary blind man, the stipulation that Russian brides should not be beaten, the anecdote about the Portuguese general's valuable mustache are just curiosities in the contexts in which Montesquieu found them. He dramatized them comically by placing them in new contexts: a snatch of dialogue and letters-within-letters. In these cases he developed, and gave form and emotional intensity to, the ludicrous potential of his sources.

1. Lettres persanes, ed. Antoine Adam (Geneva, 1954), p. 273. All page references are to this edition and will be indicated henceforth after each quotation.
2. *Journal des Scavans*, Amsterdam ed., 5 (1677): 166. The spelling of all quotations from the *Journal* has been modernized; all references, indicated henceforth after each quotation, are to the Amsterdam edition. Jean Le Clerc, the editor of three periodicals, likewise protested, on several occasions, his impartiality and his practice of praising rather than censuring authors. His *Bibliothèque choisie*, he asserts, "est pleine de louange des habiles gens, qui m’ont donné occasion de parler de leurs ouvrages. . . . Je n’ai rien dit de désavantageux à personne, qu’après en avoir été violemment outragé . . .” (*Bibliothèque choisie*, 19 [1709]: 376-77). Cf. also 21 (1710): 1-2; and his *Bibliothèque universelle*, 1 (1688): Preface.


4. Montesquieu does not at the time of the *Lettres persanes* distinguish between honneur as the exclusive principle of the monarchical form of government and vertu as that of the republican form.

5. The letter closes with a similar effect of irony reinforced by repetition with a variation and a chiastic arrangement: "Mais il faut que je vous quitte: voilà la rue que vous demandiez: je vais me mettre dans la foule; j’entre dans cette église, où, je vous jure, j’embarrasserai plus les gens qu’ils ne m’embarrasseront” (p. 85). In thus concluding the letter, Montesquieu recalls, as all commentators point out, Cotolendi’s *Lettre d’un Sicilien*. Speaking also of the blind in Paris and the institution of the Quinze-Vingts, the Sicilian ends with a detail about their begging in the churches and the trouble they cause by their noise. Montesquieu’s superior wit and creativity are evident in the play with the word *embarrasser*, which is not used by Cotolendi.

6. The traveler Adam Olearius, *Voyage . . . en Moscovie, Tartarie et Perse*, trans. A. de Wicquefort, 2 vols. (Paris, 1659), and John Perry, *Etat présent de la Grande Russie*, translated from English (La Haye, 1717), are Montesquieu’s main sources for his letter on Russia. The statement that Russian wives like to be beaten comes most likely from Olearius, who mentions with some skepticism all the travelers before him who speak of it. But neither he nor Perry reports the curious article in the marriage contract to which Montesquieu refers.

7. The device is first used in Letter 28 and besides Letter 51 is repeated in 78, 130, 142, 143 and 145. In Letters 28 and 51, the opening sentence is the same: an actress complains to Rica: “Je suis la plus malheureuse fille du monde”; the Russian wife echoes: “Je suis la plus malheureuse femme du monde.”


9. French-Spanish animosity, dating back to the end of the sixteenth century, continued to rise in the seventeenth and the eighteenth. It is significant that the source of most of Letter 78 is a Frenchwoman’s biased and spurious account of Spain, Mme d’Aulnoy’s *Relation du voyage en Espagne* (1691).