

**Andrew Kahn, introduction to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721] (Oxford Classics 2008), pp.xxii-ii.**

The following extract from Andrew Kahn's Introduction to the *Persian Letters* (1721) by Baron de Montesquieu shows how the idea of reporting on the nature of European society from the standpoint of remote foreigners such as Indians or Asiatics had caught hold of the imaginations of literary men in England and France in that period. His version of events reveals that Swift himself has the idea of writing "Indian Letters" and was beaten to it by his contemporary, the English man of letters and journalist Joseph Addison. Although *Gulliver's Travels* is modelled on a genre of exotic travel-book including Marco Polo's *Travels* (1323) and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (1499), the trick of 'defamiliarisation' applied to European society in account of it given to the denizens used by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)—a reversal of the method—is very much of the same order as Montesquieu's letters and Addison's "Indian Letter" before it, both of which he was most likely to have known when he put pen to paper to write the *Travels* in 1723.

We can only guess at the precise impulse that led Montesquieu to conceive his oriental fiction. Montaigne's reputation had lapsed during the height of French classicism, and he ceased to be reprinted for about fifty years from the 1670s; but, as we know from his notebooks, Montesquieu read and esteemed him and would certainly have known Montaigne's great essay *On Cannibals* of 1580. There he created a naive perspective from which to illuminate 'the opinions and customs of the country we live in', showing the 'savage' to be civilized and throwing the very meaning of 'civilized' into question. This was a clear influence. But Montesquieu's imagination may have been more immediately stimulated by a footnote in the *Critical Dictionary* in which Bayle wondered what the effect would be if a work written by a westerner attempted to convey the views of a Japanese or Chinese traveller who had lived in the great cities of Europe.

It is equally possible that the figure of the philosophical traveller originates with an event recorded in the pages of Joseph Addison's *Spectator*. In April 1710 four Iroquois chiefs visited London on a mission for aid in their struggle against the French in Canada. Their appearance aroused public curiosity and also captivated the imagination of Addison, who in *The Spectator* provided a description of the sights of London and the mores of the English as seen through their foreign gaze. In *The Spectator* (No. 50, April 1711) Addison produced a cultural commentator and satirist of western institutions in the fictional figure of Sa Ga Yean Qua Rash Tow, the visiting emperor of the Iroquois Indians and author of a satirical letter that was translated into French in 1714.

Through their naive perspective, where facts were only half-understood or comically reproduced, the Iroquois offered English readers a different perspective on the political circumstance and cultural landscape of their country. Addison puts the technique of defamiliarization, where what we know is described in simpler terms as something alien, to good use. The Iroquois gather that two 'kinds of Animal', namely, Whig and Tory, are important; they wonder at the size of St Paul's and its religious purpose; and comment on the performance of a preacher or 'Man in Black who was mounted above the rest, and seemed to utter something with a great deal of Vehemence' Jonathan Swift, who had hatched his own plan to write a work of *Indian Letters*, regretted sharing the idea with Addison who was quicker into print.

Addison's account was a gift to an ironist like Montesquieu, and in the *Persian Letters* he launched the career of a new type of narrator who would be a mainstay of classic Enlightenment fictions like Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* (1734), Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762), and Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1771). Montesquieu's Orientalism does not fall precisely into the style of writing about the Orient that was immediately available [...]