

IMAGINING FRANCE: Imagining the Outsider's View in Eighteenth-Century France

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Handout for Seminar 1: INTRODUCTION

Seminar 1 overview

- Introduction to the module as a whole (note deadlines, in-class test, etc.)
- Introduction to 'Imagining the Outsider's view' (set texts, how to use the reading list, etc.)
- Mini lecture: C18 France and the Enlightenment spirit of criticism; the literary and polemical function of the 'outsider's view'; 'otherness'
- Prefaces and class discussion (if we have time): focus on 'Quelques Réflexions sur *Les Lettres persanes*' ['Some Reflections on the *Persian Letters*'] (Montesquieu) and 'Avertissement' ['Foreword'] to *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (Graffigny) – make notes on the questions overleaf.

Quotations

1. Kant: '*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!*' (*An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment'?* 1784)
2. Caillois: 'the mental procedure that consists in pretending to be foreign to the society in which one lives, in looking at it from the outside as if one were seeing it from the first time'.
3. Montesquieu: 'The reader is urged to note that the entire charm of the work resides in the constantly recurring contrast between actual reality and the singular, naïve or strange manner in which reality is perceived' ['Il [le lecteur] est prié de faire attention que tout l'agrément consistait dans le contraste éternel entre les choses réelles, et la manière singulière, naïve, ou bizarre, dont elles étaient aperçues'] (from 'Some Reflections on the *Persian Letters*').
4. Howells: 'Polemical stupidity is the characteristic discursive mode of the French Enlightenment'.

Class discussion topics (if we have time):

Foreword to *Letters of a Peruvian Woman*

- According to the preface, what prejudices may affect the reader's attitude towards the novel's main protagonist Zilia?
- In what ways will she appear foreign to the French reader?
- To what extent does the preface suggest a critical attitude towards French cultural assumptions?

'Some reflections on the Persian Letters'

According to these reflections, what are the advantages of the letter novel in exploring themes of cultural otherness?