

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

Tutor: Dr Ann Lewis (a.lewis@bbk.ac.uk)

## Handout for Seminar 5: *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*

### Overview of class

- *Letters of a Peruvian Woman*: class discussion topics:
  - How is pathos used for the purposes of social criticism in *LP*?
  - Can we read this novel as the story of the heroine's gradual progress towards self-affirmation and independence (in if so, in what ways?) Is there an alternative 'regressive' reading of the story (in which Zilia retreats from reality, and the world, into dream and illusion)?
  - Is there a feminist reading of the novel?
- How to write a commentary (general). What is a commentary? How is it different from writing an essay? What makes a good commentary? Things to do / things to avoid. Ways of structuring a commentary (guidelines)
- Focus on two commentary passages – comparison Graffigny's *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* (Letter 14) – Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (Letter 28).

### General resources for literary study:

- *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Penguin, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1998)
- *Brewer's Concise Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, ed. by Betty Kirkpatrick (Cassell, 1993 [or more recent edition])
- *Dictionnaires d'autrefois* (website): <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>
- Arthur Pollard, *Satire*, Critical Idiom series (Methuen, 1970)
- D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, Critical Idiom series (Methuen, 1982)

## How to write a commentary

### General points:

The commentary is a different exercise from writing an essay: it is focused on the passage in question, and should avoid more generalised statements regarding the text.

However, like an essay, it should be structured with care in the form of a series of paragraphs with an introduction and conclusion, and should be analytical rather than descriptive. (It should not summarise or describe the passage – but identify a series of important themes or elements and discuss each of these in turn, illustrated with examples.)

Ideally, different points should be synthesised into an argument rather than reading as a series of unrelated, discrete points. (This is why it may be better not to proceed line-by-line – as this also has a tendency to lead to ‘description’.)

Don’t try and say too much – it is better to have a plan and write coherently.

There is no one way to write a commentary: this will depend on the passage in question, and different approaches may work well for the same passage.

### Elements that you should consider:

1. It is useful to contextualise the passage ( what is its wider significance? are there echoes / different versions of the same kind of episode elsewhere in the text?)

BUT too long should not be spent on this; comments on the wider context should remain secondary to the analysis of the given passage.

2. Depending on the nature of the text, you should focus your analysis on the :

- i. Structure of the passage (paragraphs? shifts in style/tone over the course of the passage?)
- ii. Use of language (use of particular kinds of vocabulary / words that seem especially important; grammatical features such as use of (sequences of) verb tenses; use of descriptive language; etc.)
- iii. Syntax; punctuation; sentence structure; word order
- iv. Rhythm and pace; shifts in tempo
- v. Style, tone and overall mood
- vi. Use of irony? pathos? other modes or narrative devices
- vii. Perspective, point of view and voice may be important; who is narrating; does the text suggest a particular relationship between narrator and ‘reader’ / implied reader?

The analysis of these features should explain why they are important or meaningful. This is not an exhaustive list! Remember that different aspects of the formal features noted above will be more or less important in any given passage – your analysis should reflect this (you don’t need to focus on aspects that are not particularly developed or interesting).

3. Focus on the passage in question. Do not provide lots of background information.

4. It is useful to analyse themes – but you should focus on **how** things are said rather than ‘**what**’ is said. It is fine to bring out ambiguities or inconsistencies where relevant; you do not need to provide a ‘definitive’ reading where different interpretations may be possible.