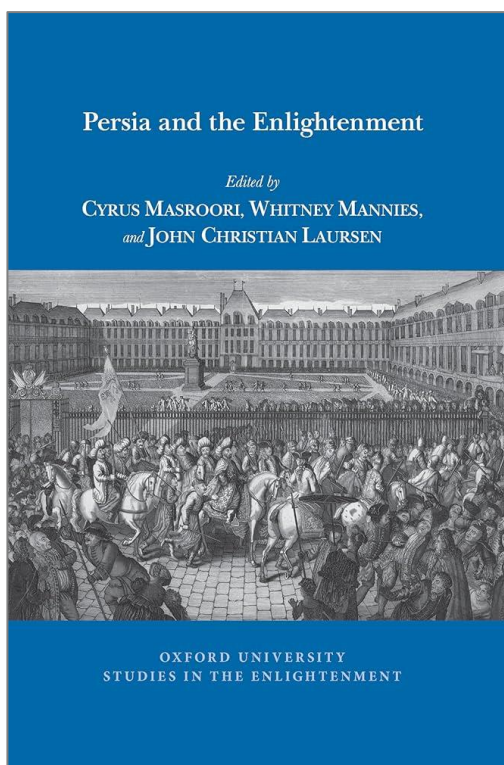


BOOKS

**Cyrus Masroori, Whitney Mannies, John Christian Laursen (eds.),
Persia and the Enlightenment, Liverpool: Liverpool University
Press, 2021, 273 p.**



Seventeenth and eighteenth-century diplomats and travelers to Persia wrote extensively about the region, nourishing the European interest in remote cultures and providing enough details about its cultural, social, and political life to intrigue Enlightenment thinkers. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot are only some, but arguably the most famous of the Enlightenment intellectuals that employed this discursively constructed space as a backdrop for political and philosophical reflection. *Persia and the Enlightenment*, a collective volume edited by Cyrus Masroori, Whitney Mannies, and John Christian Laursen, is a most welcome addition to both Enlightenment scholarship and cross-cultural studies. In nine essays, the volume explores the multifaceted intersections of Enlightenment thought and Persian civilization. From the fascination of the European Enlightenment intellectuals with Persia, to strategies of constructing otherness, to the role of Persia in the

configuration of modern European identities, this volume engages with a wide range of captivating questions that reveal the complexity of (early) modern cultural encounters and contribute to debunking reductionist assumptions about the East-West cultural dynamics.

The introduction to the volume provides a solid and nuanced theoretical discussion, which justifiably veers away from Said's *Orientalism* and embraces theoretical



models that examine Europe's pre-colonial engagement with the East as "grounded in critical reflection and mutual recognition" (2). The Enlightenment is approached in Foucauldian terms, which coheres with the volume's predisposition to reflective thinking, reticence to generalizations, and refusal of grand theories. The Enlightenment is therefore viewed as "a web of languages in a wide range of disciplines and practices such as philosophy, theology, politics, art, and historiography, which communicate with each other because they subscribe to several broadly defined but never fully stable concepts such as reason, autonomy, liberty, tolerance, and rights" (12).

The essays support the volume's "aim to demonstrate how visions of Persia informed religious debates, political struggles, social criticism, and philosophical meditations" (14) in Enlightenment Europe either by examining impressive corpora of sources on Persia, most of them by European travelers and diplomats, or by narrowing the discussion to how the image of Persia was appropriated by specific Enlightenment scholars with a view to advancing their religious, philosophical, or political projects.

The first essay, by Cyrus Masroori and John Christian Laursen, offers a most useful and well-documented record of the more or less accurate information about Persia (from ancient, medieval and Renaissance sources to early modern travelogues) that contributed to the European perceptions of the region. As the authors point out, Enlightenment intellectuals used the image of Persia to advance their own theses, with little regard for the accuracy of their perception of Persian society. John Marshall contributes an impressively well-documented essay discussing the question of Persian religious (in)tolerance and its representation in the European travel literature of the early Enlightenment, with emphasis on how European scholars perceived the religious animosity between Sunni and Shia. The discussion about religion is later particularized by Marta García-Alonso's "Persian Theology and the Checkmate of Christian Theology: Bayle and the Problem of Evil", an essay that focuses on Henri Bayle's use of Persian theology for his own religious preoccupations. Rolando Minuti's essay contributes an investigation into the representations of the military achievements and political career of Nadir Shah in the work of French intellectuals. As Minuti points out, Nadir Shah's image is polarized between "the deliverer of the Persian nation and patriot" to "the prince devoured by ambition and power and destined to become a detestable despot" (114). Of course, the work of Montesquieu could not miss from a volume on Persia and the Enlightenment. Antônio Carlos dos Santos's contribution complements the already rich exegesis on the *Persian Letters* starting from the premise that Montesquieu's work "seem[s] to resonate in a different way with each generation" and engages in an exploration of the novel "from within our own context of political struggle against prejudice, also typical of the era of Enlightenment, and the struggle for a more tolerant world" (126). Cyrus Masroori's essay continues the exploration of pseudo-Oriental letters by moving the discussion to the British soil and looking into George Lyttleton's *Letters from a Persian in England, to his friend at Ispahan*. Lyttleton's book, not as well-known nowadays as Montesquieu's, was very popular immediately after its publication and consequential in the political debate of the time (Lyttleton was part of the opposition to Robert Walpole's politics), which offers Masroori the prerequisite for arguing that pre-Orientalist scholars "used Persia as a platform for diverse domestic

purposes, to criticize various European institutions and practices, and to shape what it is to be French, English, or European” (156), which reinforces the thesis guiding the entire volume. Voltaire’s engagement with Persia is documented and discussed by Myrtille Méricam-Bourdet’s essay. Just like the European scholars discussed in the essays preceding this one, Voltaire seems to have been interested in Persian religion, politics, history, and civilization only insofar as it provided a fertile ground for the critical investigation of the French/European political and religious context of the time. In “Persia in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*”, Whitney Mannies also notes that, even if in the eighteenth century the interest in the Oriental world took an empirical turn, the accuracy of the information was not the main concern of the encyclopedists, nor was the question of whether the portrayal of Persia might be (un)favorably prejudiced as important as “the development of the historical-sociological perspective itself, which implied that religion and government are merely temporal, contextual, and artificial – not eternal, universal, and divine” (188). The last essay in the volume, “‘Peuplade estimable’: late-eighteenth-century radical critics of religion and the Ghebres” by Erica J. Manucci, looks into how French revolutionary thinkers employed to the religious culture of modern Zoroastrians for their project of “dismantling religion itself” (210).

Persia and the Enlightenment is a valuable resource for students and researchers of the European Enlightenment (particularly the French). It consists of well-documented essays that propose nuanced examinations of a series of aspects that informed Europe’s sense of itself in the Age of Reason and well beyond.

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