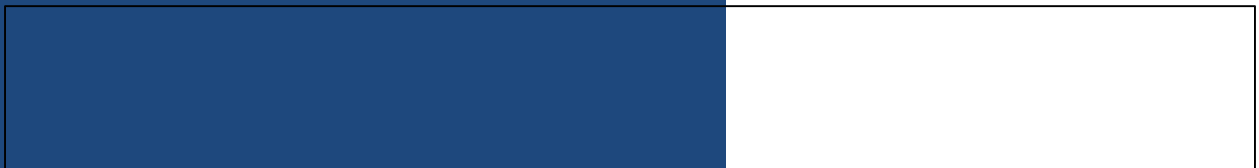


Number 17  
2003





What does this myth contribute to 18th-century moral discussion? It deliberately repudiates Thomas Hobbes' contention that Hobbesian men would have, in fact, constructed the *Leviathan*. Instead, Montesquieu insists, a Hobbesian world, where neither land nor women are secure, will produce inevitably a self-destructive cycle of desire, usurpation, and revenge, making all social organization and economic productivity impossible. As the myth suggests, two men can derail this cycle through pity for the deprived and their commitment to the common interest. But the new men who

novel, *The Persian Letters*. He and other Enlightenment thinkers use fiction set in fictional civilizations not only to circumvent censors but also to speculate more freely. Fiction, after all, presents philosophical issues to a much broader audience than is likely to read Leibniz or Kant and thus spurs public discussion and engagement with these issues. It allows the author to present an array of opinions and the reader to consider a variety of interpretations. These fictional texts allow the reader to become familiar with some essential elements of this intellectual movement, which is, at root, innovative, critical, open, public, and controversial.

The three works of the French Enlightenment fiction that I will discuss—Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Voltaire's *Candide*, and Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*—have moral issues at their core, use fiction as their method of presentation, and juxtapose European cultures to other cultures to gain a vantage point for critiquing their own. The questions I would like to raise are: What do these tales offer us? and What do they suggest about the larger contribution of the French Enlightenment to moral discussion?

Although I must confess that I find almost any text from this period significant and engaging, I also would like to suggest that the Enlightenment occupies a distinctive but unusual position in our intellectual landscape. The Enlightenment proclaimed itself as a new movement distinct from the past. From the mid-18th century on, men of letters, often called *philosophes*, attributed novelty and improvement to their own times and their ways of thinking and associating. The French Enlightenment, as its practitioners, proponents, and critics all acknowledge with equal vigor, was intent on remaking the world. As the old order—monarchy, hierarchy, Roman Catholicism—came under increasing attack, Enlightenment thinkers were critically aware of the challenges they faced in reforming the old or constructing a new basis for society, but they did not hesitate to call into question a traditional moral order. Moral discussions posed some of the greatest challenges to the Enlightenment and provoked some of the most interesting writing by the *philosophes* in response to those challenges.<sup>3</sup> In their writings, the *philosophes* also confronted the problem

of the “other” largely because the New World had revealed civilizations with different social and moral practices. Initially the response of the West was simply confidence that they needed to educate these other civilizations into the right way to do things. But the philosophes were much less persuaded of the wisdom of the West. They did not hesitate to wonder loudly whether Christianity and Christian societies could make any claim to virtue. Without the authority of the Christian tradition, they took on difficult and perennial ethical questions—questions such as human nature and the foundations of morality, the relationship between nature and society, or the natural and the civil, and the problem of evil in the universe.

The audacity of the claims of Enlightenment thinkers inevitably produced criticisms from a number of perspectives from the time of the Enlightenment to our own. Critics took seriously the identification of the philosophes with the new. Conservative critics, like Edmund Burke, decried the demise of tradition. Nineteenth-century romantics

lematized” the Enlightenment by insisting that earlier interpreters like Gay had drawn much too naive a picture of the good intentions of the philosophes and the beneficial implications of their social reform. Foucault’s view of a problematic or even malign Enlightenment fueled an array of modern critical interpretations of the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the end of the 20th century was marked by a turning away from the principles that most intellectuals and social critics identified as the foundations of the modern world, with the Enlightenment providing the philosophical underpinnings of modern ideology, society, and politics. Modernity, assert the critics, is nothing to be proud of. From colonialism and slavery to the oppression of women and people of color; from the Holocaust to economic globalization, global poverty, and environmental destruction, the modern world has been the triumph not of civilization over barbarism or reason over ignorance, but of those who have claimed reason and civilization in order to oppress and exploit those they deem barbarous and ignorant. Such ideals as liberty, ePaibee5nothl91aibe0.5 tmd over

### ***The Persian Letters***

In 1721, Montesquieu published *The Persian Letters*, one of the earliest texts of the movement we now call the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> It purported to be a collection of letters left in his attic by houseguests visiting from Persia. These Persian visitors had, as was the custom at a time when letters were not only a means of communication but also entertainment, not only carefully preserved copies of the letters they wrote and received but also, most cooperatively, arranged them in a coherent order so that through the letters the plot of a novel unfolds.

*The Persian Letters*, then, is an epistolary novel of 161 letters,

Some modern critics object to Montesquieu's lack of scientific rigor or to the way he objectifies women in the harem<sup>15</sup> and "orientalizes" Persians, to invoke Edward Said's term to describe the ethnocentric appropriation of the other.<sup>16</sup> Montesquieu, according to these critics, was decidedly not politically correct. But Montesquieu is a crucial figure in the development of a tradition that advocates respect for cultures different from our own,<sup>17</sup> and, because he believed that each nation has a distinct "general spirit," Montesquieu opposes imperialism.<sup>18</sup>

It is ironic that, although Montesquieu is deemed not modern enough or not sufficiently culturally sensitive, he has been greatly appreciated by modern commentators using Freudian or feminist analyses. Feminists appreciate the centrality of women to Montesquieu's vision of politics, and Freudians acknowledge his depictions of abnormal psychology and alienation in the eunuchs guarding the harem. If this text both engaged and titillated the 18th-century, it has been appropriated in our day as a fundamental text of sexual politics.<sup>19</sup>

As far as his Persians are concerned, Montesquieu was profoundly interested in other cultures and, although he surveyed as many sources as possible, he used both classical texts and standard 17th-century accounts of the Persian world.<sup>20</sup> Thus, he was not the disinterested observer we perhaps consider more desirable. He also had an explicit agenda of which *The Persian Letters* offers only a preface to his more systematic treatment in *The Spirit of the Laws*. He intended to determine when and under what circumstances people had lived in freedom. In the name of liberty and humanity, his Persian visitors question virtually every traditional value of the old regime. Despite his limitations as an observer and the westernized character of his "native informants," Montesquieu is central to the "great anthropological project of the Enlightenment: the interrogation of what we today call Eurocentrism."<sup>21</sup> French writers were caught up in the seduction of the "exotic other," but, as critics, they brought self-consciousness to bear on what modern critics call the "gaze of cultural domination." In *The Persian Letters*, a Parisian famously asked, "But how can one be Persian?," raising such questions as: Who defines what otherness is? What does our imagination of another subjectivity



tell us about the limits of our own? And, most pointedly, what does it mean to be French?<sup>22</sup>

To address that question, Montesquieu creatively recasts the convention of travel literature. This was not another case of a visitor going to a strange land, remarking on their strange practices. Instead, two Persians come to France to point out the absurdities of the French compared to what was normal and proper, that is to say, Persian. What begins as travel literature becomes probing questioning of the status quo. Only an outsider could offer such biting criticism of European culture, under the guise of ignorance. Rica proclaims that the pope is a magician because “he makes the people believe that three is really one, that the bread they eat is not bread, and the wine they drink is not wine, and a thousand other similar things.” The king is an even stronger magician “for he exercises dominion even over the minds of his subject and makes them think as he wishes. If he has only a million *écus* in his treasury, and has need of two million, he has only to persuade them that one *écu* is worth two and they believe it . . . so great is his power over their minds that he has even made them believe that he cures all kinds of disease simply by touching them.”<sup>23</sup> More seriously, Montesquieu can use the example of Tekel, a devout Muslim, to question Christianity. He writes to a friend that he knows the Christians will not go to the home of the Prophets but wonders “do you

Then, as now, the letters about the harem capture the readers' atten-

the adulterous betrayal of Usbek by Roxanne, his favorite wife and the only one he had never suspected of infidelity. After her lover is detected and killed, she kills the guards and then herself. She berates Usbek:

How could you have imagined me credulous enough to believe that I existed only to adore your caprices, that in permitting yourself every thing, you had the right to thwart my every desire? No! I have lived in slavery, but I have always been free. I reformed your laws by those of Nature, and my spirit has always held to its independence.<sup>30</sup>

In light of this letter, the earlier letter, in which Usbek described his conquest of Roxanne, must be reappraised—what he described as courtship was rape. The despot, Usbek (or, by implication, Louis XIV), is deluded about the nature of his rule and presumed affection of his subjects—both the despot and his victims become cruel, duplicitous, and depraved. Montesquieu is concerned with both the psychological and the social effects of despotism, and his contemporaries recognized the harem as a devastating but thinly veiled image of the French court and church. Montesquieu's overarching purpose, as the critic Diane Schaub has put it "is to disorient—to dis-Orient Christianity, France, or the social effects of despotism, and his contemporaries



Pangloss taught metaphysico-theologico-cosmology-boobology. He proved admirably that there is no effect without cause and that, in this best of all possible worlds, the Baron's castle was the finest of all castles.<sup>34</sup>

The previous quote is part of what is a constant theme of the novel, the repudiation of the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz. *Candide* is Voltaire's contribution to the ongoing philosophical discussion of the nature of evil and its relationship to the universe. In the late 17th century, Pierre Bayle, compiling arguments from other sources to avoid incriminating himself, argued that there was more evil than good in the world, more misery than happiness, and that painful experiences were more intense than pleasurable ones. No one, Bayle insists, would choose to live his life over again if given a choice.<sup>35</sup>

Leibniz responded in his *Theodicee*, translated into French in 1710, that the idea of God entailed his existence and that, being God, he would create a universe as diverse as possible but governed by as few principles as possible. And that it would be the best of all the possible universes God could have created, and that, as such, it would be good for human beings. There is, he conceded, pain and evil in the universe, but it ultimately serves a greater good. This philosophy was an anathema to Voltaire, and he used satire to create a crude and caricatured rendition of Leibniz's teaching in the absurd character Pangloss.<sup>36</sup> No matter how tragic the situation, Pangloss pops up, like a metaphysics-spouting energizer bunny, to recast each tragic event as part of the best of all possible worlds. He attempts to console a mourner who lost relatives in the Lisbon earthquake by saying, "This is for the best, for if there is an earthquake in Lisbon, it could not be anywhere else." In light of every tragic event, Pangloss insists: "all [misfortune] is indispensable. Private misfortunes work for the general good. So the more private misfortunes there are, the more all is well." The irrelevance of philosophical speculation to life is a constant theme of the novel, as demonstrated, for example, when Pangloss and the other galley slaves debate "cause and effect, moral and physical evil, free will and determinism, and the consolations available to a galley ship in Turkey." Pangloss maintains, "Leibniz is never mistaken. Moreover, preestablished harmony is the finest aspect of the universe."<sup>37</sup> (I wonder how

much effort on the part of serious scholars has been expended to undo this devastating satire of Leibniz!)

The tale is a picaresque journey that unfolds after Candide has been expelled from a Prussian version of the Garden of Paradise for lusting after Mlle. Cunegonde, the love of his young life and the daughter of the Baron Thunder-ten-thronckh. This version of Paradise, otherwise known as the Baron's castle, is described this way:

The Baron was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia because his castle had a gate and windows. His reception hall was even decorated with a piece of tapestry. The barnyard dogs formed a hunting pack when the need arose. . . . The Baroness, who weighed three hundred points, was widely admired for that reason.<sup>38</sup>

This paragraph alone introduces a number of Voltaire's satiric techniques: No Parisian would ever confuse Prussia for Paradise. He is making fun of German pretensions to high culture, explicitly those of the court of Frederick the Great. He will use "gardens" throughout the story to suggest the limits of any vision of Paradise.

As Candide journeys though the world in search of his true love,

The most telling response to that question is given by the Old Woman, one of the many characters who appear, tell their stories, and rescue Candide, usually by offering him practical advice to counter his exposure to Leibnizian philosophy.<sup>40</sup> But the tale of the Old Woman is unforgettable largely because, at the end of her story, she has only one buttock! She began life as a beautiful princess, the daughter of Pope Urban X and the Princess Palestrina, but experiences countless rapes, abductions, sales into one harem after another across the Mediterranean until she winds up in the harem of a general, commanding a corps of Janissaries fighting the Russians. When they were besieged, their imam persuades them that, instead of eating the women, they should just eat one buttock from each, for, if things went badly, they could look forward to a similar feast!<sup>41</sup> The Old Woman enters the novel as the servant of Mlle. Cunegonde, and her story plays several roles. This account considers seriously the range and overpowering character of human suffering but, rather improbably, does so in a way that is very funny. It allows Voltaire to juxtapose the horrible and the sensual for humorous effect. At the end of her tale of woe, the Old Woman says, "I considered suicide a hundred times, but I still loved life." But she also challenges Candide to poll his fellow passengers on the voyage to the New World. She says:

After killing both the Jew and the Inquisitor who were sharing Cunegonde's favors, Candide, the Old Woman, and Cunegonde flee to the New World. Candide expresses a hope: "We are heading for a different world. I am sure that over there all is well, because I have to admit that where we come from, there are grounds for complaining about how things are both morally and physically."<sup>44</sup> This hope, like any expressed in *Candide*, is destined to be completely thwarted. As Jean Starobinski notes, Voltaire was the first to present a global vision of human suffering.<sup>45</sup> Although the New World offers no fewer opportunities for pain and suffering, for Voltaire as for Montesquieu, it does jar our expectations. For example, Candide rescues two yelling girls who are being chased by monkeys yipping at their buttocks, only to discover that the monkeys were the girls' lovers, leading Candide to wonder in bemusement, "What would Dr. Pangloss say, if he knew what the pure state of nature is really like?"<sup>46</sup>

Voltaire also uses the New World to skewer his enemies, the Jesuits. Cacambo, his native guide, advises Candide to use his Prussian skills fighting for the Padres, about whom he says,

Their rule is certainly remarkable. . . . Los Padres own everything in it, and the inhabitants nothing. . . . It's a masterpiece of logic and justice. In my view, there's nobody cleverer than Los Padres, for here that are at war with the king of Spain and with the king of Portugal, what in Europe they are the confessors of these kings; here they kill Spaniards, and in Madrid they unlock the gates of heaven for them.<sup>47</sup>

Voltaire also uses the New World to consider more serious questions: What, given what history shows us of human nature, would we consider an ideal society? Candide and Cacambo stumble into the utopian society of Eldorado. Playing on utopian visions of Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and others, Voltaire's Eldorado is a delight for the senses; all material needs are met. Because there are no conflicts, there are no law courts and no prisons. All live in comfort and, especially intriguing to Candide, the mud is gold and jewels are used as paving stones, toys, and plumbing fixtures. Even presented with a New World "utopia," Candide decides to leave, supposedly to reunite with Mlle. Cunegonde, but actually because Eldorado cannot satisfy his human restlessness and his desire to use the wealth he picked up



in the streets to distinguish himself. Vanity, discontent, and rapacity explain Candide's departure from Eldorado. As Voltaire remarks, "people so much like to roam around, and then show off at home and brag about what they have seen in their travels."<sup>48</sup>

And what of the enigmatic ending?<sup>49</sup> After traveling through Europe, with eyes less inclined to see the world as the best of all possible worlds, Candide, Cacambo, the Old Woman, Martin the Manichean, Pangloss, and Cunegonde are finally reunited in Transylvania. Candide finally marries Cunegonde, who now has "a

France could become better. Voltaire offers, then, hard work and limited hope.

This text is certainly full of ambiguous moral messages. Human nature is puzzling; many human beings are evil, some are kind. (There is no correlation between religion and goodness, or, he suggests, perhaps an inverse correlation.) Evil exists in the universe. Philosophers have failed to explain it, but novelists must expose it. The delusions of received opinions—religious, political, or philosophical—do not equip one for life. But what hope does Voltaire hold out against “bad things happen to good people,” as it is put in the self-help sections of our bookstores? He offers as a final injunction, “Cultivate your garden.” For Voltaire, his garden is literal (his correspondence reveals a great preoccupation with putting in an actual garden) and figurative—he is fighting for justice—exposing the evils of warfare, colonialism, slavery, and the many evils perpetrated in the name of “international law” in *Candide* as well as fighting against actual miscarriages of justice, like the Jean Calas case, in France. Voltaire’s garden might well be much bigger than our own, but he would have us act where we can to good effect. Works must be productive. Once again, a strange book to give to high school students. Its message is not that of commencement speeches—that the world awaits us and is open before us—but rather, *Candide* suggests, our efforts face dire limitations. It is the advice of a battle-scared warrior in the daunting and often seemingly futile battle for Enlightenment, encouraging the husbanding of resources for deployment where they can be effective.

### ***The Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage***

With Diderot’s writings from the 1770s, we enter into a more radical phase of the Enlightenment. Diderot is one of the great specula-

and motion in the universe), Diderot considers the question of human evolution, the development of a moral conscience, and the character of evil (especially if it is rooted in human physiology). With little biological information available to him, Diderot presents these issues through fictionalized dialogues. The questions he raises are especially intriguing to modern students because they correspond to contemporary discussions about the genetic nature of human character and its implications for morality. Diderot has been slow to find his place in the canon, in part, because he did not publish these later works; they were radical enough to be dangerous, and he circulated them only among his friends.

The *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* built on the travel narrative of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's account of his voyage around the world in 1766-1769. This work was awaited with great interest because it touched on two very topical subjects: 1) the authoritarian, communistic Jesuit community in Paraguay and 2) the question of whether the Patagonia natives of Tierra del Fuego were really giants. Even though Bougainville had witnessed the expulsion of the Jesuits from Paraguay, he didn't have much to say about them. He did categorically deny that the Patagonians were giants. Diderot took his notion of the idyllic quality of Tahitian life from Bougainville's account. He categorically refused to believe that the Tahitians were primitive or any less able to evaluate their own interests than any European.<sup>52</sup>

We have this text only because d'Alembert's friend, Abbé Bourlet de Vauxcelles, saved a copy and published it in 1796 after the fall of Robespierre. He used it to indict Diderot for having taught the revolutionaries to "declaim against the three masters of the human race: the Great Workman (the name for God in the *Supplement*), the magistrate, and the priest." Strange to blame this text, not published until after the Revolution, for teaching revolutionaries!

Diderot explores sexual morality in his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* where travelers to Tahiti compare "natural" Tahitian practices with "social" Western morality. The notion of a sexual morality rooted in biological nature provides a useful background for discussing sexual practices and their relationship to social issues—a staple of modern, moral discussion. Unlike Rousseau,



eling with Bougainville. (As you must suspect by now, the chaplain will not get the good lines in this dialogue.) As a feature of Tahitian hospitality, Orou offers his guest the sexual favors of his willing wife or one of his daughters. The chaplain demurs because of his vows. Orou is puzzled by this appeal to religion against what he calls “the pleasure to which Nature invites everyone,” and he says to the chaplain, “I don’t know what you mean by ‘holy orders,’ but your first duty is to be a man and to show gratitude.”<sup>54</sup> Religion, as the chaplain represents it, violates both nature and hospitality.

As Orou and the chaplain explore differences between European and Tahitian moral ideas, they focus explicitly on their different prescriptions regarding sexual behavior. Orou asks whether Tahiti or Europe is better able to feed its population, whether all of its citizens are flourishing, whether it prizes children, or whether they languish in favor of the pursuit of what he calls “superfluous needs.” (Orou then, rather incongruously, has become the spokesman for the 18th-century French position on the demographic and economic markers of a healthy society, which we saw in Montesquieu as well.) Thus, religion also undermines a utilitarian morality.

The chaplain argues for the legitimacy of European morals by invoking the authority of the Christian God. Orou finds the notion of a “great craftsman,” who has made everything, who lives everywhere but can never be seen, and who has forbidden sex to his chosen disciples, not simply puzzling but pernicious. He finds these precepts, as he puts it, “contrary to Nature, an offense against reason, and certain to breed crime.” The European practices are clearly against nature because they are predicated on treating “thinking, feeling creatures,” that is to say women, as inanimate objects, as property. Furthermore, Christian constraints on sexuality are based on a precept forbidding one to change his or her affections, a prohibition Orou finds completely contrary to human nature. The chaplain admits these prohibitions are more honored in the breach in European society. Orou then asks whether the laws of the “great craftsman” are consistent with the laws and practices of magistrates and priests. When the chaplain once again concedes that they are frequently in conflict, Orou insists that, under such contradictory precepts, “you’ll be neither a man, nor a citizen, nor a true believer.”<sup>55</sup> The following dialogue underscores the inconsistencies:

- Orou: Does the woman who has sworn to belong only to her husband never give herself to another man?
- Chaplain: Nothing is more common.
- Orou: Your lawgivers either punish her or not: if they punish her, they are ferocious animals attacking nature; if not, they are weaklings who have held their authority up to scorn by a useless prohibition.
- Chaplain: The guilty women are punished by general disapproval.
- Orou: In other words, justice is exercised by the lack of common sense of the entire nation, and the folly of public opinion comes to the aid of the laws.<sup>56</sup>

Orou offers Tahiti as an example of a country where the laws are few, in conformity with nature, and therefore generally obeyed. He also suggests as a standard for morality “general welfare and individual utility.”<sup>57</sup> The Tahitians, in Diderot’s account, are no less able than Europeans to assess where their interests lie.

A and B then discuss the *Supplement* they have just read. This dialogue allows the case of the Tahitians to be expanded upon into principles for morals and society. In general, the claim is made that there must be good laws, and that the less laws impede human freedom, the better they are and the closer to nature. Both A and B consider Tahitian laws closer to nature. How, B asks, has “it come to pass that an act of such solemn purpose, and to which Nature beckons us by such a powerful attraction—that the deepest, sweetest and most innocent of pleasures—has become the most potent source of our evils and depravity?”<sup>58</sup> B expresses astonishment that A missed Orou’s points and reiterates them in such a way that their political application is unmistakable:

It is the tyranny of man which converted the possession of woman into property.  
It is the morals and customs which have encumbered the union of man and wife with too many conditions. . . .  
It is the nature of our society and the disparity of

wealth and rank which have given rise to our proprieties and improprieties. . . .

It is on account of the political views of sovereigns, who regard everything only in light of their own interest and security.

It is on account of religious institutions, which have attached the names of vice and virtue to actions which were not susceptible of moral judgment.<sup>59</sup>

This work is obviously the most polemical of the three we have discussed, largely because Diderot is writing for those who already espouse Enlightenment. He would like to convert them to his more





church and the state, stymied the quintessentially human use of reason and made progress dubious.

Their explorations of alternative models in the New World or the East cause all of these authors to single out for devastating criticism

Critics sometimes disparage the Enlightenment as the terrain of intellectuals whose optimism and naïveté border on that of *Candide*. Roland Barthes dismissed the Enlightenment when he described Voltaire as “the last happy man”<sup>65</sup>—by which he meant not to praise his disposition, but to suggest that Voltaire was not sufficiently aware of the problems inherent to the human condition. As I hope the previous discussion has suggested, the philosophes were not naïve and the text of *Candide* is more jaundiced than happy. Voltaire himself did not have a sanguine disposition. Expecting to die at any time, much of his correspondence strikes the following cheery note, “I am rising a little from my grave to tell you,” or “I forgot to have myself buried.”<sup>66</sup> But, more generally, the philosophes understood the difficulties of the battles they fought, and believed that the fight was worthwhile even if it could not be decisively won. They believed that human beings could do better towards each other than they had, but they did not underestimate the obstacles in the way. In other words, they bore no resemblance to *Candide*.

These texts are not examples of the uncritical, caricatured belief in reason commonly invoked by critics. The philosophes did not see reason as a panacea, but reason had to prevail, especially against conventional appeals to tradition, so many of which, the philosophes insisted, were based on prejudice or superstition. However, these texts demonstrate explicitly the centrality of the passions. The philosophes’ notion of virtue includes physical pleasure, and, especially for Montesquieu and Diderot, the passion for life is positive and linked to sexuality. Thus, to the degree that they put their faith in reason, it is reason reconceptualized to include the passions. Their own works appeal not only to reason but also to the passions; they are intended to divert, both in the sense of entertaining and of changing the previous direction of thought.

Even if, as their post-colonial critics contend, they were not scrupulously sensitive in their approach to other cultures, nonetheless, Enlightenment thinkers, when confronted by different peoples, cultures, sexual orientations, and standards of behavior, adopt tolerance as a characteristic moral stance. They are willing to push the issue of tolerance beyond the point at which the most jaded or most sophisticated member of the 18th or even 21st-century society might be com-

fortable. In *Candide*, native girls mourn their monkey lovers.<sup>67</sup> Both *The Persian Letters* and the *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* test the incest taboo: Montesquieu by telling the tale of the true love of a Zoroastrian brother and sister that was stigmatized only when they left their own culture; Diderot by having a Tahitian explain that incest was not common but neither was it taboo.<sup>68</sup> What makes us uncomfortable, they seem to assert, can make us think.

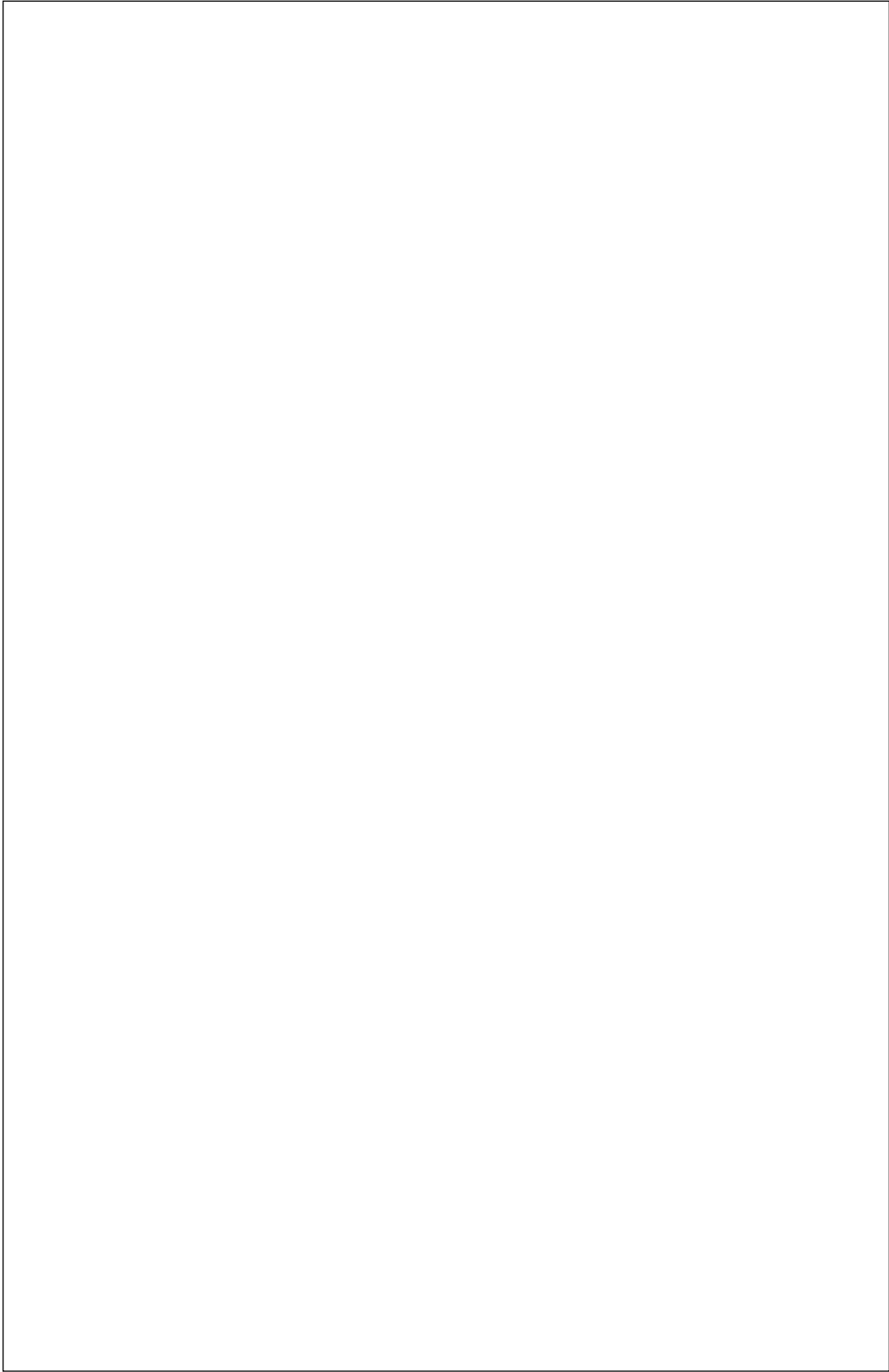
That tolerance derives in part from their acceptance of the ambiguous or inconclusive solutions they offered to the problems they raised.



*Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction*

called a “great echo chamber of ideas.”<sup>71</sup> Committed, critical, open, tolerant, humanitarian—seeking greater liberty and happiness for human beings, the writers of the Enlightenment still engage us and challenge us to do as well, to be as effective.

- 1 Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, translated with an introduction by George R. Healy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 22.
- 2 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letters X-XIV, 22-30.
- 3 Doubts that there is a beneficent God, who guides human destiny, and the fear that evil might befall man without rhyme or reason set the foundation for Enlightenment discussion of ethical problems. Even though the Enlightenment is certainly a movement, which focuses its considerable intellectual energies on an attempt to understand man, what that means had evolved quite considerably from earlier perspectives, which also emphasized the centrality of man. Crucial similarities between the high Middle Ages and the Enlightenment exist, particularly the emphasis on the power of human reason, as Carl Becker long ago maintained in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932). The Renaissance, too, placed man at the center of its investigations; it focused on man in his psychological complexity by studying the classics as models of human endeavors. But unfettered by religious certitudes or classical notions of virtue, the Enlightenment could speculate more freely, calling into question all existing institutions.
- 4 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For discussions of the reaction against the Enlightenment by the Romantics, see Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia*, translated by Frank Jellinek (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Darrin J. Earle, *Of 29 similar*



- 16 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). See Suzanne L. Pucci, "Orientalism and Representations of Exteriority in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*," *The Eighteenth Century* 26 (1985).
- 17 Montesquieu advocates toleration up to a point. He finds some social and political practices anathema, especially those characteristic of despotism.
- 18 See Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* for the most consistent development of this notion of a spirit. *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated by Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Press, 1949).
- 19 Diana Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's Persian Letters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 6.
- 20 Montesquieu also relied on 17th-century accounts of the Persian world, particularly Jean Chardin, *Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient* (Amsterdam, 1711) and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six Voyages en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (Amsterdam, 1676).
- 21 Nancy Miller makes this point about both Montesquieu and Françoise de Graffigny, in her introduction to Françoise de Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1993), xvii.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XIV, 42-45.
- 24 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXXV, 60-61.
- 25 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXXVI, 61-62.
- 26 For his discussion of some of these Parisian types see, Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXVII, 49-52, Letter XXXIV, 58-60, Letter XLV, 73-75, Letter XLVII, 78-82, LII, 88-90, Letter LIV, 91-92.
- 27 Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). See also Elizabeth Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).
- 28 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 19-20.



his level of understanding. See William H. Barber, *Leibniz in France from Arnault to Voltaire: A Study in the French Reactions to Leibnizianism, 1670-1770* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955). Whereas others, like Carolyn Korsmeyer and Peter Kivy, assert Voltaire's ability to grapple seriously with Leibniz's philosophy. See Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Is Pangloss Leibniz?," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1977) 201-208; Peter Kivy, "Voltaire, Hume and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1979) 211-24.

- 37 *Candide*, Gordon ed. 52, 49, 115. *Candide*, 115.
- 38 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 41.
- 39 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 41, 42, 44-45, 52.
- 40 *Candide*'s rescuers are also invariably those who have unorthodox or jaundiced views of religion. The most charitable character, indeed, is Jacques the Anabaptist, and the character most able to cope, and with the highest degree of happiness, is Martin the Mannichean, the character who most acknowledges the existence of evil. On the other side of this equation, those who are the most religious are exposed as the most evil, corrupt, and (if they are celibate) sexually active characters in the novel.
- 41 Voltaire, *Candide*, "The Old Woman's Story," Gordon ed., Chapters 11 and 12, 60-66.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 43 Jean Sareil, "De Zadig à *Candide*: Ou Permanence de la pensée de Voltaire," *Romantic Review* 72 (1961): 271-78.
- 44 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 52.
- 45 Jean Starobinski, "Voltaire's Double-Barreled Musket," in *Blessings in Disguise: The Morality of Evil* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 85.
- 46 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 74.
- 47 Voltaire, *Candide*, Wootton, 29.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 The ending of this tale has been the focus of much fruitful analysis. See, for example, David Langdon, "On the Meanings of the Conclusion of *Candide*," *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century* 238 (1985), 397-432; Jerry L. Curtis, "*Candide*

Cambridge University Press, 1992) 43. This speech by the Old Man is a stirring indictment of the effects of European colonialism on the New World.

54 Ibid., 47-48.

55 Ibid., 51.

56 Ibid., 52.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 70.

59 Ibid., 70-71.

60 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 26.

61 Obviously, these authors do not have Freud to rely on, but they, especially Diderot, should be recognized as perceptive pre-Freudians.

62 Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Candide and Other Related Texts*, edited and introduced by David Wootton, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001) 43.

63 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book 1, Chapter XV.5 "On the Slavery of Negroes," 238-39.

64 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, translated by Judith R. Bush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992).

65 See Roland Barthes, "The Last Happy Writer," in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 150-58.

66 This quality of Voltaire's correspondence is discussed by Daniel Gordon in his introduction to *Candide* (New York: Bedford) 16-17. See also the following study of Voltaire's correspondence during the period in which he was writing *Candide*

