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Persian Letters

Montesquieu · *1721 (English 1892) · translated by John Davidson (1892)*

Usbek writes to his friend Rustan at Isfahan: they stayed only one day at Qom, said their prayers, and on the twenty-sixth day from Ispahan came to Tauris. Rica and he may be the first Persians who have left their country urged by the thirst for knowledge. The hosted text is John Davidson's 1892 English, complete. Quote the letters, not the footnotes or a long introduction.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What do two Persian travelers actually see when they look at France, and at their own houses far away, and how should a school read a book of letters that is at once a satire, a travel, and a moral inquiry?

"We stayed only one day at Qom. After having said our prayers before the tomb of the virgin who brought forth twelve prophets, we resumed our journey, and yesterday, the twenty-sixth day since our departure from Ispahan, we came to Tauris."

Letter I, Usbek to Rustan at Isfahan

The Persian Letters are a fiction of correspondence: Usbek and Rica write from the road and from Paris, and letters also return from Persia. Europe is seen as if for the first time; Persia is not forgotten. The book is witty, and it is serious about law, religion, custom, and the soul of a monarchy. Teach it for older students, as Davidson printed it. In Letter I the heading has "Isfahan" and the body has "Ispahan"; quote each as it stands. Do not start from a footnote or from prefatory matter as if it were the first letter.

KEY CHARACTERS

Usbek
The principal traveler and writer, who leaves Ispahan with a thirst for knowledge, and whose household is not forgotten

Rica
His companion, also a first Persian, in the book's jest, to leave home in search of wisdom

Rustan
The friend at Isfahan to whom the first letter is written

A DAY AT QOM

> *"Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Isfahan // We stayed only one day at Qom. After having said our prayers before the tomb of the virgin who brought forth twelve prophets, we resumed our journey, and yesterday, the twenty-sixth day since our departure from Ispahan, we came to Tauris."*
> Letter I

> *"Rica and myself are perhaps the first Persians who have left their native country urged by the thirst for knowledge; who have abandoned the amenities of a tranquil life for the laborious search after wisdom."*
> Letter I

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Usbek to Rustan, at Isfahan
LETTER I

The correspondence opens on the road. One day at Qom, prayers at a tomb, then Tauris on the twenty-sixth day. The thirst for knowledge is already the reason given for leaving a tranquil life.

- The heading is "Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Isfahan"; the body says "our departure from Ispahan." Keep both spellings as printed
- "Rica and myself are perhaps the first Persians who have left their native country urged by the thirst for knowledge"
- Front matter and notes stand in this file; the story begins with Letter I
- This is already a book about travel, friendship, and inquiry, not a mere jest at French manners

> *"Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Isfahan // We stayed only one day at Qom. After having said our prayers before the tomb of the virgin who brought forth twelve prophets, we resumed our journey, and yesterday, the twenty-sixth day since our departure from Ispahan, we came to Tauris."*
> Letter I

02
The Road, and the Arrival in Europe
THE EARLY LETTERS

The travelers move west. Letters record cities, customs, and first judgments. Rica and Usbek do not always see with one eye.

- Keep the two friends distinct; the book is richer for their difference
- The pleasure of first seeing is real; so is the satire that will follow in Paris
- Do not reduce the early letters to a table of contents of later ideas
- Quote Davidson's wording, including place-names as printed

03
Paris Observed
THE LETTERS FROM FRANCE

Paris becomes the great object: court, town, men of letters, women of fashion, and the laws and faith of a Christian monarchy seen by guests who are not of it.

- The satire is a moral instrument, not a sneer only; teach what is being weighed
- Religion, law, and custom are the book's serious subjects; handle them with care in a Christian school, as arguments to be answered and as descriptions to be tested
- The form of letters lets many voices speak; Usbek is not the only mind
- For older students

04
Letters from Home
THE PERSIAN CORRESPONDENCE

The book is not only Europe seen from outside. Letters return from Usbek's household in Persia, and the travelers' absence has a cost at home.

- The household letters are part of the plot, not an appendix
- Teach that material with tact; it is a story of rule, absence, and disorder, and is not for a prurient reading
- The two theatres—Paris and the house at home—interpret one another
- Do not invent a last domestic peace the letters do not give

05
The Hosted Translation
DAVIDSON 1892

The hosted English is John Davidson, 1892, complete. Quote the letters themselves. Do not start from footnotes, and do not modernize the place-names.

- Letter I: heading "Isfahan," body "Ispahan," "Qom," "Tauris"
- A Christian school may teach the book as a satire that asks serious questions about law and faith, not as a dismissal of either
- The work is a classic of letters, for older students
- The French title is Lettres persanes; this file is Persian Letters

The Thirst for Knowledge | Seeing One's Own from Far Away | Law and Custom | Friendship and Letters | Travel | Absence and Home

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The correspondence opens: "Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Isfahan / We stayed only one day at Qom." Front matter and footnotes are not the first letter.
2. In Letter I the heading has "Isfahan" and the body has "Ispahan." Quote each as printed.
3. This is John Davidson's 1892 English, complete. Quote the letters, not the notes.
4. The book is a satire and a moral inquiry, for older students. Teach the questions about law, religion, and custom with care, as arguments to be weighed.
5. Letters also return from Persia. The household at home is part of the book, and should be taught with tact, not as gossip.

Quotations are verbatim from the translated by John Davidson (1892), Wikisource Persian Letters, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/persian-letters/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.