



*Giovanni Paolo Marana's Turkish Spy and  
the Police of Louis XIV:  
the Fear of Being Secretly Observed by  
Trained Agents in Early Modern Europe*

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The history of literature abounds in examples of texts which, once enormously popular with the reading public, later fell into complete oblivion. Giovanni Paolo Marana's epistolary novel about the adventures of an Ottoman spy in Paris belongs to this group. A bestseller in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was later almost forgotten. Nowadays it is only seldom studied, even if it is routinely mentioned as a major source of inspiration for Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* and as a splendid early example of the epistolary novel, so often imitated during the eighteenth century:

In literary history *L'Espion turc* is best known as the model for the *Lettres persanes*, but its importance is greater than that would imply, even as regards the question of literary influence. If the *Lettres persanes* had never been written the invention of the foreign letter-series, a device to satirize European life, would probably still have been one of the favourite forms of expression in the eighteenth-century. Marana's variation of subject-matter and boldness in speculation (on subjects rather than politics) showed potential of the genre. (Betts 1984: 98)



Strangely enough, it is only seldom remembered as the first example of a genre that was to flourish much later, namely the spy story; for if the historians of literature specializing in the eighteenth-century European novel recall *L’Espion turc*, it is in the context of it inspiring a similar subgenre, namely the surveillance chronicle, which played from the moment of the first publication of Marana’s book till the 1720s, “with its tropes of exploration, speculation, and circumspection – strongly signalling Enlightenment Orientalism” (Aravamudan 2012: 40).

I believe, however, that the work which captured the imagination of several generations and influenced eminent writers of the Enlightenment deserves to be studied not only as a footnote to Montesquieu’s brilliant prose, or even as an example of a forgotten classic. For the immense popularity of “*L’Espion turc*” was due, apart from its brilliant style, to the fact that it subtly expressed the new, unwelcome feeling that became widespread in France at the moment of its publication: the fear of being watched by the government’s agents.

#### THE AUTHOR

Giovanni Paolo Marana was born in Genoa in 1642. His involvement in the conspiracy of Raffaello della Torre against the government of Genoa in 1672 resulted in his imprisonment of four years. In 1682 he managed to flee to France, with whose ambassador François Pidou de St. Olon he became friends. Once in France, he published at his own expense a report on the conspiracy, entitled “*La congiura di Raffaello della Torre con le mosse della Savoia contra la Republica di Genova*”. Having no solid income, he hoped to obtain a position as Louis XIV’s official historiographer – in vain. The king, convinced by his confessor, granted Marana a modest pension (Ayme: 3). Looking for any other way of getting into Louis XIV’s good books, Marana decided to publish a book which would attract the king’s attention and demonstrate his own skill as a historian. Thus he came upon the idea of a book that would relate the history of Louis XIV’s reign in a way which was both entertaining flattering; the book was to be a relation of the major events which took place in Europe during the Sun King’s life, told by a foreigner in his letters to other foreigners, none of them interested in praising the French monarch.

In 1683, Marana was granted the royal privilege – i.e. permission to publish a book. At the beginning of the next year he published “*L’Esploratore turco e le di lui relazioni segrete alla Porta ottomana scoperte in Parigi nel regno di Luiggi il Grande*” - the first, Italian version of his spy story, containing thirty letters. A French version, entitled “*L’Espion du Grand-Seigneur*”, followed in February. As they turned out to sell well, Marana lost no time in preparing a longer version; the new French edition in 1686 contained already 102 letters. It was reprinted in Amsterdam in 1688 and soon attracted the attention of publishers and public in England, Germany and other



European states. Successive seventeenth-century editions, some of them ascribed falsely to non-existent publishers, often contained over six hundred letters, whose authorship remains a mystery, as Marana had died as early as 1693.

#### THE TIMING

The fact that Marana, a former conspirator, now living a lonely and uncomfortable life in a foreign capital, chose a spy as the main character of his novel is not surprising. The fact that the spy should be an Arab, or a Turk, is even less surprising. The theme of Oriental intrigue was very popular in both Italian and French literatures of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from the classic stories of Ancient Oriental monarchs such as Cyrus or Semiramis, so often told and retold by Western playwrights of the Early Modern period (like Pierre Mainfray and Nicolas Mary Desfontaines), the Ottoman sultans were frequently to be seen on stage. In 1619 Prospero Bonarelli wrote a tragedy entitled *Solimano*, which “gave impetus to the development of the French classical tragedy, particularly with regard to the “Turkish” themes”, a fine example of which was Jean de Mairet’s tragedy *Le Grand et Dernier Solyman ou la mort de Mustapha* (1635) and then Charles Vion Dalibray *Le Soliman: tragic-comédie* (1637) as well as a *Roxelane; tragic-comédie*, a 1643 play by Jean Desmares (Yermolenko 2010: 32-33). In 1648, Jean Magnon seduced the London audience with his “Le Gran Tamerlan and Bejezet”. In 1641, Madeleine de Scudéry published a romance set in an Oriental court, *Ibrahim ou l’Illustre Bassa*, the plot of which was adapted for the stage by her own brother Georges as well as by English playwright Elkanah Settle – *Ibrahim the Illustrious Bassa* (1677). In 1645 Philipp von Zesen published its German translation (*Ibrahims oder Der durchleutigen Bassa... Wundergeschichte*), which in turn inspired Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (*Ibrahim Bassa*, 1653) and August Adolf von Haugwitz (*Obsiegende Tugend: Oder der Bethörte doch wieder Bekehrte Soliman*, 1684 – Allert in Yermolenko 2013: 90). Madeleine de Scudéry was also author of the longest French novel ever - *Artamène ou le grand Cyrus* (1649-1653), set in Persia.

Furthermore, the Turkish War triggered new intensive interest in the Muslim East. In 1669 the Ottoman forces invaded Crete, and in 1672 they conquered a significant part of Ukraine and then started to support Imre Thököly’s rebellion against the Habsburgs. The war, however, proved that the Empire had grown weaker since the times of Suleiman the Magnificent, who remained so popular among playwrights: the Ottoman army was defeated in 1683 by the Habsburg and Polish forces.

“Both the Ottoman Empire and Islam itself came under closer scrutiny as a result of the Turkish threat. However, as the empire itself became less of an actual danger, such inquiries could be pursued in a more relaxed atmosphere.” (Rodinson 2006: 42). Let us add that at the moment when Marana decided to write a story of an Oriental spy, scholarly interest in Muslim culture had been developing in the West for several



decades: in 1647 André du Ryer translated the Quran into French, adding concise information of the principles of “the religion of the Turks”. Jacob Golius published an Arabic-Latin dictionary (1653), and Franz Meninski a great Turkish dictionary in 1680 (Rodinson 2006: 43).

And if Marana had never personally been to the Muslim East, in Paris he could find enough fine sources of knowledge of the Orient. Jean de Thévenot’s *Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant dans laquelle il est curieusement traité des estats sujets au Grand Seigneur* was published in Paris in 1665, his *Suite du voyage de Levant* in 1674. Claude Barbin, the first publisher of Marana’s novel, in 1677 printed Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s *Les six voyages... en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* and in 1682 *L’Histoire des trois derniers empereurs des turcs, depuis 1632 jusqu’à 1677* by English diplomat Paul Rycaut, already well known to the interested French public since his 1677 *Histoire de l’état présent de l’Empire Ottoman*. In brief, Marana could find in French literature all the details he would need to make his “Oriental” protagonist sound credible to the European public. And for any author who would consider publishing a work featuring a “Turk” 1683, the year of the battle of Vienna, was a perfect moment.

The literary form that Marana chose – an epistolary novel – also had been enjoying considerable popularity with the French reading public. 1669 saw an immense success of a book entitled *Les lettres portugaises traduites en françois*, containing letters purportedly written by a nun of a Beja convent to her French beloved and still a highly appreciated book when Marana got down to work on his novel. But Marana did more than just use a ready-made literary form: he created a new literary genre – the spy story.

## THE NOVEL

The eponymous spy is *Mahmut, Arabe de Nation*, who came to Paris in 1637 pretending to be a student of theology and lived in France under the alias of Tite of Moldavia. He spent, Marana wrote in the introductory part of his book, the rest of his life in Paris, namely forty-five years, during which he kept sending reports to Constantinople. Copies of his letters, written in Arabic, were accidentally found by – what a twist of fate – a gentleman able to understand the writing. Addressing Louis XIV in the first pages of the book published in 1688, Marana declared that he had only translated Arabic papers he had found in Paris in an old cache.

The very first letter, signed by “Mahmut Arabe, tres-vil Esclave du Grand Seigneur”, and dated 1637, informs us that its author arrived in Paris on foot, which took him one hundred forty-four days; he rented a modest room (“une chambre si petite que le soupçon mesme n’y pourra pas entrer” – Marana 1688: 1), and started his work. The Ottoman authorities expected him to send detailed reports of all the important events occurring in the politics of Western Europe, whereas the means he



could profit from were rather scarce. From the very first day of his long stay in Paris Mahmut kept complaining about how little money he had. And yet, this one man without enough money to bribe anybody of importance was able to spy effectively for years. He found a way into the households of the powerful by posing as a teacher of Greek; he obtained information from a Turkish dwarf from Morea, given by some Spaniard to Louis XIV and living at the royal court (Marana 1688: 242).

While watching, he was also being watched. At a certain point (in 1639, i.e. more than a year after his arrival) he was invited to Cardinal Richelieu's cabinet – something he had dreaded and yet thought possible, for he believed that Richelieu was keen to know everything (Marana 1688: 151-152). As we read in the long Letter XXXV, written to Vizier Azem, the Cardinal asked who "Tito" was and made sure that he knew Arabic and Greek. He suggested "Tito's" linguistic skills could be useful in dealing with a conflict that had developed in Palestine between Catholic monks and Greek Christians, but later he also asked him to write a report about the Ottoman Empire and its weak points that could be useful in planning a future military attack on the Sultan's state (Marana 1688: 150-157). Instead of such a report, Mahmut wrote Richelieu a long letter, urging him to employ learned historians to write a universal history surpassing the work of Plutarch (Marana 1688: 207-217). Eventually, Richelieu left him in peace and Mahmut kept sending his reports to the Porte.

He wrote about the announced pregnancy of Queen Anne of Austria and the birth of the heir to King Louis XIII. Very often he wrote about the ongoing Franco-Spanish war, commenting that whatever the result of the clashes, it was always profitable for the Ottoman Empire – "les François & les Espagnols estant tous ennemis de nostre Nation & de nostre Religion, nos affaires seront en plus grande seureté quand de deux ennemis nous en verrons un abatu" (Marana 1688: 77). He reported echoes of the Thirty Years' War and the English Civil War and described how Portugal was regaining independence from Spain and the Catalans were trying to revolt against Philip III. The list of the political events, starting with 1637, is the least interesting fragment of the text, although it was, in Marana's eyes, the most important part, the fictional spy story being just a vehicle. Apart from relating these events in chronological order, Mahmut described Paris and its inhabitants, sometimes formulating general opinions of the French and their culture, which usually do not go beyond clichés: "il faut admirer dans toutes leurs actions un esprit delicat, & une activité pareille à celle du feu" (Marana 1688: 21).

Marana inserted no small portion of flattery into the text. His main goal was to win the king's good graces by offering him a book on the history of his childhood and reign – and the Oriental masque was useful mainly because the purported author of the text was somebody else's loyal subject, thus he was supposed to have no interest at all in flattering Louis XIV. For example, Mahmut wrote to the vizier that the French "aiment leur Roy par inclination, & et cét amour fait en eux ce que l'attachement aux precepts de la loy, fait dans le coeur des meilleurs Turcs" (Marana 1688: 19), and spares



no time to write long eulogies of Henry IV, the grandfather of Louis XIV (Marana 1688: 157-167; 186-200).

But even if Mahmut glorifies Louis XIV's predecessors as well as the political genius of his father's main minister, even if he sometimes has a word of praise for the French, his letters leave no doubt that he remains not only a stranger among them, but also an enemy. Already in the second letter he expresses his opinion that Christians hate and despise Muslims (Marana 1688: 5), while in the third letter he informs that the news of a French victory over Spanish armies delighted him, because it meant that a lot of Christian blood had been shed (Marana 1688: 7). On the other side, he informs an admiral that the French are happy to hear about losses suffered by the Ottoman fleet (Marana 1688: 106). From an erudite Jesuit who boasts of his knowledge of the Orient ("je luy entendis vomir des injures, & des imprecations épouvantables, contre Mahomet, contre sa Loy & contre tous les fidelles" (Marana 1688: 33) down to beggars in Parisian streets, the French he meets express their hatred to the world of Islam: Mahmut must explain to Mufti that he does not give alms to the poor, because the Parisian beggars "prient continuellement Dieu contre nous" (Marana 1688: 148). And he loses no opportunity to express his hatred for the Christians in general: "Tant d'Armées qui sont dans une continuelle action, fourniront assez de matiere desormais de t'ecrire pour te divertir par le recit des folies de ces Infidelles, qui semblent se destruire tous les jours, & ruiner leurs affaires pour nous donner le spectacle de leurs deffaites, & nous faire triompher" (Marana 1688: 77-78)

Still, contacts with confessors of a religion different from his own seem to influence his attitude towards religion. Mahmut comes to France mortified by the perspective of pretending to be a Christian, but he gradually starts to look for some common principles of religions, playing with the idea that morality can be something independent of confession:

Mais croy-tu toy, qui es un des Dervis le plus éclairé, que l'homme puisse estre heureux après la mort de quelque Religion qu'il ait pû estre, s'il a vecu en homme de bien. Dis moy de grace, ce que tu penses là-dessus, c'est un point fort important à décider. Pour moy je commence veritablement à penser qu'il peut y avoir des saints pamy les Chrestiens, comme il y en a parmi nous ; j'ai veu & entendu beaucoup de choses qui marquent la veritable pieté de quelques-uns d'eux, & il faut avoüer entre nous, les preceptes de leur loy ont quelque chose de tres-juste, & s'ils sont bien observez, elle ne me paroist pas moins sainte que la nostre" (Marana 1688: 35-36)

he writes to a friend. Later, when commenting on the magnanimity shown by a pious French aristocrat to a man who had tried to kill him, Mahmut writes:





nostre Mahomet n'a jamais fait voir des sentimens si genereux lors qu'il écrivit dans sa Loy ce precepte contre les Chrestiens, qui ne l'avoient jamais offensé. *Quand vous rencontrerez les Infideles, tuez les & leur coupez la teste, faites les prisonniers, & les tenez enchaisnez jusques à ce qu'ils ayent payè leur rançon, ou que vous trouviez à propos de les remettre en liberté. Persecutez—les jusques à ce qu'ils soient tous soumis, ou qu'ils soient entierement perdus "* (Marana 1688: 37).

When the Mufti decides to exclude him from the community of the believers, Mahmut asks: "Dis-moy, est-il necessaire pour vivre en vray fidelle, de haïr éternellement les Sectateurs de Jesus?" (Marana 1688: 147). Becoming sceptical, Mahmut starts to reconsider the religious dogmas, stating questions in a philosophical way and slowly turning into a Deist.

Actually, some of these musings were too bold for French censors and Marana was forced to remove certain fragments in 1686 (Betts 1984: 99). But what remained turned out to be one of the book's strongest points: at the time *L'Espion* was gaining popularity, the West saw the coming of what Paul Hazard called "la crise de la conscience européenne": the advent of scepticism in the place of religious zeal, the increasing popularity of Deism at the cost of the traditional uncritical attitude towards the Catholic faith and the growing optimism as to the capacities of human mind and sciences. Marana introduced his Mahmut with his eschatological doubts to the reading public exactly at the moment when the learned French Catholic theologian Richard Simon published his *Histoire critique de la créance et des coutumes des nations du Levant*, containing an objective description of the rites and dogmas of Eastern Christians and Muslims – a book that became a starting point for more and more Europeans disenchanted with traditional Christianity, and looking for answers to the questions that tormented Mahmut.

The timing of the publication, as we see, was perfect. The style was brilliant; Marana adroitly mixed elements of bitter social satire, the romantic motive of hopeless love, serious but perfectly understandable reflections on philosophic and theological matters, and sparks of malicious humour. Another factor that made the novel so successful was probably the personality of Mahmut, who remains likeable even if he openly declares his enmity towards the Christian world. The main protagonist of the first spy story in European literature is completely different from those arrogant superheroes who dominated the genre once it became very popular in the twentieth century. Unhappy, lonely and poor, Mahmut actually arouses the reader's sympathy.

The very first letter brings some information which helps imagine Mahmut: he is physically unattractive. That shall help him avoid unwanted attention (Marana 1688: 2); quite a good thing, when he wants to enter the households of important men ("les maris n'ont point de jalousie de moy" – Marana 1688: 28), it becomes a source of distress when confirmed by a Greek lady with whom he falls hopelessly in love (Marana 1688: 271).



The very first letter also informs us that Mahmut cannot hope to live in comfort: “je vis de peu, quoy que les œufs soient icy plus chers que les poulets ne sont chez nous” (Marana 1688: 2); even if he can earn some extra money by teaching Greek, he is constantly in financial need: “deux sequins qu’on me donne par jour sont plus que suffisans pour entretenir un homme qui vit à la Cynique” (Marana 1688: 23), while his needs are bigger, taking into consideration his job: “Il faut vivre, il faut s’habiller, je dois aller à la Cour, & il faut pour cela avoir du pain, de la sarge ou du drap, & payer aussi des Carosses, où des Chevaux de louage” (Marana 1688: 41).

Another major source of Mahmut’s distress is the necessity to pretend to be a devout Christian; it seems that before coming to Paris he had consulted a Mufti, but still he has doubts: “Bien que le Mufti m’ait absous des mensonges & des faux sermens que je seray obligé de faire, je ne puis néanmoins tromper sans scrupule, quoy qu’après cette absolution, je le puisse sans peché” (Marana 1688: 2). Soon after coming to Paris, he laments: “je me fais passer pour Chrestien, je m’imagine voir Mahomet en colere & je croy mon ame perdue” (Marana 1688: 23) and begs the Mufti for help:

je suis un sacrilege (...) j’agis contre les precepts de Mahomet exprimez dans son Alcoran. Je suis coupable de violer la Loy qui m’est prescrite, & je merite la mort si tu n’asseures pas mon salut et vie, en approuvant cette maniere de vivre ou je suis obligé. Il est vray que tu m’as déjà donné l’absolution pour les faux sermens qu’il faudra que je fasse quand ils seron necessaires au service de mon Maistre, mais je ne suis pas assuré que cette absolution s’estende assez loin pour me mettre en seureté de conscience, lors que j’abuseray des choses sacrées. (Marana 1688: 24)

As Marana himself was a Catholic who made his fictional Muslim praise Richelieu for having fought the Huguenots (“il a gueri la France du mal dont l’Heresie l’avoit infectée” – Marana 1688: 81) he had no sympathy for the French religious dissenters, victims of the less and less tolerant policies of Louis XIV. But right after the first publication of *L’Espion* the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 made thousands of French men and women feel like Mahmut, unhappy because forced to pretend to be devout Catholics in public.

And finally Mahmut lives in constant fear of what is going on in the Ottoman court, where his fate can be decided. Writing to his friend Dgennet Oglu he confesses:

Tu es presentement au milieu des plaisirs, avec tes amis, tes enfans & ta femme, avec la liberté d’exercer ta Religion (...). Je suis au contraire parmy les Infideles, parmy des Idolâtres & des Heretiques, obligé à vivre avec une Nation toute differente de la nostre par sa Religion, par ses inclinations, & par ses coustumes (...) lorsque j’estois dans ma maison, je vivois en repos, parce que je songeois à servir, & presentement que je suis dans le service, j’ay une crainte continuelle de ne plaire pas: Combien d’ames Amurat a-t-il envoyé dans l’autre monde. (Marana 1688: 65-67)





In another letter, he asks Dgennet Oglu to find out what people are saying about him at court (Marana 1688: 255), but later he complains that his letters remain unanswered, as his friends are afraid to write freely about current affairs (Marana 1688: 306-307). Many French readers, all too well conscious of the situation of an absolute ruler's subject, could probably sympathize with Mahmut in this matter.

The appeal to the anxiety of a helpless subject, afraid that his fates can be changed by a court intrigue, counterbalanced the flattery present in the book, just like the fact that Mahmut was not a friend to Christians in general was counterbalanced by the fact that he was an unhappy person whose problems resembled those of the readers. His confessions could appeal to the reader, who could be all too well acquainted with experiences of loneliness, anxiety, economic distress and hopeless love. Marana's personal experience of loneliness in exile surfaces in Mahmut's words about sadness being a normal state for somebody living far away from friends and fatherland (Marana 1688: 219).

#### THE WEAK POINTS

Of course the novel had weak points as well. Marana had only a second-hand knowledge of the Muslim world and a reader experienced in Ottoman realities could easily expose the falsity of the claim made by Marana in the introductory letter, namely that he was only the translator of letters originally written by a real "Mahmut, Arabe de Nation". Even the identity of Mahmut was problematic: the Arabs were not exactly the ethnic group whose members were often given important positions in 17<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman bureaucracy, court and army. In the third letter Mahmut praises the wisdom of the Muslims who never fight with each other ("la sagesse des Mahomettans, parmy lesquels on ne voit jamais de Guerre ouverte" – Marana 1688: 8), which is simply a false statement; Mahmut in many places demonstrates his interest for history, both European and Ottoman, so this statement seems to be a strange mistake. There are more such details: for example Mahmut writes to Mufti: "grand Pontife (...) prie le saint Prophete qu'il m'empesche de perir" (Marana 1688: 27), and asks a friend for a piece of tapestry from Mecca as "holy relic" (Marana 1688: 247). It is not a devout Muslim who says it, but rather an Italian Catholic who has not travelled in Muslim lands.

#### THE SUCCESS

The success of the book was immediate and led to its reprinting in Amsterdam and in Cologne as well as its translation into English as early as 1687. "The work was so successful that the full text, eight volumes, was reissued at least thirty times in English



up to 1801, several times in French, in Dutch, German and even Russian in 1778." (Popkin 1987: 116). In the process, the French title underwent modifications – while the 1696 edition is still entitled *L’Espion du Grand-Seigneur, et ses relations secretes envoyées à Constantinople*, the 1700 and 1715 editions are entitled *L’Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens*, and later ones *L’Espion turc* (1743) or even *Le nouvel espion turc* (1748). And it was expanding. While the French version, reprinted in Amsterdam in 1688, contained 102 letters, later editions grew longer and longer. The first English translation included 644 letters in eight volumes, the last of which was printed in 1692 (Betts 1984: 97). The successive French editions, some of them provided with subtitles claiming that they were translated from English, contained over 600 letters.

In the first French three-volume version of the book, Marana addressed Louis XIV in the preface, suggesting that the work could be expanded: “J’ay commence, sire, à traduire ne ma langue naturelle les Relations de cet Arabe qui me sont tombés dans les mains, & je prens la liberté d’en presenter à V. M. la premiere partie. (...) Il me restera encore beaucoup à faire, SIRE, pour achever la traduction de tant de Lettres” (Marana 1688: ii). This proves that Marana hoped to be successful enough to be asked – by the king, or by the publisher – to write further volumes. But did he really write five hundred more letters after completing the first French edition of 102?

There continues to be a controversy about the authorship of the volumes subsequent to Marana’s first, based on a series of speculations that range from the possibility of the author being Marana himself for the most part, to a number of English replacement candidates including (...) an unnamed English Jacobite in exile with James III’s court in St. Germain-en-Laye. Meanwhile, French critics predictably favour the candidacy of French authors including Bayle, Cotelendi, Marana’s translator François Pidou de St. Olon, and the intriguing possibility of an unidentified French Huguenot refugee intellectual exiled in London after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.” (Aravamudan in Backscheider 2005: 58)

Virginia Aksan states that “There is remote possibility that Marana himself wrote all the letters, as he himself suggested in 1690. (...) Suffice it to say that there are insoluble problems about the authorship of the Turkish Spy and all its European relatives” (Aksan 1994: 204). In the twentieth century, Guido Almansi claimed that all the letters were created by Marana (Betts 1984: 98), but *Continuation of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy at Paris. Giving an impartial Account to the Divan at Constantinople of the most Remarkable Transactions of Europe, and discovering several Intrigues and Secrets of the Christian Courts*, published in London in 1718, is ascribed to Daniel Defoe (who most probably worked himself as a governmental spy (Aravamudan 2012: 40). The success of the book was so big that it could pay for an English, Italian or French author to publish a forged continuation of Marana’s work rather than sell it under their own name.



Having enjoyed a huge popularity with the French reading public during the first half of the eighteenth century, the story started to lose its grip and by 1783 in France it was already considered to be good only for “credulous youth” (Aksan 1994: 202-203). Still, it had been read attentively by two important writers whom it deeply influenced: Montesquieu and Meslier. Montesquieu, who owned a 1717 copy of *L’Espion du Grand-Seigneur* in his library, was visibly inspired by Marana’s idea of putting a subtle critique of subjects as delicate as religion and politics in the mouth of an exotic observer; his *Lettres persanes*, published in 1721, were inspired for both form and content by Marana’s text. Just like the Genoese author, in his preface Montesquieu declared that the book was only a collection of letters translated from an Oriental language. Just like him, he made his main protagonist, Usbek, reconsider his religious ideas of a pious Muslim while meeting Christians – which in both cases led to the evolution of the character’s religiosity and to his adopting a fairly deistic stance.

Mahmut’s religious musings influenced also Jean Meslier, whose monumental *Testament*, discovered as a manuscript at his death in 1729 proved to be too bold an attack on the Catholic church and Christianity to be published in its full length till the end of the century. Meslier’s reflections had been inspired by the idea that all religions are actually human inventions, used by politicians as tools to deceive peoples – an idea he first found in *L’Espion turc* (Meslier 1864: 35).

Marana’s book found its way into the libraries of a mundane aristocrat and of a modest village priest. No wonder that the Dutch publisher of the 1730 edition of *Lettres persanes* provided them with a subtitle stating that the book resembles *L’Espion* (Douthwaite 1992: 131). Marana’s novel “became one of the best-sellers of the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth-century European literature and inaugurated yet another subgenre of modern fiction: the pseudo-foreign letter or spy novel” (Mancini 2003: 33). During the eighteenth century numerous French and English writers followed Marana’s example, making their protagonists foreign observers of Western ways and institutions. The most important example is of course Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721), which in turn inspired George Lyttleton to write *Letters from a Persian in England to his Friend at Ispahan*, claiming that he was only the translator (1735), as well as the anonymous author of *The Persian Letters continued, or the second volume of Letters from Selim at London to Mirza at Ispahan* (Crisafulli 1953: 210). In 1735 Boyer d’Argens started to publish *Lettres juives, ou lettres d’un Juif en voyage à Paris à ses Amis en divers Endroits*, and several years later *Lettres chinoises ou correspondance philosophique, historique, & critique entre un Chinois Voyageur à Paris, & ses correspondants en divers Endroits* (1739). Poullain de Saint-Foix published his *Lettres d’une Turque à Paris, écrits à sa soeur au serrail* (1730), anonymously, just like Madame de Graffigny did with her *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* (1747), whose popularity inspired yet another author to offer the reading public *Lettres d’Aza ou d’un Péruvien* (1748) (Crisafulli 1953: 210). Joseph Landon published *Lettres siamoises, ou le siamois en Europe* (1751), pretending that the real author was an Oriental spy (a visitor from Siam,



expressing his surprise and sometimes disgust while observing Parisian institutions, had been a protagonist in *Amusements sérieux et comiques d'un Siamois*, published by Charles Rivière Dufresny as early as 1698, and translated freely into English by Tom Brown). A similar claim was made by the anonymous author of *Letters from an Armenian in Ireland to his Friends at Trebisond* (1756) (Crisafulli 1953: 211). Maubert de Gouvest, himself a spy, published his *Lettres iroquoises*, full of sarcastic comments on the French ways, in 1752. Among many other pseudo-foreign letters offered to the Western audience during the eighteenth century, an especially interesting example is *Iggerot Meshullam ha-Eshtemoi* (1789-1790) by Isaac Abraham Euchel, written in Hebrew and featuring a Jew from Aleppo, who comes to Europe in order to study its customs undercover (Neiman 1975: 164). There were also literary works whose protagonists of foreign observers were less exotic: "Gatien de Courtilz's *The French Spy* (1700), Ned Ward's *The London Spy* (1698-1700), Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* (1709), Captain Bland's *The Northern Atalantis, or York Spy* (1713), the anonymous *The German Spy* (1738), *The Jewish Spy* (1739), Eliza Haywood's *The Invisible Spy* (1755), and many more" (Aravamudan 2012: 45).

Marana's book enjoyed an enormous success, whether we measure it by the number of sold copies or by its influence on the literary scene. But Marana himself was probably disenchanted: Louis XIV paid no attention to the book at all. Paradoxically, it was the trick that Marana intended to be able to flatter Louis XIV that brought him fame – when used not to flatter, but to criticize the French government – the Oriental camouflage was later used by great authors of the French Enlightenment, including Montesquieu and Voltaire. Montesquieu made a perfect use of Marana's invention of a protagonist who is an exotic observer, eager to understand what the reader had always taken for granted, excusable if asking questions which could expose the absurdities of the ways and traditions of the locals. Montesquieu's *Rica*, being Persian, could criticize the French king and describe the pope, institutions and customs as harshly as "naively".

The novel won its popularity in spite of the servile flattery Marana tried to use to win the king's good graces. From the mid-1680s on fewer and fewer Frenchmen were ready to read yet another book praising the genius of Louis XIV. If the Revocation was not felt as an unacceptable political decision in the wide circles of the Catholic French society, there were other disasters. France was visibly getting weaker in the sphere of international relations, Louis XIV's wars ruined its treasury and decimated its population, along with the disastrous famines of 1693 and 1709.

Increasingly unpopular, Louis XIV demanded his police to control not only whatever his subjects were doing, but also what they said in private about him, the government, and the Church. He knew that he could not expect sincerity from his courtiers: the few bold ones, who had the courage to express their worries about the disastrous state of the kingdom and to call for changes, from Vauban to Fénelon, were silenced and disgraced by the king.



And yet it was impossible to censor and control everything that was being written and thought in the kingdom. The political treaties published by Protestant exiles abroad still managed to find their way into France, and the authorities were not able to catch all those who smuggled and read them. Already in 1667 in Paris Colbert created the first modern police, which started to work under Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie, expected to prevent any expression of discontent with the government (Fierro 1996: 74). His greatest success was to expose the activity of organized crime in Paris (the so-called "l’Affaire des Poisons", 1677-1680), which led to a public trial of dozens of people accused of witchcraft involving human sacrifices, trading in poisons and illegal abortions. The process made it clear to the Parisians that they were observed on a scale they had not suspected. Police agents eavesdropped on their conversations in the streets, in bars and cafés; servants informed the authorities of what was being said and done in the houses of the rich.

It was to become even worse. De la Reynie was replaced by René-Louis d’Argenson, whose intelligence and efficacy made the Parisians fear that the police, now famous for its undercover agents, knew everything about their lives and sins. One of the tasks of the Paris police in the last years of Louis XIV’s reign was collecting data on the religious practices and opinions of the king’s subjects. As Louis XIV was getting old, his Catholic religiosity took on the form of intolerant bigotry; with Protestantism officially banned in France, the king decided to put an end to Jansenism and expected d’Argenson’s men to provide information not only about men and women who had extramarital sex, read the writings of non-Catholic dissidents, and criticized the government’s policies. By the king’s orders, they were also to look for those who lived in a way more virtuous than their neighbours, gave more alms to the poor and prayed more often than average. And those who, in the times of acute crisis, dared to express any dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the kingdom. Nothing expresses the absurdity of the situation better than the letter d’Argenson himself wrote to the royal chancellery in 1709, stating that it made no sense to punish a poor woman who had been heard saying a few "seditious" words at a time of general misery (Saint-Germain 1965: 22-23).

What prepared the ground for the success of the first spy story in Western literature was the new feeling of being observed by the agents of the government, which became widespread after the first modern police force was created in France. Those who read Marana’s brilliant novel were perfectly able to sympathize with the fictitious Oriental spy’s fears of being disclosed by the government’s men, hunting not only for foreign spies, criminals and sinners, but also for people whose only crime was to treat their religion too lightly – or really seriously. Watched and eavesdropped in streets, taverns and even their private apartments, by those who were paid to collect information about their lives, feelings and beliefs, the French enjoyed reading the story of an underpaid, lonely and homesick Turkish spy who trembled at the thought of being watched himself.





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