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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Rica to Ibben in Smyrna

I have seen the young monarch. His life is very precious to his subjects ; it is not less so to all of Europe, for the great troubles that his death could produce. [1] But kings are like gods, and while they live we must believe they are immortal. His physiognomy is majestic, but winsome ; a superior education seems to collude with an excellent temperament, and already promises a great prince.

They say one can never know the character of kings of the Occident until they have passed through the two great tests, their mistress and their confessor. We shall soon see both of them try to capture the mind of this one, and for that great struggles will ensue. For under a young prince these two powers are always rivals, but they are reconciled and join forces under an old one. Under a young prince the dervich has a very difficult role to sustain ; the king's strength makes his weakness, but the other one triumphs equally over his weakness or his strength.

When I arrived in France, I found the late king totally governed by women [2] ; and yet in his old age I think he was the one monarch who on earth had the least need of them. One day I heard a woman saying : Someone needs to do something for that young colonel ; I know his valor ; I shall speak of him to the minister. Another was saying : It is surprising that this young abbé has been overlooked, he must become a bishop ; he is a man of good birth, and I could answer for his behavior. Yet you must not imagine that the women who spoke in this way were favorites of the prince : they had perhaps never spoken twice with him in their lifetime, even though that is very easily done among European princes. The thing is that there is no one who has any function at court, in Paris, or in the provinces, who has not a woman through whose hands pass all the favors and sometimes the injustices that he can do. These women all have relations with one another, and make up a sort of republic [3] whose members, ever active, mutually assist and serve each other ; it is like another state within the state [4] ; and the man who is at court, in Paris and in the provinces, who sees ministers, magistrates and prelates act, if he does not know the women who govern them, is like the man can see a machine running but does not know how it works. [5]

Do you think, Ibben, that a woman gets the idea of being a minister's mistress so she can sleep with him ? What an idea ! It is so she can present him with five or six petitions every morning ; and the goodness of their temperament is shown in their eagerness to benefit an infinite number of unfortunate people who procure for them a hundred thousand livres worth of income.

People complain in Persia that the kingdom is governed by two or three women ; it is much worse in France, where the women in general govern, and not only take wholesale, but also divide up retail, all the authority.

Paris this last day of the moon of Chalval 1717

[1] Louis XV was only seven in October 1717 ; were he to die, Philip V of Spain, grandson of Louis XIV, might - despite his renunciation of the French throne (one of the conditions of the treaty of Utrecht in 1713) - try to lay claim to the succession.

[2] In 1711, this was essentially Madame de Maintenon, who died in 1719.

Letter 104

[3] In the general sense : the word *republic* "is used sometimes for any kind of state or government" (*Académie*, 1694).

[4] This expression was commonly applied to the Church or more particularly to the Jesuits.

[5] This remark is reminiscent of the anecdote about the scenic "machines" at the opera in Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) : unaware that Phaeton is raised into the air by ropes and pulleys, pre-cartesian scientists explain his movement by mysterious properties.