

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3473>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

---

**Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés**

---

*Rica [1] to Ibben in Smyrna*

---

We have been in Paris for a month, and have been the whole time in continual motion : a lot is involved in finding lodgings, locating the persons to whom we have been referred, and getting ourselves supplied with the necessary things, which are all lacking at once.

Paris is as large as Isfahan. The houses are so tall that one would swear they are inhabited only by astrologers. [2] You can judge that a city built upward, which has six or seven houses on top of each other, is extremely populous, and that once everyone has descended into the street, it is very crowded. [3]

What you might not believe is that in the month I have been here, I have yet to see anyone walk. There are no people on earth who get more out of their machines [4] than the French : they run, and they fly. The leisurely carriages of Asia, the steady gait of our camels, would make them faint dead away. As for me, who am not used to such a pace, I often go on foot without changing my stride. I sometimes get in a rage like a Christian : for allowing that I will get splashed from foot to head, I cannot forgive the elbows that hit me regularly and periodically : being regularly and predictably. A man who comes from behind and overtakes me gives me a half-turn around, and another, who is coming the other way, suddenly puts me back where the first had caught me, and I have not gone a hundred paces without being more pommelled that if I had gone six leagues.

Do not expect me for now to tell you much about European behavior and customs ; I only have a slight notion of them myself, and have scarcely had time to register my surprise.

The king of France is the most powerful prince in Europe. He has no gold mines like his neighbor the king of Spain, but he has more wealth than he, because he draws it from the vanity of his subjects, [5] more inexhaustible than mines. He has been able to undertake or sustain great wars, with no other funds than honored titles to sell [6] ; and by a miracle of human pride, his troops get paid, his fortresses supplied, and his fleets equipped.

This king is, moreover, a great magician : he extends his authority over the very minds of his subjects, making them think what he will. If he has but a million écus in his treasury, and he needs two, he only has to persuade them that one écu is worth two, and they believe him. If he has a war difficult to support, and has no money, he only has to get them to thinking that a piece of paper is money, [7] and they are at once persuaded it is so. He even goes so far as to make them believe that he cures them of all sorts of diseases by touching them, [8] so great is the power he has over their minds.

Let not what I am telling you about this prince surprise you : there is another magician even more skilled than he, who is not less master of his mind than himself he is of others'. This magician is called the pope. Sometimes he makes him believe that three are only one, [9] that the bread one eats is not bread, or the wine one drinks is not wine, [10] and a thousand other things of the sort.

And in order to keep him always in shape, and not let him lose the habit of believing, from time to time he gives him for practice certain articles of faith. Two years ago he sent him a document which he called Constitution, [11] and tried to oblige this prince and his subjects under heavy penalties to believe everything that was in it. He succeeded with

respect to the prince, who promptly submitted, and gave the example to his subjects ; but some of them revolted, and said they wanted to believe nothing of everything that was in the document. It is the women who have fomented this whole revolt, which is dividing the whole court, the whole realm and every family. This Constitution forbids them to read a book that all Christians say was brought from heaven ; it is properly their Qur'an. The women, outraged at the insult committed against their sex, are arousing everyone against the Constitution ; they have got the men to go along, who on this occasion claim no privilege. Yet it must be admitted that this mufti [12] does not reason badly, and by the great Ali he must have been schooled in the principles of our holy Law : for since women are of inferior creation to ours, and our prophets tell us that they will not enter paradise, why should they presume to read a book that exists only to show the path to paradise ?

I have heard stories about the king that verge on the miraculous, and do not doubt that you will hesitate to believe them.

They say that while he was waging war on his neighbors, who had all united against him, [13] he had in his realm a countless number of invisible enemies [14] who surrounded him. They add that he searched for them for over thirty years, and that despite the unflagging efforts of certain dervishes, [15] who have his ear, [16] he could not find a one. They live alongside him ; they are in his court, in his capital, in his troops, and in his tribunals ; and yet they say he will have the displeasure of dying without having found them. It is as if they exist in general, and vanish in particular ; it is a body, but there are no members. [17] No doubt heaven wishes to punish this prince for not being sufficiently merciful to the enemies he has conquered, since it gives him invisible ones, whose genius and destiny are above his own.

I shall continue to write to you, and tell you things very unlike the Persian character and genius. It is, to be sure, the same Earth that bears both of us : but the men of the country where I am living, and those of the country where you are, are very different men. [18]

*Paris this 4th day of the moon of Rebiab II, 1712* [19]

---

[1] First letter from Rica, whose name had been mentioned in letter 1, and who is the first to describe Paris. Rica indeed plays an epistolary role quite different from Usbek's, for he never writes from anywhere but Paris, and himself receives only two letters, numbers 76 and 125.

[2] That is, they must have been made to accommodate observatories in their upper storeys. As Chardin makes clear, astrology is a powerful force in Persian society.

[3] The theme of the modern city also furnishes the opening scene of Robert Challe's *Les Illustres Françaises* (1713), which is situation in a traffic jam in central Paris.

[4] Their bodies (Cartesian sense of the term).

[5] This "vanity" might be seen as the seed of what in *The Spirit of Law*, in a less satirical mode, will be labelled "honor" as the driving force of monarchy (see *SL*, III, 9).

[6] Allusion to the great financial difficulties of the crown in this period, and to the long-standing sale of offices (called *la vénalité des charges*) and noble titles.

[7] An apparently double allusion, both to false letters of credit and hence the crown debts, and to the paper money put into circulation by John Law (see letter 138).

[8] An old popular belief held that the king's touch could cure scrofula.

[9] Allusion to the Trinity.

[10] Allusion to the transubstantiation of the Eucharist.

[11] Conventional name given to the papal bull *Unigenitus* of 1713 against Jansenism, promulgated in fact on 8 September 1713, a date posterior to the date ascribed to this letter (4 June 1712).

[12] A Muslim ecclesiastical dignitary.

[13] The triple alliance established in 1700 against France (promoted in Spain by the Castillians) included England, the Lowlands, and the Empire (with the exception of the electorates of Cologne and Bavaria).

[14] The Jansenists.

[15] Chardin saw beggars called dervishes who were "more or less like monks or pilgrims in the Roman Church ; for they pretend to leave the world for principle or devotion, and profess willful poverty and beggary" (VIII, 109-111).

[16] The Jesuites, among whom Louis XIV chose all his confessors : La Chaise, much more hostile to the Protestants than to the Jansenists, was succeeded in 1709 by Le Tellier, a determined adversary of Jansenist Port-Royal and unflagging supporter of the bull *Unigenitus*. The regent was to exile him after the death of Louis XIV.

[17] Allusion to proposition LXXV of *Unigenitus* : "The Church is a single man composed of many members, of which Jesus Christ is the head, the subsistence and the person" ; and to St Paul : "the body is one, and hath many members" (I Corinthians 12:12).

[18] This letter is reputed to have provoked the indignation of Cardinal Fleury, and his opposition to Montesquieu's entrance into the Académie Française en 1727 (cf. letter 71).

[19] Thus it has taken 161 days (see Schneider, "Le jeu du sens dans les Lettres persanes : temps du roman et temps de l'histoire", *Revue Montesquieu* 4, 2000, p. 127-159 [[http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/IMG/pdf/RM04\\_Schneider\\_127-159.pdf](http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/IMG/pdf/RM04_Schneider_127-159.pdf)], p. 153) to reach Paris from Isfahan ; the letters exchanged subsequently between the two capitals normally also take about five and a half months to reach their destination.