

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3469>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

Rica to *** [1]

Yesterday I saw something rather singular, although it occurs every day in Paris.

All the people assemble in the late afternoon, [2] and go perform a sort of scene which I have heard called Comedy. The principal movement is on a platform which they call the stage ; on either side you see men and women in small nooks which are called loges, who together perform silent scenes much like those that are practiced in our Persia. [3]

First an aggrieved mistress expresses her languor ; then another with scintillating eyes and an air of passion feasts her eyes on her suitor, who gazes at her in the same way ; all the passions are painted on the faces, and expressed with an eloquence that is only the more bold for being silent. There only half of the actors is visible, and they usually out of modesty have a muff to hide their arms. Down below is a group of people standing, [4] who make fun of those who are up on the stage, who in turn laugh at those who are below.

But those who take the most trouble are some young men who are chosen for this effect at an early age, to sustain the fatigue : they are obliged to be everywhere ; they pass through places known only to them, climb with surprising agility from one storey to the next ; they are upstairs, downstairs, in all the loges ; they plunge, so to speak ; you lose sight of them, they reappear ; often they leave the site of the scene and go perform in another one. [5] You even see some who, by a miracle one would not have dared ask of their crutches, [6] walk and circulate like the others. Finally you go into rooms [7] where a private comedy is performed : you begin with curtsies and continue with embraces : they say the slightest acquaintance gives a man the right to smother another. [8]

Everything I am telling you takes place in much the same way in another place which they call the Opera : the only difference is that they speak at the one and sing at the other. One of my friends took me along the other day to the dressing room where one of the principal actresses was disrobing. We made such good acquaintance that the next day I received this letter from her :

Monsieur,

I am the most unfortunate maiden in the world. I have always been the most virtuous actress at the Opera. Seven or eight months ago I was in the dressing room where you saw me yesterday ; as I was dressing as a priestess of Diana, a young abbé [9] came and found me there and with no respect for my white dress, for my veil and bandanna, [10] he stole my innocence. When I exaggerate the sacrifice I have made for him : he laughs, and contends he found me quite profane. Meanwhile I am so pregnant that I dare no longer appear on the stage : for when it comes to honor I am unbelievably delicate, and I always maintain that it is easier to get a proper girl to lose her virtue than her modesty. With my delicacy you of course understand that the young abbé would never have succeeded had he not promised to marry me. Such a legitimate motivation led me to neglect the usual little formalities, and begin where I ought to have ended up. But since his infidelity has dishonored me, I no longer want to stay at the Opera, where between us I am hardly paid enough to live on, [11] for now that I am getting older and becoming somewhat less attractive, my wages, which are still the same, seem to diminish by the day. I have learned from a man in your retinue that a good woman dancer is much appreciated in your country, and that if I were in Isfahan my fortune would quickly be made. [12] If you wanted to grant me your protection and take me with you to that country, you would have the advantage of helping a

girl who by her virtue and conduct would prove herself not unworthy of your kindnesses. I am...

Paris this 2nd day of the moon of Chalval 1712

[1] The asterisks are a convention to indicate that the real name is being hidden as a matter of editorial discretion.

[2] At the Comédie Française performances took place at 5:30 in the afternoon.

[3] Chardin speaks of women dancers or "mimes" in Persia whom he compares to theatre actors in Europe (II, 247-248 and V, 71-73).

[4] At the Comédie there were no seats in the pit.

[5] Presumably he means young fops who are flitting all over the place.

[6] Presumably he refers to men's canes, which were much in style.

[7] This refers either to one of the two backstage foyers at the theatre, which was then on the Rue des Fossés Saint-Germain, or to the dressing rooms of the actresses.

[8] Perhaps an allusion to the embarrassing familiarity manifested by Oronte in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (I, 2). The place itself seems to elicit affection ; indeed they say that the princesses who reign there are not difficult ; and aside from two or three hours per day when they are quite hostile, you can say that the rest of the time they are amenable, and that this is a sort of madness that easily leaves them. [[The sense seems to be that they are aloof during the performance, when they are playing queens and princesses, and are courtesans the rest of the time.

[9] The abbé could wear a collar and was presumed to be preparing for the priesthood, but had not necessarily pronounced any vows.

[10] The virginal bandanna, like the veil and white dress, are part of an opera costume : the vestals, says Bernard Montfaucon, "wore their hair bound with a ribbon," and the priestesses were veiled in various manners (*L'Antiquité expliquée*, vol. II, p. 32 and 41-42).

[11] On 13 January 1713 Louis XIV imposed a regulation that fixed the number of artists at the Opera and their pay : there would be two women dancers at 900 livres each, four at 500 livres, and four at 400 (Louis Travenol, *Histoire du théâtre de l'Académie royale de musique en France*, Paris, 1757, vol. I, p. 120), which is a bit more than those of an humble parish priest (300 livres).

[12] Chardin observes that in Persia women dancers were public women (II, 249-252) : "in the Orient, dancing is not respectable, or infamous if you prefer, and none but public women do it" (IV, 140 ; cf p. 194.) They could, however, be well paid and showered with presents at court.