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- Persian Letters - Letters -

Date de mise en ligne : mardi 14 avril 2020

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Usbek to Ibben in Smyrna

The most powerful states of Europe are those of the emperor, the kings of France, Spain, and England. Italy, and a large part of Germany, are divided into an infinite number of small states whose princes are properly speaking the martyrs of sovereignty. Our glorious sultans have more wives than most of these princes have subjects. Those of Italy, who are not so united, are more to be pitied : their states are open like caravanserais, [1] where they are obliged to lodge the first come ; they must therefore become attached to the great princes, and share their fear with them rather than their friendship.

Most governments in Europe are monarchical, or rather so called ; for I do not know whether there truly have ever been any such, or at least they could not possibly have lasted for long : it is a violent state that always degenerates into despotism or into a republic. [2] Authority can never be equally divided between the people and the prince ; the balance is difficult to maintain : power must diminish on one side while it increases on the other ; but the advantage is generally on the side of the prince, who is head of the armies.

So the power of European kings is very great, and one can say that they have it as they desire ; but they do not exercise it as extensively as do our sultans : first of all because they do not wish to go against the peoples' ways and religion ; secondly, because it is not in their interest to carry it so far.

Nothing brings princes closer to the condition of their subjects than this immense power they exercise over them ; nothing subjects them more to the reversals and whims of fortune.

Their custom of putting to death everyone who displeases them at the slightest sign they make, reverses the proportion that must exist between offenses and punishments, [3] which is like the soul of states and the harmony of empires ; and this proportion scrupulously kept by the Christian princes gives them an infinite advantage over our sultans.

A Persian who by imprudence or misfortune has drawn on himself the prince's disfavor is sure to die ; the slightest mistake or the slightest whim places him in this necessity. But if he had made an attempt on his sovereign's life, if he had tried to deliver his strongholds to the enemy, he again would get off with losing his life : he therefore runs no more risk in the latter case than in the former.

Thus in the least disfavor, seeing that death is certain, and seeing nothing worse, he is naturally inclined to trouble the state and conspire against the sovereign, the only resource he has left. [4]

The same does not apply to the grandees of Europe, whom disfavor deprives of nothing but benevolence and favor ; they withdraw from the court, and think only of enjoying a tranquil life and the advantages of their birth. As they are hardly made to die for any crime short of lese majesty, they fear falling into that by the consideration of what they have to lose and the little they have to gain ; for which reason we see few revolts and few princes who have died a violent death.

If in the unlimited authority which our princes have, they did not take such great precautions to put their lives in safety, they would not live one day ; and if they did not have in their pay an innumerable number of troops to tyrannize the rest of their subjects, their domination would not last one month.

Only four or five centuries ago a French king engaged guards, against the customs of those times, to protect himself from the assassins whom a petty Asian prince had sent to put an end to him. [5] Until then the kings had lived tranquilly amidst their subjects, as fathers amidst their children.

Far from French kings being able of their own accord to take the life of one of their subjects, like our sultans, on the contrary they always bear with them the pardon of all criminals. It is enough for a man to have the good fortune of seeing the august visage of his prince for him to cease being unworthy to live. These monarchs are like the sun [6] that brings warmth and life everywhere. [7]

Paris this 8th day of the moon of Rebiab II, 1717

[1] See letter 44.

[2] This passage provides an outline for book VIII of *The Spirit of Law*, "On the corruption of the principles of the three governments."

[3] This idea of proportionate punishment which was to inspire book XII of *The Spirit of Law* and give rise to Beccaria's *Trattato dei delitti et delle pene* in 1764 is already part of current discourse.

[4] An allusion to the revolt of Mir-Weiss in 1719 ; this intendant of the province of Candahar shrugged the Persian yoke to found the kingdom of Afghanistan.

[5] An anecdote drawn from the *Gesta Philippi Augusti* by the monk Rigord and related by Nicolas de Baudot de Juilly in *Histoire de Philippe Auguste* (Paris : Brunet, 1702, vol. I, p. 207). According to Moreri, it was Louis XI who hired Swiss guards, after making a treaty of alliance with them in 1481 (1707, art. "Gardes-du-corps du roi").

[6] Rhetorically, the comparison with Biblical overtones (cf. II Samuel [II Kings] 23:4) is doubtless overdetermined ; here it can only be an oblique commentary on the pretensions of the "sun king" Louis XIV.

[7] Clemency, and more particularly the right to pardon, was a right reserved to the king, but could be delegated to certain others (prelates and princes of the royal blood) in exceptional circumstances.