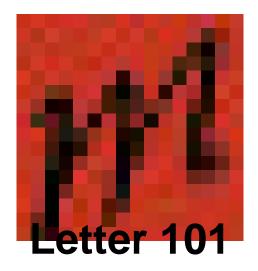http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3391

Letter 101

- Persian Letters - Letters -

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To the same

Not all the peoples of Europe are equally submissive to their princes ; for example, the impatient humor of the English scarcely allows their king the time to press his authority ; submission and obedience are the virtues they pride themselves on least. They say quite extraordinary things about that. According to them, there is only one tie that can bind men together, and that is gratitude : a husband, a wife, a father, a son, are bound together only by the love they bear one another, or by benefits they procure for each other ; and these various reasons of remembrance are the origin of all kingdoms and all societies. [1]

 But if a prince, far from making his subjects live happily, tries to crush and destroy them, the grounding of obedience ceases ; nothing binds them, nothing attaches them to him, and they regain their natural freedom. [2] They maintain that any power without limits cannot possibly be legitimate, because it could never have had a legitimate origin. For we cannot, they say, give to another more power over us than we have ourselves ; now we do not have unlimited power over ourselves ; for example, we cannot take our own lives [3] : therefore, they conclude, no one on earth has such power.

 The crime of lese majesty is, in their view, nothing other than the crime which the weakest commits against the strongest by disobeying him, in whatever manner he disobeys. Thus the people of England, who turned out to be the stronger against one of their kings, declared that it is a crime of lese majesty for a prince to make war on his subjects. [4] They are then quite right when they say that the precept of their Qur'an which commands us to submit to authorities [5] is not very difficult to follow, since it is impossible for them not to observe it, insofar as it is not to the most virtuous that they are obliged to submit, but to him who is the strongest.

 The English say that when one of their kings who had conquered and taken prisoner a prince who had rebelled and contested his crown, began to reproach him for his disloyalty and betrayal : It was just a moment ago, said the unfortunate prince, that it was decided which of us is the traitor. [6]

 A usurper declares that all those who have not like him oppressed the homeland are in rebellion ; and believing there are no laws where he sees no judges, he causes the whims of chance and fortune to be revered as decrees from heaven.

Paris this 20th day of the moon of Rebiab II, 1717

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[1] Although the idea goes back to Cicero, who declares that the ties between husband and wife and the children of their union are the basis of the city and the origin of the state (*De officiis*, part I, § XVII, 54), here Usbek attributes it specifically to the English. Locke, in his *Treatises of Civil Government* (1690), places the emphasis on duties of gratitude that children, once independent, owe their parents rather than on a natural bond of vassalage and dependence.

[2] This passage is marked by the memory of two English revolutions, that of Cromwell in 1648 and that of William of Orange in 1688. Since, according to the Orangists, James II had not respected the clauses of the monarchical contract, the English people no longer considered him the

seat of sovereignty ; once again free, they invested William with it.

[3] The question of suicide is examined in letter 74 ; it concerns precisely whether one can dispose of oneself as one sees fit.

[4] It was as traitor and enemy of his own people that Charles I of England was judged and executed in January 1649.

[5] See I Peter 2:13-18 and Romans 13:1.

[6] The source of this anecdote has not yet been identified. It probably concerns prince Edward, son of Henry IV, adressing king Edward IV after the battle of Tewkesbury on 4 May 1471. In Shakespeare's *Henry VI, part three* (V, 5), the prince indeed calls the king a traitor.