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Letter 87

Letter 89

Usbek to the same in Smyrna

From this general passion which the French nation has for glory, a certain something has formed in the minds of individuals, which is called the point of honor [1] : it is properly the character of every profession, but it is more prominent in men of war, and theirs is the point of honor par excellence. It would be difficult for me to make you sense what it is, for we have no notion quite like it.

Formerly the French, especially the nobility, obeyed virtually no other laws than those of this point of honor ; these laws determined their life's entire conduct, and were so strict that one could not, I do not say violate them, but even elude their least provision, without a punishment more cruel than death.

When it came to settling disputes, they prescribed really only one means of decision, which was the duel, which ended all the difficulties. But what was bad about it was that often the judgment was rendered between parties other than the parties concerned.

If a man was known by another, that was enough to required him to enter into the dispute, and pay with his person as if he had himself been angered. [2] He always felt honored at such a choice and such a flattering preferment ; and a man who would have been unwilling to give four pistoles to a man to save him from the gallows, him and all his family, might without hesitation go risk his life a thousand times for him.

This manner of deciding was rather ill-conceived : for because a man was more skilled or stronger than another, it did not follow that he had the better reasons.

So kings have forbidden it under very severe penalties [3] ; but it is in vain : honor, which always wants to prevail, revolts and recognizes no laws.

Thus the French are in a most violent state ; for the same laws of honor oblige an honest man to avenge himself when he has been offended ; but on the other hand, justice punishes him with the cruellest punishments when he exacts vengeance. [4] If you follow the laws of honor, you perish on a gallows ; if you follow those of justice, you are forever banished from the society of men. There is therefore only this cruel alternative : either to die, or to be unworthy to live.

Paris this 18th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1715

.Supplementary Letter IV of the 1758 edition would be placed here

[1] This term summarizes a whole system of protocols regulating duels, long forbidden but persistent none the less.

Letter 88

[2] Usbek refers to the role of the second : when chosen as second, one could not honorably refuse, and thus ran the same life risk as the principal party to the dispute.

[3] Duels had been forbidden several times since the reign of Henri IV. Richelieu was particularly severe on duelists, going so far as to apply capital punishment. In 1679 Louis XIV promulgated an edict extending the death penalty to seconds and others ; it was to be renewed in February 1723 by Louis XV ; see letter 57 and note 3.

[4] The usual solution for the man who prevailed in a duel was prompt voluntary exile, with the hope that his family could in the long term arrange for a pardon.