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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to \*\*\**

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It seems that families here govern themselves all alone : the husband has but a shadow of authority over his wife, the father over his children, the master over his slaves. Justice gets involved in all their disputes, and be sure that it is always against the jealous husband, the worried father, and the troublesome master.

The other day I went to a place where justice is rendered. Before arriving there one has to survive the seductions of an infinite number of young merchant women, who call you in a beguiling voice. [1] This spectacle is first rather appealing, but it becomes dreary when you enter into the great halls where all you see is people whose raiment is even more grave than their faces. Finally you enter the holy place where all the secrets of families are revealed and where the most hidden acts are shown in broad daylight.

There a modest girl comes to confess the torments of a virginity too long preserved, her struggles and her distressful resistance. She has so little pride in her victory that she still threatens an imminent defeat ; and so that her father will no longer ignore her needs, she exposes them to all the people. [2]

Next a brazen woman comes forward to expose the scandals she has perpetrated on her husband as a reason for being separated from him.

With similar modesty another comes to say she is weary of bearing the title of wife without its pleasures : she comes to reveal the mysteries hidden in the wedding night ; she wants to be delivered to the inspection of the most skilled experts and for a sentence to restore to her all the rights of virginity. [3] There are even some who dare to defy their husbands, and ask of them in public a combat that witnesses make so difficult, a test as stigmatizing for the woman who asserts it as much as for the husband who undergoes it. [4]

An infinite number of raped or seduced girls make men much worse than they are. Love echoes through this tribunal. You hear about nothing but angry fathers, abused daughters, unfaithful lovers, and worried husbands.

By the law that is observed there, any child born during the marriage is assumed to belong to the husband ; too bad if he has good reasons not to believe it : the law believes it for him, and takes the examination and scruples out of his hands.

This tribunal decides by the majority of votes, but they have recognized by experience that it would be better to decide by the minority ; and that is quite natural, for there are very few just minds, and everyone agrees that an infinite number of them are wrong.

*Paris this 1st day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1715*

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## Letter 84

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[1] The milliners of the Galerie du Palais (de Justice) flatter passers-by like Sirens to attract their clientele. In Corneille's *La Galerie du Palais* (1634) he depicts there a bookseller, a haberdasher, and a seller of linens. Cf. letter 56 on the entrepreneurs of Paris.

[2] Though parents could not be forced to marry a child, in some regions they could be required to pay a dowry, following Roman law.

[3] If the marriage has not been consummated, it can be annulled ; therein lies her hopes of freedom. On the "visit", see letter 69.

[4] In 1712, the marquise de Gesvres famously attempted to have her marriage annulled because of her husbands impotence. "The marquis de Gesvres claimed he was not impotent, and as it was a question of fact, it was ordered that he be visited by surgeons, and she by matrons" (Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, vol. IV, p. 497). The "congress" or test of the potency or impotency of married men had been abolished in 1677.