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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to \*\*\**

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I have heard of a sort of tribunal they call the Académie Française ; there is none less respected in the world, for they say that the minute it has decided, the people strike down its decrees, and impose laws on it which it is obliged to follow. [1]

Some time back, in order to install its authority it issued a code of its judgments : this child of so many fathers was almost old when it was born ; and although it was legitimate, a bastard which had already appeared had nearly smothered it at birth. [2]

Those who constitute it have no other function than to chatter endlessly. Eulogy takes a place as if on its own initiative in their endless babble, and as soon as they are initiated into its mysteries, [3] the fury of the panegyric comes to seize them and nevermore leaves them. [4]

This body has forty heads chock full of figures, metaphors, and antitheses ; all these voices speak almost exclusively in exclamations ; its ears always want to be struck by cadence and harmony. As for eyes, it has none : it seems to be made for talking, and not for seeing. It is not steady on its feet : for time, which is its scourge, shakes it at every moment, and destroys everything it has done. It used to be said that its hands were greedy ; I will say nothing to you about that, and leave the decision to those who know better than I. [5]

These are strange things, \*\*\*, which we do not see in our Persia ; our mind is not inclined to these singular and strange institutions ; we always seek nature in our simple customs and naive manners.

*Paris this 27th day of the moon of Zilhagé 1715*

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[1] Founded by Richelieu in 1635 to regulate usage and style in language, the Academy was often satirized for its formalism and uselessness ; it was nevertheless a respected institution, and Montesquieu himself was soon to seek admission (see below, note 5).

[2] The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* first appeared in 1694, with a second edition in 1718 ; its preparation, launched in 1674, had been long and difficult. For this reason there was ample time in the interim for the publication first of a dictionary under the name of Richelet (1680) and a second by Furetière (1690).

[3] Possibly by analogy with the rites of Freemasonry, which was beginning to establish itself in Europe.

[4] The tradition in the Academy has always been that a newly elected member delivers a eulogy of the predecessor whose seat he fills.

[5] In 1727, Montesquieu was to have difficulties obtaining admission to the Academy because of the opposition of Cardinal Fleury, less on account of this letter than because of the steamy overall reputation of the *Persian Letters* (notably with regard to letter 22).