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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to ****

People are very keen on the sciences here, but I do not know whether they are very learned. He who as philosopher has doubts about everything dares to deny nothing as theologian ; this contradictory man is always satisfied with himself provided you agree about qualities. [1]

It is the rage for most Frenchmen to be witty, [2] and the rage for those who want to be witty is to write books.

Yet there is nothing so ill-conceived. Nature seemed to have wisely provided that men's follies be transitory, and books immortalize them. A fool ought to be content to have bored all his acquaintances ; he also tries to torment future races ; he wants his folly to triumph over the oblivion he could have enjoyed like the tomb ; he wants posterity to be informed that he has lived, and know forever that he was a fool.

Of all authors there are none I think less of than compilers, who search on every hand for fragments of others' works which they stick onto their own, like sections of grass on a terrace ; they are not above those pressmen who arrange letters which, combined together, constitute a book to which they have only lent a hand. I would like to see the original books respected, and it seems to me that it is a sort of profanation to remove the pieces that compose them from the sanctuary where they are, to expose them to a contempt they do not deserve.

When a man has nothing new to say, why does he not keep his peace ? What use are these repetitions ? But I want to put things in a new order. You are an able man, in other words you come into my library and you put on the bottom the books that are on top, and on top those that are on the bottom : you have created a masterpiece.

I am writing to you on this subject, ***, because I am exasperated at a book I have just put down, which is so big it appeared to contain all knowledge ; but it bored me to death without teaching me anything at all. Adieu.

Paris this 8th day of the moon of Chahban 1714

[1] Perhaps a general allusion to Cartesians.

[2] See letters 52 and 61 on banter.