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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Letter 51

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Zelis [1] to Usbek in Paris

Never was a passion more powerful or more lively than that of Cosrou, a white eunuch, [2] for my slave Zelide [3] : he is asking for her in marriage with such fury that I cannot refuse her to him. And why should I oppose it, when her mother does not, and Zelide herself seems satisfied with the thought of this false marriage, and the vain shadow she is being offered ? [4]

What use can she make of that unfortunate, who will be a husband only in his jealousy, who will cease to be indifferent only to enter into futile despair, will always recall the memory of what he once was to make her remember what he no longer is, who ever willing to give of himself, and never giving, will constantly deceive himself and her, and make himself feel at every moment all the miseries of his condition ?

What would it be to be forever in images and phantoms ? To live only in order to imagine ? To find oneself always surrounded by pleasures and never among them ? Languishing in the arms of an unfortunate not to respond to his sighs, but only to his regrets ?

What contempt must one not have for a man of this kind, whose purpose is only to guard, and never to possess ? I look for love, and do not see it.

I speak freely to you because you like my candor, and prefer my openness and my sensitivity to pleasures to the feigned modesty of my peers.

I have heard you say a thousand times that eunuchs enjoy with women a kind of sensual pleasure that is unknown to us ; that nature compensates itself for its losses ; that it has resources for repairing the handicap of their condition ; that one can indeed cease to be a man without ceasing to be sensitive ; and that in that state one is in something like a third sense, where all you do, so to speak, is to change pleasures.

If that were so I would find Zelide less pitiable ; it is something to live with people less unhappy.

Give me your orders on this matter, and let me know whether you wish the marriage to take place in the seraglio. Adieu.

From the Isfahan seraglio this 5th day of the moon of Chalval 1713

[1] Zelis will be mentioned (letter 144) with Roxane as one of Usbek's wives, making five in all (cf. letter 19, note 1), although the Qur'an - as Usbek explicitly recognizes in letter 110 - limits their number to four. Usbek also possesses concubines (see letter 45). Zelis will later play an important role, reappearing in letters 60 and 68 as writer, and in letter 69 as addressee ; and as subject in letters 139, 140, 144, et 148.

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[2] Sole mention of this character, whose name is to be found in Chardin (X, 103).

[3] In letter 4, Zelide was the slave of Zephis ; the the principal eunuch had expressed the intention of taking her from her : see letter 19, note 1.

[4] The subtitle of Charles Ancillon's *Traité des eunuques* specified : *où on examine principalement s'ils sont propres au mariage, et s'il leur doit être permis de se marier* ('Treatise on eunuchs, in which it is examined whether they are suited to marriage and whether they should be allowed to marry'). His thesis is clear : "Eunuchs who unite with a woman are deceiving her ; they do not contract marriage with her because they are not capable of contributing on their part as they should to the substance of marriage. Thus we can say that it is no more than a vain phantom, it is merely a feigned and simulated marriage, and not a real and genuine marriage at all" (p. 115-116).