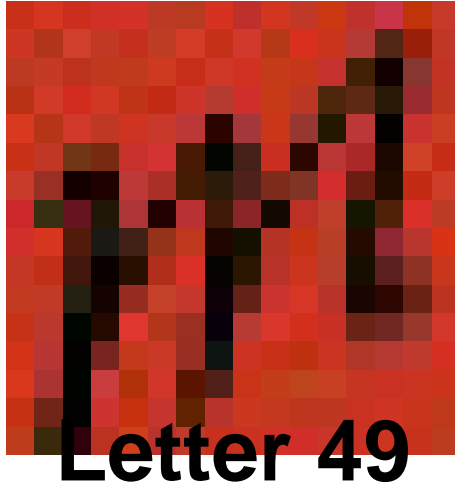


<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3446>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

---

**Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés**

---

## Letter 49

---

<a href="#">Letter 48</a>	<a href="#">Letter 50</a>
---------------------------	---------------------------

*Nargum, the envoyé from Persia to Muscovy, [1] to Usbek in Paris*

---

They have written to me from Isfahan that you had left Persia, and were at this moment in Paris. Why must I learn news of you from others than you ?

Orders from the king of kings [2] have detained me for the last five years in this country, where I have concluded several important negotiations.

You know that the czar is the only one of the Christian princes whose interests overlap with those of Persia, because he like us is an enemy of the Turks.

His empire is greater than ours, for it is two thousand leagues from Moscow to the last fortress of his states facing China.

He is the absolute master of the lives and property of his subjects, who are all slaves, save four families. The lieutenant of the prophets, [3] the king of kings, who has heaven as his footstool, [4] does not make a more formidable exercise of his power.

Seeing Muscovy's terrible climate, you would never believe that it was a punishment to be exiled ; yet as soon as a grandee falls from favor he is relegated to Siberia. [5]

As the Law of our Prophet forbids us to drink wine, that of the prince forbids it to Muscovites. [6]

They have a manner of receiving their guests that is not at all Persian. As soon as a stranger enters the house, the husband introduces his wife to him ; the stranger kisses her, and that passes for a courtesy to the husband.

Although fathers ordinarily stipulate in their daughter's marriage contract that the husband will not beat whip, still it is unbelievable how Muscovite women like to be beaten. They cannot understand that they possess their husband's heart if he does not give them a proper beating ; an opposite conduct on his part is an unforgivable sign of indifference. [7] Here is a letter that one of them wrote lately to her mother.

My dear Mother,

*I am the most miserable wife on earth. there is nothing I have not done to make my husband love me, and I have never been able to succeed in that. Yesterday I had a thousand things to do at home ; I went out, and stayed out the whole day. I thought that when I came home he would beat me good and hard, but he did not say a single word. My sister receives very different treatment : her husband rains blows on her every day ; she cannot look at a man but he suddenly batters her ; they love each other too, and get along admirably.*

*That is what makes her so proud. But I will not long give her cause for scorning me : I am determined to make my*

husband love me, whatever it costs. I will make him so angry that he will have to give me some signs of friendship ; it shall not be said that I will not be beaten, and that I will live in the house without being taken account of. At the slightest nick he gives me, I will yell with all my strength so people will think he is really doing it, and I think if some neighbor came to my rescue I would strangle him. [8] I implore you, dear mother, to make my husband see that he is treating me ignobly. My father, who is such an upright man, did not behave that way, and I remember that when I was a little girl, it sometimes seemed to me that he loved you too much. I embrace you, my dear mother.

Muscovites cannot go outside the empire, even to travel [9] : thus separated from other nations by the laws of the land, they have preserved their ancient customs with all the more attachment that they did not believe it possible that anyone could have others.

But the prince who rules at present [10] tried to change everything : he has had great scuffles with them about their beards ; the clergy and the monks fought no less in favor of their ignorance. [11]

He is endeavoring to make the arts flourish, and neglects nothing to extend to Europe and Asia the glory of his nation, neglected until now, and known almost solely to itself.

Restless and constantly stirring, he roams through his vast states, leaving signs everywhere of his stern nature.

He leaves them as if they could not contain him, and goes in search of other provinces and new realms in Europe. [12]

I embrace you, my dear Usbek ; send me news of yourself, I beg you.

*Moscow this 2nd day of the moon of Chalval 1713*

---

[1] The term Russia was not yet in general usage ; in fact St. Petersburg had been the official capital since 1713.

[2] A Biblical epithet (and therefore an example of the "Oriental sublime"), applied to several kings in the Old Testament, then to Jesus (I Timothy 6:15). In some edicts quoted by Chardin, the king of Persia is called the "king of the world."

[3] "[...] the right of government belongs to the prophets alone, and to their lieutenants or direct successors" (Chardin, VI, 3).

[4] In a formal supplication to the grand vizier, the king is called "most high and most noble monarch, who has heaven as his footstool"(Chardin, III, 212). The titles chosen by Nargum recall the epithets of God in the Bible : "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool" (Isaiah 66:1).

[5] This fact was widely known at the time (see Perry, p. 74).

[6] Mentioned earlier in letter 31. Peter I never forbade the use of wine or vodka, which was one of the principal sources of state income, but in several edicts had strictly regulated its sale.

[7] *L'Espion turc* quotes the testimony of a man who has spent several years in Moscow : "He says that Russian women do not believe their husbands love them unless they beat them every day. They regard this correction as a sign of their husbands' esteem and affection for them." (Jean Paul Marana, *L'Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens*, vol. III, letter I, p. 3.)

## Letter 49

---

[8] Perhaps an echo of Molière's *Le Médecin malgré lui* where Martine turns on M. Robert, who tries to intervene, saying : "I want to be beaten" ("Il me plaît d'être battue," I, 2).

[9] So reports Olearius (vol. I, p. 180).

[10] Peter I (1672-1725). After conquering Sweden he travelled twice to Europe, in 1697-1698 and 1717, when he was received at the French court by the regent.

[11] To orthodox Russians, the beard was a mark of religious faith, and to cut it was a mortal sin. In 1698, Pierre I had caused great consternation by ordering his subjects to shave their beards.

[12] The peace with Sweden concluded in 1721 was to permit Russia to keep its Baltic conquests. But in 1711 the ill-fated Pruth campaign had caused her to lose Azov and the lands taken from Turkey in the war of 1696.