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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Rica to Ibben in Smyrna

It is a great question among scholars whether it is more advantageous to deprive women of freedom than to let them have it ; it seems to me that there are many reasons for and against. If the Europeans say that there is no generosity in making persons you love unhappy, our Asians reply that there is something base in men giving up the domination which nature has given them over women. If you tell them that the large number of women locked up is onerous, they reply that ten women who obey are less onerous than one who does not. Now if they object in turn that Europeans cannot expect to be happy with wives who are not faithful to them, they reply that that fidelity they so vaunt does not prevent the disaffection that always follows sated passions ; that such tranquil possession leaves us nothing to desire or to fear ; that a little coquetry is a salt that seasons and prevents corruption. A wiser man than I would be hard pressed to decide ; for if the Asians do very well to seek means that can calm their anxieties, the Europeans do very well also not to have any.

After all, they say, even if we were we unhappy as husbands, we should always find the means of consoling ourselves as lovers. For a man to have the right to complain of his wife's infidelity, there would have to be no more than three people in the world ; they will always be tied [1] when there are four.

It is another question whether natural law subordinates women to men. A very gallant philosopher told me no the other day : nature never dictated such a law. The domination we have over them is a real tyranny ; they have allowed us to assume it only because they are meeker than we are, and consequently possess more humanity and reason : these advantages, which doubtless ought to have given them the superiority if we had been reasonable, have made them lose it because we are not.

Now if it is true that we have only a tyrannical power over women, it is no less so true they have a natural dominance over us, which is that of beauty, which no one can resist. Ours does not prevail in all countries ; but that of beauty is universal. Why should we then have a privilege ? Is it because we are the strongest ? But that is a real injustice. We employ all sorts of means to undermine their courage. Our strengths would be equal if education were as well : let us try them in the talents that education has not weakened, and we will see whether we are so strong.

It must be admitted, though it shocks our ways of thinking : among the most refined peoples, women have always had some authority over their husbands. It was established by a law among the Egyptians, in honor of Isis, [2] and among the Babylonians, in honor of Semarimis. It was said of the Romans that they commanded all nations, but obeyed their wives. [3] I am not talking about the Sarmatians, who were truly in servitude to that sex ; they were too barbaric for their example to be cited here.

You will see, my dear Ibben, that I have developed a liking for this country, where people like to argue for extraordinary opinions, and reduce everything to paradoxe. The Prophet has decided the question, and regulated the rights of each sex : women, he says, must honor their husbands ; their husbands must honor them ; but they have a degree of superiority over them. [4]

Paris this 26th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1713

[1] *À but* : a sporting term (from the *jeu de paume*).

[2] According to Diodorus of Sicily, because of the great benefits given to man by Isis, "the custom was established that the queen should obtain more power and honor than the king and that among individuals woman should prevail over man, husbands promising in marriage contracts to obey their wives in everything" (*Bibliothèque historique*, i, 27, 1-2 ; Paris : Belles Lettres, 1993, vol. I, p. 64.)

[3] Plutarch quotes Cato to this effect (*Life of Cato*, VIII, 4) adding that it is borrowed from Thucydides (XVIII, 4).

[4] "And due to the wives is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority]." (Qur'an, 2:228) ; but the application to Jews as to Christians is evident : cf. Genesis 2:18 and 20-24 and Ephesians 5:22.