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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to Ibben in Smyrna

The king of France is old. [1] Our histories have no examples of a monarch who had reigned for so long. They say he has an extraordinary talent for making people obey him ; he governs his family, his court, and his state with the same genius. He has often been heard to say that of all the governments in the world, that of the Turks or of our august sultan [2] would be most to his liking, such high regard does he have for oriental politics.

I have studied his character and found contradictions in it which I am unable to resolve. For example, he has a minister who is only eighteen, and a mistress of eighty. [3] He loves his religion, and cannot abide those who say it must be strictly observed. Although he flees the tumult of the cities, and communicates little, everything he does morning to evening is to make people talk about him ; he likes trophies and victories, but he is as fearful of seeing a good general leading his troops as he would have reason to fear him leading an enemy army. He is, I think, the only person who ever was both blessed with more wealth than a prince could hope for, and struggling under a poverty that an individual would be unable to bear.

He likes to gratify those who serve him ; but he pays just as liberally the assiduities, or rather the idleness, of his courtiers, as the hard campaigns of his captains. Often he prefers a man who disrobes him, or who hands him his napkin when he sits down to eat, to another who captures cities or wins battles for him. He does not believe that sovereign grandeur should be hampered in the distribution of favors ; and without examining whether the man he showers with gifts is a man of merit, he thinks that his choice will make him so : thus he has been known to give a small annuity to a man who had fled two leagues, and a important government to another who had fled four.

He is magnificent, especially in his constructions : there are more statues in the gardens of his palace than citizens in a large city. [4] His guard is as strong as that of the prince before whom all thrones are overthrown [5] ; his armies are as numerous, his resources as great, and his finances as inexhaustible. [6]

Paris this 7th day of the moon of Maharram 1713

[1] In 1713, Louis XIV, born in 1638, had reigned for seventy years.

[2] The term is Turkish, but Montesquieu like the dictionaries of the time does not distinguish it from *shah*.

[3] Madame de Maintenon was born in 1635 ; Barbezieux, the son of Louvois, had been appointed secretary of state at seventeen, in 1685, and put in charge of the war department on his father's death in 1691. The case had been repeated with Michel II Chamillart, marquis de Cany (1689-1716), who in 1707 was appointed secretary to his father, minister of war from 1701 to 1709, and secretary of state at eighteen in 1708.

[4] The expenses incurred in the construction and decoration of Versailles were often criticized.

[5] The king of Persia.

[\[6\]](#) See letter 22 and notes.