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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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### *Usbek to Rhedi in Venice*

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Coffee is very popular in Paris [1] ; there are a large number of public houses where it is served. [2] In some of these houses they relate news ; in others they play chess. There is one where the coffee is prepared in such a way that it confers wit on those who consume some ; at least among all who are leaving there is not one who does not believe he has four times more than when he entered.

But what shocks me about these wags is that they do not make themselves useful to their homeland, and amuse their talents in puerile things. For example, when I arrived in Paris, I found them heated up over the slimmest dispute one can imagine : it was about the reputation of an old Greek poet, whose homeland, as well as the time of his death, have been unknown for two thousand years. [3] The two parties admitted that he was an excellent poet ; the only question was how much more or less merit should be attributed to him. Everyone wanted to set the rate. But among these dispensers of reputation some carried more weight than the others : such that is what the quarrel was about. It was quite lively : for on both sides they cordially proffered such ugly insults to each other, they made such bitter jokes, that I marvelled not less at the manner of debating than at the subject of the debate. If someone were foolish enough, I said to myself, to stand before one of these defenders of the Greek poet and attack the reputation of some good citizen before, he would be quickly corrected, and I think that this delicate zeal over the reputation of the dead would be quickly inflamed to defend that of the living ; but however that may be, I added, God forbid I should ever draw on myself the enmity of the poet's censors, whom a stay of two thousand years in the tomb has not been able to protect from such implacable hatred. Right now they are punching air ; but what would it be like if their fury were inspired by the presence of an enemy ?

These men of whom I have just spoken argue in the vulgar tongue, and we must distinguish them from another kind of debater who use a barbarous language that seems to add something to the fury and tenacity of the combatants. There are neighborhoods where you see a thick, dark crowd of these sorts of men. [4] They thrive on distinctions, they live by obscure reasoning and false consequences. This profession in which one ought to die of hunger is nevertheless remunerative : there was a time when an entire nation expelled from their country crossed the seas to settle in France, [5] bringing nothing with them to cope with the necessities of life but an awesome talent for disputation. Adieu.

### *Paris this last day of the moon of Zilhagé 1713*

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[1] Cafés, unlike taverns, where wine was served, spread first in London, then in Paris late in the seventeenth century. They were sociable places where literary and other crowds gathered.

[2] Several hundred in 1720, according to Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *Les Cafés littéraires* (Paris : Georges Veyrier, 1987).

[3] Allusion to the quarrel over Homer (1714-1716) ; see Hepp, especially p. 629-772 ; Salvatore Rotta, "L'Homère de Montesquieu", *Homère en France après la Querelle (1715-1900)* (Françoise Létoublon et Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, ed.), Paris : Champion, p. 141-148 ; and Christophe Martin, "L'esprit parle" : Montesquieu lecteur de Homère, Virgile, Fénelon et quelques autres", *CM 9*.

## Letter 34

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[4] The Latin Quarter.

[5] Irish Catholics exiled after the fall of James II in 1689. The Collège des Irlandais was on Rue des Carmes in the Latin Quarter.