

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3464>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

Usbek to Rhedi in Venice

Wine is so dear in Paris because of the taxes levied on it, that it seems they have undertaken here to apply the precept of the divine Qur'an which forbids us to drink it.

When I think of the dreadful effects of that liquor, I cannot help regarding it as the most fearsome present nature has made to men. If there is something that has dishonored the life and the reputation of our monarchs, it has been their intemperance ; it is the most poisoned source of their injustices and cruelties. [1]

I will say it to men's shame, the law forbids our princes the use of wine, and they drink it with an excess that even degrades them from humanity. Its use is on the contrary permitted to Christian princes, and one does not observe that it makes them make any mistakes. The human mind is contradiction itself : in licentious drunkenness, one rebels with furor against precepts ; and the law, intended to make us more just, often serves only to make us more guilty.

But when I disapprove the use of that liquor that deprives us of reason, I do not at the same time condemn those beverages that cheer him up. It is the wisdom of Orientals to seek remedies against sadness as carefully as against the most dangerous diseases. When some misfortune befalls a European, he has no other resource than reading a philosopher they call Seneca [2] : bus Asians, more sensible than they, and in that better physicians, take concoctions that can make a man cheerful and beguile the memory of his pains. [3]

There is nothing so dismaying as consolations drawn from the necessity of evil, the ineffectualness of remedies, the inevitability of destiny, the order of Providence, and the tragedy of the human condition. It is mockery to try to palliate an evil by the consideration that we are born in misery ; it is better to lift the spirit above its reflections, and consider man as sensitive rather than treating him as reasonable.

The soul joined with the body is endlessly tyrannized by it. If the movement of the blood is too slow, if the spirits are not sufficiently purified, [4] if they are of insufficient quantity, we fall into dejection and into sadness ; but if we take beverages that can change this disposition of our bodies, our soul again becomes capable of receiving impressions that cheer it up, and it feels an inner pleasure at seeing its machine [5] resume, so to speak, its movement and life.

Paris this 25th day of the moon of Zilcadé 1713

[1] Chardin gives examples : "Indeed, when the king is angry, or drunk on wine, no one around him is sure of his possessions or his life. He removes ministers and favorites from one moment to the next. He has hands and feet cut off, noses and ears, he has people put to death, all at the slightest caprice, and a man may be a victim of his fury at the end of his drunkenness who at the beginning was his dearest companion." (VI, 19-20).

[2] The image of Seneca at the time was that of rigid stoic.

[3] Chardin had spoken of a concoction called *coquenar* (II, 69) ; cf. reference to an "essence of hemp" which gives them "thoughts so agreeable

Letter 31

and pleasures so intense that for several hours they seem to be outside themselves" - a stage followed by lethargy (*Essai sur les causes*, OC, IX, 242-243).

[4] After the double distillation which transforms the natural spirit into a vital spirit (at the level of the heart) and then into animal spirit (at the level of the brain), according to the Galenic theory of animal spirits.

[5] *Machine* designates the body, especially in a context which opposed the soul to the body ; see letter 22, note 4.