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XVI.6 On polygamy in itself

- The Spirit of Law - Book XVI. How the laws of domestic slavery relate to the nature of the climate -

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XVI.6 On polygamy in itself

To consider polygamy in general, independently of the circumstances which can make it somewhat acceptable, it is not useful to the human race, nor to either of the two sexes, to the one that abuses nor to the one that is abused. Neither is it useful to children, and one of its great drawbacks is that the father and mother cannot have the same affection for their children : a father cannot love twenty children as a mother loves two. It is much worse yet when a woman has multiple husbands, for then paternal love hangs only on this opinion : that a father may believe, if he wishes, or that the others may believe, that certain children are his.

A plurality of wives - who would have thought it ? - leads to that love which nature disowns ; for one degradation always brings another with it. I remember that in the revolution that took place in Constantinople when the sultan Ahmed was deposed, accounts of it said that when the people had ransacked the house of of the kehaya, they had found not a single woman there. We are told that in Algiers the point has been reached where there are none at all in most seraglios. [1]

Moreover, the possession of many wives does not always preclude desires for another's wife ; lust is like avarice, which gets thirstier from the acquisition of treasures.

In the time of Justinian, several philosophers constrained by Christianity withdrew to Persia with Khosrow. What struck them the most, says Agathias, [2] was that polygamy was permitted to men who did not even abstain from adultery.

[1] Laugier de Tassy, *Histoire du royaume d'Alger*.

[2] *De la vie et des actions de Justinien*, p. 403. [Greek poet and historian (6th century) ; Montesquieu owned his *De imperio et rebus gestis Justiani libri quinque*, 1594 (Catalogue, no. 2808).