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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to the same*

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I returned at the appointed time, and my man led me precisely to the place where we had parted company. Here, he said, are the grammarians, the glossers, and the commentators. [1] Father, I said, can all these people not get by without common sense ? Yes, he said, they can, and it does not even show ; their writings are not the worse for it, which is very convenient for them. That is true, I said, and I know many philosophers who would do well to apply themselves to such kinds of science.

Here, he continued, are the orators, who have the talent of persuading independently of the reasons [2] ; and the geometers, who oblige a man to be persuaded despite himself, and convince him with tyranny. [3]

Here are the books of metaphysics, which deal with such great interests, and in which infinity is everywhere encountered ; the books of physics, which find no more to marvel at in the economy of the vast universe than in our craftsmen's simplest machine.

The books of medicine, those monuments of the fragility of nature and the power of art, which make one tremble when they discuss even the slightest illnesses, so greatly do they make death present to us, but which place us in complete security when they speak of the virtue of remedies as if we had become immortal.

Right near them are books of anatomy, which contain much less the description of the parts of the human body than the barbarous names they have been given, something which heals neither the patient nor his illness, neither the physician nor his ignorance.

Here is chemistry, [4] which sometimes lives in the poorhouse, and sometimes in the madhouse, [5] as homes equally appropriate to it.

Here are the books of science, or rather of occult ignorance : such are those which contain some sort of devilry, execrable according to most people, pitiful according to me. Such are also the books of judicial astrology. [6] What is that, Father ? Books on judicial astrology ? I replied heatedly. It is those we most esteem in Persia : they determine all the actions of our lives, and determine us in all our undertakings ; the astrologers are properly our directors. [7] They do more : they enter into the government of the state. If that is so, he said to me, you live under a yoke far more harsh than that of reason ; that is truly the strangest of all dominions. I quite pity a family, and even more a nation, that allows itself be so dominated by the planets. We use astrology, I replied, as you use algebra : each nation has its science by which it regulates its politics ; all the astrologers together have never committed as many foolish things in our Persia as a single one of your algebrists has here. Do you think the combination of the heavenly bodies is less sure a rule than the fine reasoning of your system-maker ? [8] If we counted votes on that in France and in Persia, it would be a fine occasion of victory for astrology. You would see the mathematicians well humiliated ; what overwhelming corollary could we draw against them ?

Our dispute was interrupted, and we had to separate.

Paris this 26th day of the moon of Rhamazan 1719

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[1] Particularly Biblical commentators.

[2] This reflects a radical definition of rhetoric, precisely the one for which Socrates reproached the sophists in the *Gorgias*.

[3] Authoritatively.

[4] Although chemistry and alchemy were still conflated, the first had a very broad meaning : "The art that teaches how to dissolve mixed natural bodies, reduce them separately to the pure principles of which they were composed and combine them to make exalted bodies" (Richelet 1680).

[5] On the *Petites Maisons*, see letter 75, note 16 ; cf. the portrait of the alchemist in letter 43.

[6] That which makes predictions based on the movements of heavenly bodies.

[7] In other words, the Persian equivalents of directors of conscience.

[8] John Law, whose financial scheme was called the "system." The term "algebrist" is used here less in the sense of mathematical expert than, sarcastically, as one who cultivates astrological or numerical knowledge.