

*VI – Certain Maxims Concerning Love*

You think, then, Marquis, that you have brought up an invincible argument, when you tell me that one is not the master of his own heart, in disposing of it where he wishes, and that consequently you are not at liberty to choose the object of your attachment? Morals of the opera! Abandon this commonplace to women who expect, in saying so, to justify their weaknesses. It is very necessary that they should have something to which to cling, like the gentleman of whom our friend Montaigne speaks who, when the gout attacked him, would have been very angry if he had not been able to say, “Cursed ham!” They say it is a sympathetic stroke. That is too strong for me. Is anyone master of his heart? He is no longer permitted to reply when such good reasons are given. They have even so well sanctioned these maxims that they wish to attract everyone to their arms in order to try to overcome them. But these same maxims find so much approbation only because everyone is interested in having them received. No one suspects that such excuses, far from justifying caprices, may be a confession that one does not wish to correct them.

For myself, I take the liberty of being of a different opinion from the multitude. It is enough for me that it is not impossible to conquer one’s inclination to condemn all those who are unreasonable or dishonorable. Dear me! Have we not seen women succeed in destroying in their hearts a weakness that has taken them by surprise, as soon as they have discovered that the object of their affections was unworthy of them? How often have they stifled the most tender affection, and sacrificed it to the conventionalities of an establishment? Rest, time, absence, are remedies which passion, however ardent one may have supposed it, can never resist; insensibly it weakens, and dies all at once. I know that to withdraw honorably from such

a liaison requires all the strength of reason. I comprehend still more, that the difficulties you imagine stand in the way of maintaining a victory, do not leave you enough courage to undertake it, so that, although I may say that there are no invincible inclinations in the speculation, I will admit that there are few of them to be vanquished by practice, and it happens so, only because one does not like to attempt without success. However that may be, on the whole, I imagine that there being here only a question of gallantry, it would be folly to put you to the torture, in order to destroy the inclination which has seized upon you for a woman more or less amiable, but also, because you are not smitten with anyone, I persist in saying that I was right in describing to you the character which I believed would be the most capable of making you happy.

It is without doubt to be desired, that delicate sentiments, real merit, should have more power over our hearts, and that they might be able to occupy them and find a permanent place there forever. But experience proves that this is not so. I do not reason from what you should be, but from what you really are. My intention is to give you a knowledge of the heart such as it is, and not what it ought to be. I am the first one to regret the depravity of your taste, however indulgent I may be to your caprices. But not being able to reform the vices of the heart, I would at least teach you to draw out of them whatever good you can. Not being able to render you wise, I try to make you happy. It is an old saying: to wish to destroy the passions would be to undertake our annihilation. It is only necessary to regulate them. They are in our hands like the poison in a pharmacy – compounded by a skillful chemist they become beneficent remedies.