

On Luxury

by Voltaire

PEOPLE have declaimed against luxury for two thousand years, in verse and in prose, and people have always delighted in it.

What has not been said of the early Romans when these brigands ravaged and pillaged the harvests; when, to enlarge their poor village, they destroyed the poor villages of the Volscians and the Samnites? They were disinterested, virtuous men; they had not yet been able to steal either gold, silver, or precious stones, because there were not any in the little towns they plundered. Their woods and their marshes produced neither pheasants nor partridges, and people praise their temperance.

When gradually they had pillaged everything, stolen everything from the far end of the Adriatic Gulf to the Euphrates, and when they had enough intelligence to enjoy the fruit of their plundering; when they cultivated the arts, when they tasted of all pleasures, and when they even made the vanquished taste of them, they ceased then, people say, to be wise and honest men.

All these declamations reduce themselves to proving that a robber must never either eat the dinner he has taken, or wear the coat he has pilfered, or adorn himself with the ring he has filched. He should throw all that, people say, in the river, so as to live like an honest man. Say rather that he should not have stolen. Condemn brigands when they pillage; but do not treat them as senseless when they enjoy. Honestly, when a large number of English sailors enriched themselves at the taking of Pondicherry and Havana, were they wrong to enjoy themselves later in London, as the price of the trouble they had had in the depths of Asia and America?

The declaimers want one to bury in the ground the wealth one has amassed by the fortune of arms, by agriculture, by commerce and by industry. They cite Lacedaemon; why do they not cite also the republic of San Marino? What good did Sparta to Greece? Did she ever have Demosthenes, Sophocles, Apelles, Phidias? The luxury of Athens produced great men in every sphere; Sparta had a few captains, and in less number even than other towns. But how fine it is that as small a republic as Lacedaemon retains its poverty.

One arrives at death as well by lacking everything as by enjoying what can make life pleasant. The Canadian savage subsists, and comes to old age like the English citizen who has an income of fifty thousand guineas. But who will ever compare the land of the Iroquois to England?

Let the republic of Ragusa and the canton of Zug make sumptuary laws, they are right, the poor man must not spend beyond his powers; but I have read somewhere:

"Learn that luxury enriches a great state, even if it ruins a small."

If by luxury you understand excess, everyone knows that excess in any form is pernicious, in abstinence as in gluttony, in economy as in generosity. I do not know how it has happened that in my village where the land is ungrateful, the taxes heavy, the prohibition against exporting the corn one has sown intolerable, there is nevertheless barely a cultivator who has not a good cloth

coat, and who is not well shod and well fed. If this cultivator toiled in his fields in his fine coat, with white linen, his hair curled and powdered, there, certainly, would be the greatest luxury, and the most impertinent; but that a bourgeois of Paris or London should appear at the theatre clad like a peasant, there would be the most vulgar and ridiculous niggardliness.

When scissors, which are certainly not of the remotest antiquity, were invented, what did people not say against the first men who pared their nails, and who cut part of the hair which fell on their noses? They were treated, without a doubt, as fops and prodigals, who bought an instrument of vanity at a high price, in order to spoil the Creator's handiwork. What an enormous sin to cut short the horn which God made to grow at the end of our fingers! it was an Outrage against the Deity! It was much worse when shirts and socks were invented. One knows with what fury the aged counsellors who had never worn them cried out against the young magistrates who were addicted to this disastrous luxury.