

Diogenes's Invectives

How I pardoned Louvois

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I have a confession to make: Louvois irritates me. He's always right.

— Sire, he said to me the other day as I was parading in front of my troops, is not our army the envy of all Europe?

— Europe may envy our army, I replied, but you are too boastful. For I regret to inform you that this peerless army has falling socks.

— Falling socks! But Sire, the falling sock is a military tradition! The armies of Henri IV, your illustrious forbear, had falling socks at Ivry. Those of Alexander's troops fell at Cunaxa. As for the armies of Leonidas, if Your Majesty will re-read his Thucydides, their socks fell at Thermopylae or I'll be hanged!

— Then you shall be hanged, Monsieur de Louvois, for Cunaxa was not a battle fought by Alexander but by Cyrus the Younger: reread your Xenophon.

It was thus that I had Louvois hanged, and was at last rid of a minister of war who had long gotten on my nerves. My friend Archiloques insists that I was wrong-to hang him, for it would be quite embarrassing to the eminent historians who claimed that Louvois died in his bed. Died in his bed? How utterly idiotic for a minister of war!

Whatever the case, Archiloques and I discussed the matter at such length, as we munched our snacks on the doorstep of my barrel, that I finally pardoned Louvois. But in compensation, I introduced into universal military history an element much more revolutionary than the mere execution of a minister: I invented the elastic sock-garter, an innovation whose record one may seek in vain in the memoirs of Saint-Simon (that jealous historian) or in the National Archives (that rat's nest), but which, by giving the French army the most elegant calves ever seen, surreptitiously changed the face of the world.

My companion Archiloques, who can be as annoying as a minister of Louis XIV, objects that no calf, even an elegant one, ever changed anyone's face. To that objection I will refrain from replying. Although a poet, Archiloques is not gifted in the art of creative dreaming.

What if I do like to dream now and then that I am Louis XIV, and to interject certain novelties into history which are invisible to the naked eye? Whom can that bother, I ask you? Sometimes I tell myself that it is thus that Providence operates: by manipulating the invisible.

Diogenes