

XIII – Vanity Is a Fertile Soil for Love

You are not satisfied, then, Marquis, with what I so cavalierly said about your condition? You wish me by all means to consider your adventure as a serious thing, but I shall take good care not to do so. Do you not see that my way of treating you is consistent with my principles? I speak lightly of a thing I believe to be frivolous, or simply amusing. When it comes to an affair on which depends a lasting happiness, you will see me take on an appropriate tone. I do not want to pity you, because it depends upon yourself whether you are to be pitied or not. By a trick of your imagination, what now appears to be a pain to you may become a pleasure. To succeed, make use of my recipe and you will find it good. But to refer to the second paragraph of your letter:

You say you are all the more surprised at the coldness of the Countess, as you did not think it in earnest. According to what you say, your conjectures are based on the indiscretions of her friends. The good she spoke about you to them was the main cause of your taking a fancy to her. I know men by this trait. The smallest word that escapes a woman's lips leads them into the belief that she has designs upon them. Everything has some reference to their merits; their vanity seizes upon everything, and they turn everything into profit. To examine them closely, nearly all of them love through gratitude, and on this point, women are not any more reasonable. So that gallantry is an intercourse in which we want the others to go along with us, always want to be their debtors. And you know pride is much more active in paying back than in giving. If two lovers would mutually explain, without reservation, the beginning and progress of their passion, what confidences would they not exchange?

Elise, to whom Valère uttered a few general compliments, responded, perhaps without intending to, in a more affectionate manner than is usual in the case of such insipidities. It was enough. Valère is carried away with the idea that from a gallant he must become a lover. The fire is insensibly kindled on both sides; finally, it bursts forth, and there you are, a budding passion. If you should charge Elise with having made the first advances, nothing would appear more unjust to her, and yet nothing could be more true. I conclude from this, that to take love for what it really is, it is less the work of what is called invincible sympathy, than that of our vanity. Notice the birth of all love affairs. They begin by the mutual praises we bestow upon each other. It has been said that it is folly which conducts love; I should say that it is flattery, and that it cannot be introduced into the heart of a belle until after paying tribute to her vanity. Add to all this, the general desire and inclination we have to be loved, and we are bravely deceived. Like those enthusiasts who, by force of imagination, believe they can really see the images they conjure up in their minds, we fancy that we can see in others the sentiments we desire to find there.

Be careful, then, Marquis, not to let yourself be blinded by a false notion. The Countess may have spoken well of you with the sole object of doing you justice, without carrying her intention any farther. And be sure you are wrong when you suspect her of insincerity in your regard. After all, why should you not prefer to have her dissemble her sentiments toward you, if you are the source of their inspiration? Are not women in the right to hide carefully their sentiments from you, and does not the bad use you make of the certainty of their love justify them in so doing?