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The political theory of
MONTESQUIEU

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For Micha

Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Editorial preface | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| I Montesquieu's mind and influence | 3 |
| II Montesquieu's life and milieu | 9 |
| III Some questions about Montesquieu's theory | 17 |
| IV Montesquieu on comparative and natural law | 20 |
| V <i>The Persian Letters</i> (1721) | 31 |
| VI <i>Considerations on the Causes of the Romans' Greatness and Decline</i> (1734) | 51 |
| VII <i>The Spirit of the Laws</i> (1748) | 57 |
| VIII French terms used in the translation | 105 |
| Selections from the <i>Persian Letters</i> | 111 |
| Myth of the Troglodytes | 113 |
| Sequel to the myth of the Troglodytes | 120 |
| Seraglio sequence | 122 |
| A note on chronology in the <i>Persian Letters</i> | 141 |
| Selections from <i>Considerations on the Causes of the Romans' Greatness and Decline</i> | 143 |
| Ch. III How the Romans could expand | 145 |
| VI The means used by the Romans to subjugate all other peoples | 147 |
| VIII The internal divisions that always existed at Rome | 154 |
| IX Two causes of Rome's downfall | 159 |
| XVIII The new maxims adopted by the Romans | 162 |
| Selections from <i>The Spirit of the Laws</i> | 167 |
| Montesquieu's introduction | 169 |
| Preface | 170 |
| Bk. I Laws in general | 172 |
| II Laws that derive directly from the nature of the government | 178 |
| III The principles of the three governments | 188 |
| IV The laws governing education in a state ought to be relative to the principle of government | 197 |

| | |
|--|-------------|
| <i>Contents</i> | <i>viii</i> |
| V The laws provided by the legislator ought to be relative to the principle of government | 202 |
| VIII Corruption of principle in the three governments | 224 |
| IX The relation of laws to the power of defense | 237 |
| XI Laws that comprise political liberty: their relation to the constitution | 242 |
| XIV The relation between laws and the nature of climate | 257 |
| XV How the laws of civil slavery are related to the nature of the climate | 263 |
| XIX Laws: their relation to those principles that form the general spirit, <i>moeurs</i> , and <i>manières</i> of a nation | 269 |
| XXIII How laws are related to the number of inhabitants | 291 |
| XXIV How laws are related to every country's established religion (considered intrinsically and in terms of its practices) | 293 |
| XXV How laws are related to established religions and their provisions for maintaining orthodoxy | 301 |
| Notes | 306 |
| Glossary of proper names | 345 |
| Index | 349 |

Editorial preface

This volume is meant to make available in modern English the most significant part of Montesquieu's political, social, and legal theory. About two-thirds of this book has been translated from *The Spirit of the Laws*, the only English version of which has been the eighteenth-century rendition by Thomas Nugent. Apart from its textual inadequacies (it was not based on the best edition Montesquieu himself prepared for his *Oeuvres complètes*), the Nugent version is today unsatisfactory.¹ Nugent failed to translate Montesquieu's technical terms consistently; often he distorted Montesquieu's meaning by his choice of the nearest English institutional or legal equivalent; finally, because of changes in English usage, often Nugent's language is either obscure or archaic.

Also included are substantial selections from the *Persian Letters* and the *Considerations on the Causes of the Romans' Greatness and Decline*. Although the modern translations of these works are not subject to the criticisms of Nugent made by Montesquieu scholars, nevertheless it seemed advisable to maintain stylistic and intellectual consistency by providing my own version of them.² Reluctantly, because of space limitations, I had to omit my translation of Montesquieu's closest approximation to a discourse on explanation in the social sciences, "An Essay on the Causes that May Affect Men's Minds and Characters." It can be found in *Political Theory*, 4 (1976).

Although the *De l'Esprit des Lois* is ostensibly the least literary of Montesquieu's great works, anyone presumptuous enough to attempt its translation finds himself abashed by the delicate structures of meaning, images, and rhythm created in such passages as those celebrating the French people and its distinctive spirit (IX, 7; XIX, 5), the chapter satirizing the apologists of Negro slavery (XV, 5), and in the same tone (that of the *Persian Letters*) the inimitable set piece on the Inquisition and its treatment of the Jews (XXV, 13). The *Persian Letters* and the *Considerations* have long been recognized as profoundly individual and significant

Editorial preface

x

achievements of style. Confronted with such prose, the translator can aspire to little more than avoiding disgrace.

Fortunately there is room for selections from Montesquieu translated with a more modest set of objectives in view: to make available his theories in a form that presents the fewest possible obstacles to modern students. I have attempted to render Montesquieu's meaning in a simple style that avoids archaism and anomaly. When read in French today, Montesquieu does not appear quaint, despite his references to a society and government long since vanished. I have sought English terms to convey the quality of his matter and style. I have not hesitated to depart from his sentence structure. Even had I wished to do so, I could not have produced the complex and beautifully balanced sentences he sometimes wrote. Nor have I retained Montesquieu's style in the titles of books and chapters. Particularly in *The Spirit of the Laws*, these were apt to begin with *De* ("Concerning"). Although such headings indicate Montesquieu's sympathy for the essayistic intentions of Montaigne and Bacon, I concluded that to maintain this form would erect an unnecessary barrier between Montesquieu and his potential modern readers. For the same reason I have chosen to omit the italics Montesquieu employed to underline certain passages and terms.

For reasons that will be discussed in my Introduction, Montesquieu understood himself to be using his own distinctive categories and distinctions, some of which he expressed by the use of familiar terms, some others by words and phrases of his own creation. In order to emphasize Montesquieu's terms of art, the special concepts he designed to convey the novelty of his theoretical intentions, I have employed a limited number of French words, the meanings of which are given at the end of my Introduction. Montesquieu's references are listed in a glossary that will be found following the notes at the back of the book.

While doing my translation, I attempted not to use any dictionary Montesquieu himself could not have consulted. I depended for the most part on the 1740 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*. A most useful eighteenth-century dictionary based on that of the French Academy is the *Dictionnaire Royal François-Anglois et Anglois-François* of Abel Boyer. Its first edition was owned by Montesquieu. On occasion, as when Montesquieu himself used words in English, it is necessary to know their meaning in eighteenth-century usage. The best lexicographical

Editorial preface

xi

guide is, of course, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, the year of Montesquieu's death. Another source of great value for finding English equivalents is the correspondence of Montesquieu's friend, Lord Chesterfield. In his letters to his son and godson, Chesterfield often compares and contrasts French and English usage, politics, and history.

In any work such as this, many debts are incurred. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the aid of colleagues, the cheerful persistence of those who helped produce the manuscript, and the welcome accorded me by the great libraries in which I have been fortunate enough to work.

Samuel H. Beer, to whom I owe much else, suggested that I begin this project. Raymond Aron, Jean Ehrard, Brenda Forman, Evelyn Greenberger, Nan Keohane, David Lowenthal, Robert Loy, Allen Mandelbaum, and Robert Shackleton have all aided me, although none of them ought to be associated with any criticism of this book.

My graduate assistants and secretaries deserve my thanks for turning out the successive versions of this book with so few complaints. Binnaz Sayari, Bonnie Pastor, Barbara Joseph, Heather Rimboeck, and Marina Wehde have all been thoroughly pleasant and efficient. Annette Phillips and Patricia White helped finish the manuscript.

I particularly wish to acknowledge the enthusiasm, intelligence, and scholarship Susan Tenenbaum has brought to this enterprise during the years we have worked together. It is one of the pleasures of teaching to have the help of a student whose own work promises to be so distinguished.

Without the editorial skill, the constant encouragement and devotion of Micha Wenninger-Richter, this book would not have been completed. My sons, Anthony and Giles, have been understanding and even sympathetic.

Finally, I must record my appreciation of the Frederic Lewis Allen Room in the New York Public Library, where I enjoyed the resources of that superb research institution. At various times, I have profited from the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Bodleian Library, the Balliol and Nuffield College Libraries, the British Museum, and Widener Library.

M.R.

New York
 October 1976