

I

Montesquieu
Life and Letters

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There are political writers who merely regurgitate prevailing opinion. There are political writers who refine one of the forms of political discourse dominant in their own time. Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu fits into neither category. Like all of the major political philosophers, he was a man who thought for himself.

Montesquieu was born on January 18, 1689 at his mother's family's ancestral seat, the Chateau de La Brède, outside Bordeaux. He died in Paris on February 10, 1755. He wrote in and refined the French that he had inherited. While young, he was taught by the schoolmaster in the village of La Brède. As he approached, then entered adolescence, he studied with the Congregation of the Oratory at the *College de Juilly* some twenty miles outside Paris. And, as a young man, he mastered Roman and French law both as a student at the University of Bordeaux and as a neophyte practitioner in Paris.¹

Along the way, Montesquieu read all or nearly all of the Greek and Roman writers of note. And in time he became closely familiar with the works of Machiavelli, Montaigne, Bodin, Hobbes, Pascal, Pierre Nicole, Pufendorf, Algernon Sidney, Locke, and many another writer less well-known today.² But he was not constrained by any of the “languages” in which their discourse was framed. What he wrote at the end of his life with regard to himself applies with equal force to all thinkers of comparable stature: “I have had new ideas; it has been quite necessary to find new words or to give to old words new meanings” (*EL Avertissement de l'auteur*).³

If Montesquieu was in any sense “a man of his own time,” it was in two crucial particulars. To begin with, he had a keen interest in the

well-being of the polity to which he belonged and also felt a genuine affection for his fatherland. His exploration of the various forms of government and of their grounding in human psychology; his investigation of the influence exerted on human mores, manners, and laws by these governmental forms; and his study of the impact on all four of geography, climate, commerce, and religion – these were first and foremost the product of a genuine and deep curiosity. He firmly believed that this had liberated him from the “prejudices” of his time and place (*EL Préf.*), and he hoped that he would be read centuries after he had passed from the scene (*MT* 1940). But this did not exhaust Montesquieu’s aims, for he wrote also with an eye to the tastes, interests, and particular needs of his contemporaries – above all, his fellow Frenchmen – and his desire for their approval and concern for their welfare (and his own) sometimes operated as a constraint on the thinker in his guise as an author.

Montesquieu was tied to his time in one other regard. He was a philosopher of history – though not in the Hegelian sense. His understanding of history was in no way an echo of the notion of salvation history propagated by the Christian church. He was merely a witness to an ongoing and increasingly dramatic transformation. The earth was moving beneath everyone’s feet, and Montesquieu was among the first to notice and reflect on the logic and long-term implications of the tectonic shift then underway.⁴ Had he lived four hundred years earlier, he might well have been alert to the manner in which the emergence of Christianity and, later, Islam had permanently altered the political playing field, but it is most unlikely that he would have been similarly sensitive to the revolutions that commerce was undergoing and to the larger revolution that these were already then effecting in mores, manners, and politics. Coming of age when he did, he could easily discern that commerce was producing consequences, that they were already profound, and that they would be even more so in the future.

What it was that awakened Montesquieu from the dogmatic slumber that is the fate reserved for most men is a mystery. His upbringing was conventional. His years of study in the village of La Brède, at the *Collège de Juilly*, at the University of Bordeaux, and in Paris were what one would expect in the case of a young person in his situation. Montesquieu was the first-born son of a French aristocrat and expected to spend his life in service to the crown. He belonged both to the nobility of the sword and to the nobility of the robe. His father had been a soldier; his father’s elder brother was a *président à mortier* in the *Parlement de Guyenne* in

Bordeaux. Expectations weighed heavily on the scion of such a house. He could easily have followed his father's profession, and he may at some point have considered it. Eventually, he did become a judge – in succession to his uncle, who had no heir. Ordinarily, that would have been the end of it. With minimal effort and a modicum of frugality, Montesquieu might have been a local notable – an exceedingly prosperous vintner, a presiding judge in the provincial parliament, and a member of the nascent Académie de Bordeaux – and all of this he was.⁵ But he also became a thinker of world-historical importance, and how and why he did so will always be a puzzle.

It was undoubtedly important that Montesquieu resided near a port on the Atlantic in a part of France tied up with international trade. That in itself was a liberation. Had he lived deep in the interior, far from the sea and the complex of rivers and canals that linked parts of the kingdom with it,⁶ he might well have been less alert to the larger world of trade, and he might have settled into a more parochial outlook. It was also crucial that his father had a substantial library, which filled the largest room in the family castle. Much of what he did not learn from the merchants who flocked to Bordeaux from distant parts, he could learn from the books he had inherited and from those that he acquired. But this is insufficient as an explanation for his emergence on the world stage.

There was one event – which took place when Montesquieu was in his sixteenth year – that helps explain this development, for it profoundly upended the young man. His country had for centuries been the leading power on the European continent. It had sometimes been checked. But it had not decisively lost a major battle in a century and a half; and, in the seventeenth century, as the War of the Spanish Succession was being fought, Louis XIV, the Sun King of France, seemed to be on the verge of establishing a universal monarchy in Europe and the New World. “Before the battle of Blenheim,” Montesquieu later remembered,

France had risen to a time of greatness (*grandeur*) that one regarded as immutable, although the country was then on the verge of decline (*touche au moment de la décadence*). It is certain that the league [of those allied against Louis XIV] was in despair. That day at Blenheim, we lost the confidence that we had acquired by thirty years of victories... Whole battalions gave themselves up as prisoners of war; we regretted their being alive, as we would have regretted their deaths. It seemed as if God, who wished to set limits to empires, had given to the French this capacity to acquire, along with this capacity to lose, this fire that nothing resists, along with this despondency (*déscouragement*) that makes one ready to submit to anything. (MT 1306)

Of course, Marlborough's victory might well have been dismissed as a fluke. But he managed the like thrice again – at Ramillies, Oudenarde, and Malplaquet – and he did so in the years, stretching from 1706 to 1709, when Montesquieu was coming of age.⁷ By that time, it was obvious, even to the unsuspecting glance, that there was something very much amiss, and that the dream fostered by the Sun King regarding the destiny of France was unsustainable.

After the great king died at the beginning of September 1715, the extent of the fiscal crisis produced by his wars became evident. The Scottish financial wizard John Law was brought in a few years later to address the matter; and, by dint of financial legerdemain and an ill-advised paper money scheme, he managed to produce a financial bubble followed by an economic collapse that greatly increased the national debt and reduced the value of French banknotes to less than the paper on which they had been printed.⁸ At this stage, everyone was forced to concede that France was bankrupt, and the discerning in their number recognized that this was true in more ways than one. The monarchy did not command resources sufficient for the successful pursuit of the course set out for it by Louis, and it knew no other path. It was this gradually dawning realization that eventually gave Montesquieu's innate curiosity a focus.

That curiosity knew no bounds. It is not surprising that while studying in Bordeaux and while residing in Paris, Montesquieu began jotting down in a set of quartos extensive notes on the law.⁹ He had a profession to master. But it is revealing that, while in Paris between 1709 and 1713, he began a series of commonplace books that he called his *Spicilège* and named another set of volumes *Geographica*. In the two he summarized lectures, papers, and conversations touching on a vast array of topics: such as the eulogies delivered at the *Académie des Sciences* and the *Académie des Inscriptions*; a then unpublished scientific paper that had come into his hands; a controversial critique of a Jesuit's history of France; a conversation he conducted with a Chinese Christian visitor to Paris concerning the mores, manners, and practices of his native land; and the acerbic table talk of a Neapolitan scholar concerning the ancient Greek historians, the canonical books of the Old Testament, the papal bull *Unigenitus*, and the Jesuit order.¹⁰

When he returned to La Brède after his father's death in November 1713, Montesquieu took up his patrimony and his responsibilities as a proprietor. Sixteen months later, he married a woman of substance and began fathering children. Thirteen months thereafter, he inherited his

uncle's office, which he soon assumed. Much of his time was now spoken for, but he continued his quest to learn. Soon after the foundation of the *Académie de Bordeaux*, he was invited to join, and in 1716 he became an active participant. He had already composed a little treatise on the idol-worship of the ancients, a brief eulogy of Cicero, and a *mémoire* – addressed to Philippe II, duc d'Orléans, who was serving as regent during the infancy of Louis XIV's great-grandson Louis XV – suggesting how the government might deal with the crushing debt incurred during the wars conducted by his long-lived uncle the Sun King of France. Now, for the academy of his province, Montesquieu composed and delivered a *Dissertation on the Policy of the Romans Regarding Religion* deeply indebted to Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*; and at about the same time he drafted a *Discourse on Cicero*. Moreover, in keeping with the academy's larger purpose, he dabbled in science, conducting experiments on animals and plants alike and reporting on his findings. In these years, under its auspices, he also announced a great geological project encompassing a history of the earth in ancient and modern times.¹¹

As all of this suggests, Montesquieu might have ended up as a dilettante – a well-to-do, highly intelligent country gentleman with a penchant for studying this and that. He was saved from such a fate when the plight of his native land came once again to preoccupy him. All of his major works were begun as meditations on the causes and consequences of France's *décadence*.

PERSIAN LETTERS

The first of these works, a literary masterpiece entitled *Persian Letters*, was ushered into print under the Regency shortly after the collapse of John Law's "system." It was a *jeu d'esprit* – playful, satirical, and, at its core, profoundly serious and even philosophical; and it took the form of an epistolary novel. It was founded upon an attractive and intriguing conceit: to wit, that in 1711 two prominent Persians – Usbek and his younger friend Rica – had left their native land in search of safety as well as wisdom. They journeyed to Europe, sojourned in and near Paris until late in 1720, and over the years regularly exchanged letters with friends, eunuchs, and wives back home as well as with one another and with two Turkish acquaintances (one of whom traveled west in their wake). The letters bring to life two worlds: the one these two travelers had left behind (above all, the harem of Usbek) and the one to which they journeyed (above all, France). From the outset, the anonymous editor of this

correspondence invites his fellow Europeans to reflect on the despotic east and to come to see themselves as outsiders might see them.

The book, which appeared in Amsterdam under a false imprint, enjoyed a *grand succès de scandale*.¹² Although its author was not identified on the title page, his identity was soon bruited about, and it made him in short order a celebrity throughout Europe. In Paris, he was almost immediately the talk of the town, his notoriety catapulted him into high society, and after a brief interval admiration for his literary achievement rendered him eligible for election to the *Académie Française*. The work's irreverent character also induced André Hercule Cardinal de Fleury, the chief minister of Louis XV from 1726 to 1743, to hesitate before having the king confirm his election.¹³

Fleury had reason for his misgivings. The book was no less controversial for its treatment of politics than for its handling of religion, and it was as entertaining as it was subversive. The harem narrative gave it a structure, the satirical description of France provided by Usbek and Rica gave it purchase, and its mischievous depiction of French politics and religion rendered it delicious. Had Montesquieu merely mocked the vanity of his compatriots and the sacral character of the monarchy, as he did to great effect (*LP* 22.24–42/24),¹⁴ he might have elicited more amusement than ire. But there was more than mere mockery in the book. There was also analysis, and it was blunt.

By means of it, Montesquieu raised a question concerning the likely future of France that he wanted his contemporaries to ponder. He achieved this by having Usbek debunk monarchy itself as “a violent State” with a perpetual tendency to “degenerate into a Despotism, or a Republic.” It was not, Usbek contended, possible for “power” to be “shared equally between the People and the Prince.” He regarded “the equilibrium” as “too difficult to maintain.” He expressed the view that “it is necessary that power diminish on one side while it grows on the other.” In this struggle, moreover, the prince, as “head of the Armies,” ordinarily had “the advantage.” That monarchy could long subsist, Usbek judged implausible (*LP* 99.9–16/102).

This Montesquieu intimated in another fashion as well. In his depiction of the relations between Usbek and the harem that he had left behind in Ispahan, some among his contemporaries and friends recognized an elaborate burlesque of the French court with obsequious prelates, priests, and ministers represented as eunuchs who have exchanged a servitude of obedience for a servitude of command, and with fawning courtiers of both sexes parodied as concubines – all professing a love for and devotion

to their master, all desperate for his favor, and all obsessed with outmaneuvering one another by way of manipulating the despot they served.¹⁵ Some may even have discerned in Montesquieu's narrative of the chief eunuch's ultimately successful campaign for the acquisition of tyrannical power, an account of the collapse of the system of government by councils, called *polysynodie*, which had been established by the Regent after Louis XIV's demise, and a depiction of the rise to pre-eminence of his chief minister, Guillaume Cardinal Dubois, Archbishop of Cambrai. In a letter to the author, written not long after the appearance of Montesquieu's book, one such friend knowingly referred to this very minister on the occasion of his death as "the grand vizier" of France.¹⁶

Elsewhere, Montesquieu had Usbek and Rica comment on the decline of the *parlements* (LP 89.13–23/92, 134/140), describe in unflattering terms the operation of the court at Versailles (LP 22/24, 35/37, 122.20–30/127), depict the manner in which favor and the machinations of adulterous women consistently trump merit in the making of royal appointments (cf. LP 35/37, 86.9–16/88, 104/107, with 87.42–49/89), touch on the prominent status accorded tax farmers (LP 46.33–45/48, 95/98), and ponder the moral and political consequences of the speculation spawned by John Law's financial prestidigitation (LP 126.9–23/132, 129.8–44/135, 132.1–2, 22–41/138, 136.43–105/142).

It is, tellingly, on this last note that Montesquieu brought his narrative of Usbek's observations in Paris to an end (LP 138/146). That in subsequent letters he went on to describe in detail the disintegration taking place within Usbek's harem in Ispahan at this very time and then recounted the rebellion of his favorite wife, Roxane (LP 139–50/147–61), is more telling yet – for, among other things, the harem is, as we have seen, a parody of the court at Versailles; and Roxane justifies her fierce assertion of her right to freedom on the basis of an appeal to laws of nature of the very sort that will eventually be deployed in France against the monarchy itself (LP 150/161).

Twelve years after the publication of Montesquieu's epistolary novel, Voltaire wrote that there had never been "anything of greater force and strength than the *Persian Letters*" and expressed doubts as to whether there was any other "book in which anyone has discussed the government and religion with less tact and solicitude."¹⁷ In later years, when moderation had become his watchword (EL 29.1) and he was inclined to speak of the letters as "*juvenilia*," Montesquieu is said to have told some friends that "if he were actually going to put forth those letters now, he would omit certain ones in which the fire of youth had overwhelmed and transported him (*l'avait transporté*)."¹⁸

A DISCOVERY OF PRINCIPLES

In the years stretching from 1713 to 1727, Montesquieu oscillated back and forth between La Brède, where he had duties to attend to, and Paris, the political and intellectual capital of France. In the six years following the appearance of his *Persian Letters*, he once again gave curiosity full rein, producing a number of minor literary works such as *The Temple of Cnidus*, *Letters from Xenocrates to Pheres*, *A Dialogue between Sulla and Eucrates*, and *A Dialogue of Xathippe and Xenocrates*; and delivering at meetings of the Bordeaux academy papers entitled *Observations Regarding Natural History*, *On Consideration and Reputation*, and *A Discourse on the Motives That Ought to Encourage Us to Undertake the Sciences*. He started a book entitled *A Treatise on Duties*, which was deeply indebted to the Stoics, and delivered a paper on the subject at the provincial academy. He drafted the *Essay on Taste* that would later appear in the *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot and D'Alembert, and he composed *Considerations on the Wealth of Spain*.¹⁹

In the years subsequent to his father's death, while maintaining two households – one at La Brède, the other in Paris – Montesquieu ran up considerable debts; and in 1726 he made a momentous decision. He sold to a local lawyer of some distinction a life-interest in his office as a *président à mortier* in the Bordeaux parliament, and in April 1728 he set out on a tour of Europe that would last three years.²⁰

Montesquieu had always been sensitive to the diversity of the mores, manners, and laws governing the various nations of the world. He had seen plenty of evidence for this while in Bordeaux and Paris, and it had later been one of the many themes explored in his *Persian Letters*, *Spicilège*, and *Geographica*. But he had never fully confronted that diversity. Now he did so, and in the process he discovered how to make a whole of the many and quite distinct objects of his curiosity. Looking back upon this period at the time of the publication of his *magnum opus*, some two decades after his departure from France, he reflected on this development in the following fashion:

Many times I began this work and many times I abandoned it; a thousand times I dispatched to the winds the pages I had penned; every day I felt the paternal hands drop; I followed my object without forming a design; I knew neither rules nor exceptions; I found the truth only to lose it. But when I discovered my principles (*mes principes*), everything that I had been seeking came to me; and, in the course of twenty years, I saw my work begin, grow, advance, and come to completion. (*EL Préf.*)

While he was on his grand tour, pondering what gave all of this diversity a unity, Montesquieu sojourned in Vienna; then, in Venice, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Florence, Rome, Naples, Bologna, Modena, Parma, and other places in Italy. Thereafter, he visited Munich, Hanover, Utrecht, Amsterdam, and the Hague. And, finally, he settled down in Great Britain. Wherever he went, he dined out on the fame the *Persian Letters* had afforded him and on the prestige attendant on his election to the *Académie Française*. He hopped with the knobs, conversed with the local intellectual luminaries, and became acquainted with an enormous host of notables including Prince Eugene of Savoy, John Law, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the English king George II, his wife Caroline of Anspach, and their young son Frederick as well as Lord Chesterfield, Charles Townshend, the Earl of Pembroke, and Lord and Lady Hervey. All the while, in a set of notebooks he referred to as *Mes voyages*, he took copious and sometimes caustic notes both on the mores, manners, art, and laws of every place he visited and on what he learned from his conversations both about the locality in which he happened to be and about places further afield, such as Portugal and China, in which his informants had at one time or another resided. It was almost certainly on this tour that Montesquieu first became familiar with the *Origines iuris civilis* of Gian Vincenzo Gravina and the *Istoria civile del regno di Napoli* of Pietro Giannone, books that, as exemplars, helped shape his later work. He may even have met their fellow Neapolitan Giambattista Vico, about whose *New Science* he had heard a great deal.²¹

England was of particular importance to Montesquieu, and it is regrettable that his *Voyage en Angleterre* is lost almost in its entirety.²² There he spent roughly half of the time devoted to his tour, and it was arguably there that he settled on his “principles.” For he is reported to have later said that, while “Germany was made to travel in, Italy to sojourn in, . . . and France to live in,” it was “England” that was made “to think in.”²³

In the United Kingdom, Montesquieu studied not only the regnant mores and manners but also the political regime. He perused *Cato's Letters*, he devoured the English press, and, with some frequency, he worked his way through the numbers of *The Craftsman*, a journal edited by the Tory freethinker Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, whom he had known in Paris. In the winter and early spring of 1730, he attended meetings of Parliament to observe the debates. He was astounded when the maneuvers taking place in the House of Commons and House of Lords eventuated in the passage of a bill curtailing bribery in elections that neither house really wanted.

It was almost certainly in England that Montesquieu either studied the pioneering work on political economy, *A Discourse of Trade*, that had been published in 1690 by Nicholas Barbon or listened to conversations echoing the man's prescient analysis of the obstacles apt to prevent Louis XIV from establishing a universal monarchy on the continent of Europe and his careful examination of the economic and institutional foundations of England's strength. It was also during his sojourn in Britain that Montesquieu was elected a member of the Royal Society and admitted to the Freemasons.²⁴

The chief practical objective that Montesquieu pursued by way of making his grand tour – a goal articulated repeatedly in letters written both from abroad and after his return to various figures in Paris, including Fleury – was to secure for himself a diplomatic post. This pursuit was, however, doomed. For while circulating among the notables he met, he was outspoken on a variety of issues in a manner most undiplomatic – and while in England, at social gatherings, he compared the government of his native France unfavorably with that of the country he was visiting, and this, when reported back to the authorities in Paris, was fatal to his quest.²⁵ Had he succeeded, he might be remembered today solely as the author of the *Persian Letters*.

THE BOOK THAT NEVER WAS

When Montesquieu journeyed back to France in May 1731 and discovered that he was not to receive a diplomatic post, he turned, in frustration, to another pursuit. To La Brède, which he had not visited in four years, he returned; and there for two years he settled down to write – with an eye to achieving by way of his pen what he had hoped to accomplish as a political insider. It was also in these years that Montesquieu began energetically jotting down his passing observations in a new series of notebooks he called *Mes pensées*.²⁶

Montesquieu's immediate objective was to refine and deepen the thinking of Nicholas Barbon by way of producing a triptych made up of three essays: the first, a study of Rome's rise to imperial grandeur and its establishment of what he called a "universal monarchy"; the second, an exploration of the reasons why, after the fall of Rome, no one in Europe was able to duplicate this feat; and the third, a description of the peculiar form of government found in England and an account of its success in articulating an alternative grand strategy that eschewed expansionism on the continent of Europe and aimed, instead, at promoting England's