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Ursula Haskins Gonthier, *Montesquieu and England: Enlightened Exchanges, 1689-1755*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010. viii + 236 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-85196-997-5.

Review by David W. Carrithers, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Ursula Gonthier has provided us a well conceived, clearly written and for the most part ably researched study that sheds much light on the interaction between Montesquieu and English intellectuals between 1689 and 1789. The influence on Montesquieu of such British thinkers as Locke, Sidney, Shaftesbury, Addison, and Bolingbroke is thoroughly explored, as she establishes Montesquieu's "continuous engagement with English thought and writings throughout his career as an author" (p. 7). The scope of her study is commendably broad. Instead of focusing just on *The Spirit of Laws*, she includes his *Persian Letters*, his notes from his European travels, his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, and his *Essay on Taste*. She devotes a separate chapter to each of these works and succeeds admirably in retaining her focus on Montesquieu's involvement with English thought and history. Moreover, she moves well beyond exploring the influence of English writers on Montesquieu. She is equally interested in the impact of his ideas in England where he was "an active participant in the English public sphere" owing to the timely translations of each of his major works, hence the sub-title of her monograph: "Enlightened Exchanges, 1689-1755" (pp. 9-10).

Gonthier's first chapter is devoted to the *Persian Letters*. She demonstrates the influence of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1711) as well as his *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor* (1709) on the Troglodyte letters affirming man's natural sociability (pp. 23-24), on Montesquieu's criticisms of the French practice of employing "witty banter" even in "state meetings" (p. 31), on his penchant for frank and satirical discussions of religion (also influenced by Locke (pp. 35-40), and on his assertion in letter 83 that "even if there were no God, we should still love Justice" (pp. 39-40). She also establishes the influence of Joseph Addison's *Spectator*, which Montesquieu owned in a French translation published in 1714 (p. 28). She reminds us that Addison utilized the device of the Oriental tale in several of his essays and she suggests that an essay portraying a group of Indian Kings visiting London may have influenced the very design of the *Persian Letters* (p. 29).

Montesquieu's notes taken during his Grand Tour (1728-1731) form the subject matter of Gonthier's second chapter. Again her primary goal is to establish English influences. She concludes that he was influenced by Locke in the empirical approach and the "scientific objectivity" that characterizes these travel notes (pp. 45-46, 49) and more specifically by Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) on which he took detailed notes (pp. 50-55). In analyzing his lengthy sojourn in England at the end of his Grand Tour, Gonthier reaffirms Robert Shackleton's conclusions regarding the influence of comments made by Bolingbroke in *The Craftsman* on Montesquieu's perceptions of the presence in England of corruption, greed, esteem for wealth rather than honor or virtue, reckless financial speculation, and Crown patronage to control the House of Commons (pp. 60-62). [1]

In chapter three of her study Gonthier highlights the influence of Bolingbroke on Montesquieu's Roman history (p. 93). She asserts that Montesquieu's work was modeled on Bolingbroke's *Remarks on English*

*History*, which took the form of “twenty-four letters each discussing a particular period or aspect of English history.” Bolingbroke described his work as embodying “systems of hints,” she observes, and “[t]his definition can also be applied to the *Considerations*, where Roman history is not related (in narrative form) but presented as a series of enigmatical political lessons to be decoded by the astute reader” (p. 93). Montesquieu’s work on Rome, she concludes, “represented an English approach to history,” characterized by “brevity and fragmentation of the text that shocked many French readers” (p. 94).

In accord with Paul Rahe and other recent students of Montesquieu’s thoughts on Rome, Gonthier suggests the *Considerations* should be read not “as a defective history of Rome but rather as a commentary on the political situation in Europe in the 1730s” (p. 76). Thus she notes that Montesquieu went out of his way to praise English government as “one of the wisest in Europe” because of its tolerance for conflicts of opinion, its use of checks and balances and its ability to correct abuses of power (p. 84). There was a clear message directed at France, she asserts, in these comments praising England since France lacked the political parties and “political contestation” that had aided the English in retaining the liberty traceable to her German forbears.[2] Continuing recent trends, Gonthier also pays close attention in her third chapter to Montesquieu’s *Reflections on Universal Monarchy* (1731-1733), which he originally planned to publish as an addendum to his text on Rome and which conveys a strong anti-imperialist message suggesting that European nations should work together rather than contesting for supremacy on the battlefields of Europe.[3]

Gonthier’s fourth chapter covering *The Spirit of Laws* is the centerpiece of her study and there she makes some controversial assertions. Rather than depicting Montesquieu as moderately satisfied with the prospects for liberty in France under Louis XV—following the recovery from the lapse into despotism under Louis XIV—she sees him as longing to introduce English institutions and political customs into France.[4] However descriptive, objective and encyclopedic the *Spirit of Laws* may seem, she reads Montesquieu as pursuing a focused political agenda designed to convince his countrymen of the superiority of English government and politics (p. 172). She believes a proper reading of *The Spirit of Laws* places the English political experience at the very center of Montesquieu’s reason for writing the book. “In *L’Esprit des lois*,” she asserts, “England is constructed as a focus for the dreams of liberty cherished by the European subjects of the continent’s absolute monarchs” (p. 133). Moreover there is no doubt, on her reading, that Montesquieu wished to import English political practices into France. Montesquieu believed, she opines, that “France’s adoption of the English model would have a salutary effect on politics and would encourage free thinking but without plunging the country into anarchy” (p. 121).

Gonthier believes the key purpose of both the *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of Laws* was to rehabilitate England in the eyes of Frenchmen harboring intense dislike for the British as a result of a combination of military and commercial conflict with England, French abhorrence of the instability of British politics, and the general tendency of all peoples to prefer their own ways of doing things. Whereas works such as the abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc’s *Lettres d’un François concernant le gouvernement, la politique et des moeurs des Angloise et des François* (1745) decried the factional strife turning British elections into noisy, tumultuous struggles, “Montesquieu uses his portrayal of the English to attack such contemporary French beliefs regarding the superiority of France’s cultural and political organization and the dangers of English political liberty” (p. 112).

Montesquieu’s goal of rehabilitating the image of England in the eyes of Frenchmen was first made evident in the *Persian Letters*. In that work he “refuses to present England as a land of license and disorder, the perfect foil to a stable and successful France. Instead the *Persian Letters* show that the English in the early eighteenth century are a civilized and law-abiding people, that England rivals France as a dominant power in Europe and that the radical politics of the English have propelled them

towards progress and prosperity. England's increasing political stability, wealth and influence are identified with her citizens' right to exchange opinions, as well as goods and capital, freely and openly." Hence Montesquieu "seeks...to challenge the conventional image of England as a chaotic, uncivilized and extremist state that had been accepted in France since the mid-seventeenth century" (p. 40). Gonthier has no doubt that Montesquieu eulogizes England in order to spur changes in France. "The depiction of England in the *Persian Letters* as a free and wealthy nation, responsive to the demands of its citizens," she concludes, "highlights what was lacking in contemporary France in both social and institutional terms" (p. 28). The image of Regency France in the *Persian Letters*, on the other hand, is none too positive with heavy emphasis on near financial collapse of a government also beset with many other woes (p. 28).

The rehabilitation of the image of England is also the key purpose of *The Spirit of Laws*, according to Gonthier. "Montesquieu's description of the English constitution," she remarks, "appears to represent an attempt to legitimize the English polity in the eyes of his countrymen. Rather than being a modern aberration founded on regicide, usurpation and heresy, England's government is shown to stand for the survival of ancient European liberties" (p. 133). Gonthier terms Montesquieu's treatment of England in *The Spirit of Laws* a "sophisticated strategy for convincing the French of the need for political reform by implying that England and France share the same political ancestry, and are hence heirs to the same political legacy" (p. 9). In writing *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu meant to encourage "France...to return to its constitutional roots and embrace the Gothic liberties and institutions once possessed by the nation's Frankish forbears" (p. 138). In chapters 23-29 of Book XVIII and in Books XXVIII, XXX, and XXXI, Montesquieu describes a Gothic, balanced constitution stemming from Frankish practices "to which France would do well to return" (p. 116). A crucial text in Tacitus's *De Situ Moribus et Populis Germaniae* (AD 98) identifying the presence of liberty among the Franks that is quoted by Montesquieu in Book XVIII, chapter 30 of *The Spirit of Laws* states that "affairs of importance," rather than being decided by German princes, were "submitted to the whole nation" and also "at the same time laid before the princes." The Franks, then, in the words of Gonthier, "only gave their kings, or chiefs, a very moderate degree of power" (p. 115).

At this juncture, there is a bold leap in Gonthier's reasoning. She catapults from consideration of this text in Tacitus to the assumption that Montesquieu meant to suggest "that only a popularly elected legislative body would be true to the spirit of the Germanic assemblies of the nation that once existed in France" (p. 119). She goes on to depict Montesquieu as just as severe a critic of French government as Bolingbroke was of the English system, and she stresses that they both relied on the myth of the ancient constitution to highlight the abuses of power threatening liberty in their countries.[5] But Montesquieu "was a pragmatist rather than a polemicist," she concludes, and he therefore eschewed invectives. Accordingly, his criticisms are muted. What Montesquieu provides, she remarks, is a "veiled censure of France" (p. 138).[6] "Montesquieu's call for reform of the modern French constitution is present in the text by implication only in accordance with his own guidelines established in the final chapter of book 11: 'one should not always exhaust a subject to the point where the reader has no work to do. My business is not to make people read, but to make them think'" (p. 131). However veiled his censure of France, Gonthier is certain that Montesquieu's "call for a return to Gothic values is unmistakably clear." She concludes, however, that he stopped short of using the loss of Gothic liberty as a club to beat the monarchy of Louis XV, which is why he pointedly remarked in the final sentence of *The Spirit of Laws*: "my treatise on feudal law ends where most authors begin." The result is that "Montesquieu's call for reform of the modern French constitution is present in the text by implication only" (p. 131). Such indirect argumentation, however, is fully sufficient to convince her that Montesquieu did indeed intend to encourage his fellow Frenchmen to return to more balanced, Gothic government. This position she forthrightly defends: "Montesquieu brings out the similarities between the government of the English and that of the Germanic tribes to transmit a simple yet controversial message: to be true to its past France should follow England's example in rejecting absolute monarchy and reverting to Gothic government" (p. 129). And this step, according to Gonthier, would entail

adopting English institutions. “By showing that England represents a modern incarnation of France’s original political values,” she writes, “Montesquieu implies that the English constitution could be transplanted to French soil” (p. 119).

In assessing Montesquieu’s views on the early Germanic peoples who conquered Roman Gaul, Gonthier leaves out a crucial quotation from Tacitus’ *Germania* that helps to explain why Montesquieu could admire British institutions without thinking they should be transported to France.[7] As Michael Sonenscher has shown, a key passage for comprehending Montesquieu’s vision of the French monarchy as capable of achieving the balance that averts despotism is Tacitus’ statement: “in the choice of their king they were determined by his noble extraction and in that of their leader by his valour.”[8] This text demonstrates that what Montesquieu called “the key to the beginnings of the French monarchy” was that the Merovingian kings “had the civil authority” while military power was in the hands of *duces*, or knights, the result being that the Franks discovered “the method of separating sovereign authority between two representatives in the same country.”[9] By focusing on this particular text in *Germania*, Sonenscher notes, Montesquieu was able “to drop the idea of indivisible, unitary sovereignty” employed by both the abbé Dubos and Henri de Boulainvilliers in their respective accounts of the French Constitution[10] and “explain the emergence of both a sovereign king and a number of ‘intermediate, subordinate, and dependent powers’ in the form of the nobility.”[11] Sonenscher notes that “the dual system of authority which was the hallmark of the ancient government of the Germans was a mirror image of the government of modern France....While the Frankish kings had no power but had the right to judge, modern French kings had absolute power but no right to judge.”[12] The key point for Montesquieu was that the separation of political power and the right to judge preserves moderation and hence liberty. Thus Montesquieu concluded that dividing power between the king *and the nobility* (my emphasis) was the basis of “modern government...rarely produced by hasard, and seldom attained by prudence.”[13]

Gonthier exaggerates the extent of Montesquieu’s admiration for the English system of government. Unlike a number of other commentators, she does not point out that Montesquieu ended his famous depiction of the English constitution in Book XI, chapter 6 with the statement that the English had achieved “extreme” rather than “moderate” liberty and that in the very next chapter of Book XI he explicitly states that there is present in Europe and France “a spirit of liberty, that can, in these states, produce equally great things and can perhaps contribute as much to happiness as liberty itself. The three powers [executive, legislative, and judicial],” Montesquieu continues, “are not distributed and cast on the model of the constitution which we have mentioned; each instance shows a particular distribution of them and each approximates political liberty accordingly; and, if it did not approximate it, the monarchy would degenerate into despotism.”[14]

Gonthier includes no discussion of Montesquieu’s views on the eighteenth-century French constitution. Had she done so, she would have had to acknowledge that Montesquieu believed liberty was preserved by the Parlements of France, which were both depositories of the laws to which monarchs are subject and quasi-legislative bodies empowered to register the crown’s edicts before they became law. Montesquieu’s definition of liberty did not stress political participation. Instead he focused on security, as is evident in the third paragraph of Book XI, chapter 6 where he remarks: “Political liberty in a citizen is that tranquility of spirit which comes from the opinion each one has of his security, and in order for him to have this liberty the government must be such that one citizen cannot fear another citizen.”[15] This was a definition that did not require for its fulfillment meetings of popularly elected, representative assemblies on the Frankish or the English model.

As mentioned, Gonthier acknowledges that Montesquieu merely implies the thesis she attributes to him, and to my knowledge there is neither a *Pensée* nor a remark in Montesquieu’s correspondence actually recommending the substitution of English institutions for those the French had developed. Moreover, even if he regarded early English developments as more favorable to political liberty than what had

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transpired under the Merovingian, Carolingian, Capetian, Valois, and Bourbon Kings of France, this is not equivalent to a desire to transport the British system to France. Such a transplantation thesis requires us to suspend belief regarding the consistent message Montesquieu sent regarding every nation embodying its own distinctive blend of the myriad elements fashioning its “general spirit,” including the nature and principle of government; the physical aspect of the country including size, climate, terrain, and soil quality; the occupations of the inhabitants and the country’s stage of economic development; religion; wealth; population size; mode of commerce, customs, morality and manners.[16] Whatever their common origin in the distant past, England and France had been on very different tracks for centuries, and the net result was the creation of two very distinct political cultures displaying very different national spirits. Characteristic of Montesquieu’s caution regarding one nation trying to adopt the mores of another is the following *Pensée*: “I do not at all think that one government ought to make the others repulsive. The best of all is normally the one in which we live [and a sensible man ought to love it.] For since it is impossible to change it without changing manners and mores, I do not see, given the extreme brevity of life, what use it is for men to abandon in every respect what they have gotten used to.”[17] In sum, accepting that Montesquieu believed France needed to preserve a semblance of balanced government in order to avoid lapsing into despotism is not equivalent to his believing France should adopt British political institutions and customs.

Perhaps one reason for Gonthier’s exaggeration of Montesquieu’s regard for English constitutionalism is that she is selective in the previous studies she consults. A key work by Frances Acomb entitled *Anglophobia in France, 1763-1789* is not listed in her bibliography, and she makes no use, either, of an important work by Gabriel Bonno that would perhaps have heightened her sensitivity to French reservations about the English form of government and the English version of party politics.[18] Nor does she reference the lengthy discussion in Keith Baker’s *Inventing the French Revolution* of an alternative reading of Montesquieu’s views on England in spite of the fact that she is familiar with this collection of essays and makes use of several of Baker’s analyses and perspectives.[19]

Turning now to an assessment of Gonthier’s final chapter, it is evident she has developed an insightful account of Montesquieu’s aesthetic theories. Building on the prior work of Annie Becq and Downing Thomas, she demonstrates that his views on taste were substantially influenced by Locke, Shaftsbury, Addison, and Hutcheson.[20] She notes that Montesquieu had a significant interest in aesthetics as early as the 1720s—even before his Grand Tour which exposed him to some of the great art treasures of Europe—and that he exchanged opinions with Jean-Jacques Bel who had published in 1726 a critique of the aesthetic theories of the abbé Dubos (pp. 161; 206, fn. 88). Like Bel, and against Dubos, Montesquieu concluded that public taste can be improved and is not the sole preserve of a highly educated elite possessing a monopoly on “fine minds” (pp. 161-162). Rather, he regarded taste as “a universal and perfectible quality” (p. 162). Even on this topic of aesthetics, Gonthier manages to bring the conversation around to her thesis regarding Montesquieu’s enthusiastic approval of the English constitutional system and his desire to model France on England. Unlike Dubos, who regarded taste as the birthright of elites, she asserts, Montesquieu regarded the taste of nearly all persons as subject to improvement, which she believes “connects Montesquieu’s treatment of taste in the *Essai sur le goût* with the support he expresses in *L’Esprit des lois* for the English constitutional model of representative government” (p. 161). “[T]he *Essai sur le goût*,” she concludes, “clearly resonates with English ideas and upholds the English ideal of universal, disinterested participation in the cultural as in the political sphere” (p.171).

Overall, Professor Gonthier has made a valuable contribution. Much of any argument regarding influences must necessarily remain conjectural since Montesquieu’s mere possession of a given book does not mean he plundered its contents. And yet Gonthier does succeed in demonstrating striking overlaps between Montesquieu texts and arguments in Locke, Sidney, Shaftsbury, the *Spectator*, and Bolingbroke so that the English sources of many of his perspectives on politics do emerge rather convincingly from her analysis. She also does a commendable job of explaining how Montesquieu’s

works affected English political debates and developments. Where she risks controversy, however, is in her depiction of Montesquieu's treatment of England not just as a way of echoing "many of the objections to absolutism being voiced in the nascent French public sphere in the mid-eighteenth century" (p. 170) but as a model that he wished the French nation to adopt. This is a contention to which she continually returns and which has been contested by numerous other students of Montesquieu's thought.[21]

## NOTES

[1] See Robert Shackleton, "Montesquieu, Bolingbroke, and the Separation of Powers," *French Studies* 3(1949): 25-38, reprinted in David Carrithers, ed., *Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 405-418; and Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu. A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 126-130; 297-301.

[2] She borrows the phrase "political contestation" from Keith Baker. See his *Inventing the French Revolution. Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 168-172 and *passim*.

[3] On Montesquieu's original publication plans, see Paul Rahe, "The Book That Never Was: Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Romans* in Historical Context," *History of Political Thought* 26(2005): 43-89.

[4] For a contrasting viewpoint, see the following remark in Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 53: "Whereas Hobbes and Locke spoke the language of absolute rights—the individual's or the sovereign's...Montesquieu, in contrast, considered the defects and merits of the French monarchy with equanimity. The French monarchy's principle of legitimacy was radically illiberal, but its effective functioning assured tolerable liberties" (p. 53).

[5] She also suggests that Bolingbroke provided Montesquieu with a living demonstration of the value of political contestation as a result of the role he played as the outspoken opponent of Sir Robert Walpole's Whig ascendancy ensured by extensive corruption in the awarding of places and pensions to members of Parliament to assure their voting loyalty (pp. 88-89).

[6] As an example of Montesquieu's avoidance of polemics, she notes that he had originally planned to dedicate *The Spirit of Laws* to Frederick, the Prince of Wales, just as Bolingbroke had dedicated his *Patriot King* to Frederick, but he decided this would be too overt a criticism of French absolutism (p. 138).

[7] On Montesquieu and Tacitus, see Catherine Volpihac-Augier, *Tacite et Montesquieu* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1985).

[8] Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.137.

[9] *Pensée* 1769, cited by Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, 137.

[10] See Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules*, 2 vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris, 1742) and Henri de Boulainvilliers, *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de France*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam and the Hague, 1727).

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- [11] Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, p. 138.
- [12] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Book XI, chapter 11, cited by Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, p.138.
- [13] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Book V, chapter 14, cited by Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, p. 139.
- [14] Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone, eds. and trans., *The Spirit of the Laws* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Book XI, chapter 7, pp. 166-167.
- [15] Cohler, Miller and Stone, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book XI, chapter 6, p. 157.
- [16] Cohler, Miller and Stone, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book I, chapter 3, p. 9.
- [17] *Pensée* 934 in Henry C. Clark, ed., *Montesquieu: My Thoughts*, forthcoming from Liberty Fund.
- [18] See Frances Acomb, *Anglophobia in France, 1763-1789* (Durham, N.C., 1950) and Gabriel Bonno, *La Constitution britannique devant l'opinion française de Montesquieu à Bonaparte* (Paris, 1932).
- [19] See Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, pp. 173-78.
- [20] A. Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne: de la Raison classique à l'Imagination créatrice, 1680-1814*, 2 vols. (Pisa: Pacine Editore, 1984), 2: 779-80; D.A. Thomas, "Negotiating Taste in Montesquieu," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39/1(2005): 71-90. For Locke, see *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1695). For Shaftesbury, see *A Notion of a Tablature, or The Judgment of Hercules*, in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 3 vols. London, 1714). For Addison, see *Spectator*, numbers 411-419. For Hutcheson, see *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2004).
- [21] For discussions of the opposing point of view contending that Montesquieu was not completely enamored of the English constitution and English political customs and by no means thought it advisable or practicable to transplant them in French soil, see Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, pp. 173-178; Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, pp. 107-108; Iris Cox, "Montesquieu and the History of Laws," in David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe, eds., *Montesquieu's Science of Politics. Essays on the Spirit of Laws* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. 422-423; Michael Mosher, "Monarchy's Paradox: Honoring the Face of Sovereign Power," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, pp. 171-172 and *passim*; Paul Rahe, "Forms of Government," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, p. 83; Paul A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 97-98; and Sharon Krause, "The Spirit of Separate Powers in Montesquieu," *The Review of Politics* 62(2000): 231-265.

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