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Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *Correspondance choisie: "Avec respect et l'amitié la plus tendre."*
Edited by Philip Stewart. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016. 283 pp. 34€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-4615-3.

Review by Henry C. Clark, Dartmouth College.

When d'Alembert invited him to write some political articles for the *Encyclopédie*, Montesquieu responded with a polite demurrer. Under different circumstances, he wrote, he would have been an eager participant; the work, after all, whose first three volumes had already appeared, was "un beau palais où je serais bien curieux de mettre les pieds." But alas, after the exertions of *L'Esprit des lois* (published a few years earlier, in 1748), he had nothing more to offer on the proposed subjects of "democracy" and "despotism." If you would like me to contribute something, he continued, how about leaving it to my "esprit" to decide on the details, perhaps over a glass of cherry liqueur at Mme. du Deffand's (p. 229)? It's a familiar scenario, with its characteristic mix of good food, good company, and a few potentially earth-shaking ideas thrown in for good measure, made more poignant here by the spectacle of an aging sage trying to humor his younger friend.

The eighteenth century, that great age of epistolary art, is of course filled with moments like these. As of this writing, the Electronic Enlightenment website (<http://www.e-enlightenment.com>) boasts over 70,000 letters by over 8,500 correspondents, and counting. Voltaire's correspondence alone numbers over 20,000 items in the Besterman edition. Ralph Leigh's scarcely less monumental Rousseau collection runs to forty volumes, along with 12 more of supplemental materials. The Pierre Bayle project (under the direction of Antony McKenna and the late Elisabeth Labrousse) will run to fourteen volumes, about the same as the sixteen tomes of Diderot's correspondence (directed by Georges Roth and Jean Varloot), which appeared in the 1950s and 1960s.

Herein lies a small irony. Despite the career-making success of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, a work of fiction that did much to popularize the epistolary novel as a genre, its author emerges as a rather minor player in real life. The Masson edition of his works that appeared in the 1950s included roughly 700 letters by or to the Baron of La Brède. Some but not many others have been discovered since then. A few decades ago, sixty-eight items in the possession of the d'Aux family were discovered, to be subsequently published by René Pomeau in 1982; that is the largest addition to the corpus in the past half-century.

In recent years, starting in 1998, a new critical edition of the author's complete works has been coming out, under the auspices of the Société Montesquieu and published at first by the Voltaire Foundation and the Istituto italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, then later through a collaboration between Classiques Garnier and ENS-Lyon. Fourteen of a projected twenty-two volumes have now appeared. Of these, two (numbers eighteen and nineteen) of an eventual four cover the correspondence. They thus far number 626 dated letters (to 1747) and a handful of undated ones. For perspective, that is roughly on par with the number of letters in the late Dorothy Medlin's splendid edition of the correspondence of abbé André Morellet (1727-1819).^[1]

Not only does Montesquieu seem to have written far fewer letters than some of his comparably celebrated contemporaries, he generally did not put as much substance in them. His missives seem mostly shorter and more “mundane” than those of his peers, as he made less effort to reveal or to explore the inner life of himself or his correspondents. With rare exceptions, he did little of his actual work in the letters, certainly compared with the prodigious labors he poured into the intellectual diary that he called his *Pensées*, as Carole Dornier and her team have recently reminded us.^[2] On the other hand, as the opening example makes clear, his epistolary corpus is not without its gratifications.

The editor of the volume under review, Philip Stewart, is a retired professor of French literature at Duke University with considerable experience in the study of Montesquieu. He previously contributed an edition of *Lettres persanes*, as well as extensive work on the current *Œuvres complètes* project, including the correspondence itself.^[3] Here, he provides a selection covering the period from 1721 until the author’s death in 1755. The selection of 176 letters, he informs us, covers roughly fifteen or twenty percent of the available corpus, and is designed for breadth rather than depth (p. 10). Thus, readers will generally not find an entire sequence of exchanges involving one correspondent or one subject matter, but will instead find one or two entries in each of many different threads.

The subtitle for this edition, “Avec respect et l’amitié la plus tendre,” might suggest that its purpose is to highlight the more intimate and personal dimension of Montesquieu’s correspondence. But that does not seem to be the case. In the first place, as mentioned above, the intimate and the personal are not notable priorities for Montesquieu (although they are not entirely absent, of course). But also, the editor’s principal criterion governing the selection seems to have been the inclusion of a wide variety of subjects (pp. 10, 19). And indeed, the reader will find here a remarkably eclectic array of topics in which Montesquieu maintained an active, life-long interest. Everything including science, philosophy, literature, the arts, his family and business dealings, politics, history, and law appears in these pages.

Editorially, the aim seems to be a “critical edition” (see the title page) that, at the same time, avoids being “trop chargée de documentation” (p. 19). The annotations are carefully measured, though less abundant than in the corresponding volumes of the *Œuvres complètes*. Stewart is generally more cautious about attributing date or recipient than earlier editors have been. All of the letters selected are reproduced in their entirety, rather than in excerpts with expurgated salutations (p. 10). Helpfully, the notes include references (where applicable) to the location of manuscript materials online, notably in the Bordeaux municipal library where much of the Montesquieu material has long been housed (p. 20).

Priced to sell, this volume will be a more accessible introduction to the epistolary life of one of the leading figures of his age than the fuller though perforce more cumbersome editions in the ongoing *Œuvres complètes*. Bound in the familiar yellow Classiques Garnier paperback format, it takes its place in a series of *Correspondances et mémoires* edited by Mireille Huchon et al., alongside the letters of literary figures like Dumas, Rolland and Vigny. In that setting, it is a welcome addition to the corpus of Montesquieu’s writings.

NOTES

[1] Dorothy Medlin, Jean-Claude David, and Paul Leclerc, eds., *Lettres d’André Morellet* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1991-96), now available on the Electronic Enlightenment webpage cited above.

[2] See Montedite, *Édition critique des Pensées de Montesquieu* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2013) at <http://www.unicaen.fr/services/puc/sources/Montesquieu/>.

[3] Philip Stewart and Catherine Volpillac-Augier, eds., *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu, 19: Correspondance II* (Lyon: ENS Editions and Classiques Garnier, 2014), p. xxi.

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