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Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, Ed., *Montesquieu en 2005*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 2005:05. ix + 316. Abstracts. \$65.00 (pb). ISBN 0-7294-0859-0.

Review by Patrick Coleman, University of California, Los Angeles.

This volume celebrates the 250th anniversary of Montesquieu's death with a variety of studies, many of which derive from, or are inspired by, the philological and methodological work involved in producing a truly critical edition of Montesquieu's works (*Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, also at the Voltaire Foundation). While some essays (especially those in the last section) will appeal to a broader readership than others, scholars of eighteenth-century France should take a look at all of them. While the details of such subjects as the handwriting of Montesquieu's secretaries are intended for specialists, the frameworks developed for dealing with the genesis and revision of texts as complex as the *Lettres persanes* (henceforth LP) or *L'Esprit des lois* (henceforth EL) will benefit all those who work with primary sources in the French Enlightenment. A handy series of abstracts at the end of the volume provides helpful overviews for busy readers.

The first section includes four essays on LP, which supplement the critical material now available in the edition of that book in volume one of the critical edition (2004). This edition differs from most modern editions of LP by taking the "A" edition of 1721 as its base text, rather than the posthumous edition of 1758, which contains additional letters (some of these had been published in another 1721 edition, "B", whose relation to A has been a subject of scholarly dispute, since some letters present in A do not appear in B). By separating the additional letters from the main text, this edition seeks to be faithful to the work as it was initially read. A similar preoccupation with textual form characterizes Jean-Paul Schneider's essay. By carefully comparing the letters the B edition added to (or omitted from) A, he shows that Montesquieu's changes reflect an evolving approach to the representation of power. B's omissions tend toward a streamlined but simplified theoretical understanding, while the additional letters, which reinforce the "novelistic" aspect of the work, mark a greater emphasis on the relation between theory and practice. The central idea is not new, but by focusing on the way the changes affect the overall economy of the work instead of on the letters as individual texts, he is able to make that argument more concrete. Among other observations, Schneider undercores a point he had made in an earlier study. Montesquieu settled on a date for Usbek's chronologically last letter (#146 in the 1758 edition) which suggests that Usbek had in hand Roxane's famous suicide letter (#161), which ends the book. Thus we need to read the general reflections on power in Usbek's letter as his response to the particular situation of the seraglio.

Séité and Volpilhac-Auger examine the "sommaires" or annotated list of letters that was first added without Montesquieu's authorization to an edition of 1752, and then the "tables des matières" or index that was added in 1758. These are reproduced in modern editions of the novel and we take them for granted (so much so that no one seems to have noticed that the "sommaires" that appear in Paul Vernière's widely used Garnier edition are not those of the eighteenth-century editions but of unknown provenance.) The inclusion of annotated list of letters reinforces the narrative quality of LP and affects the interpretation of the thematic content as well, notably by amplifying the opposition between East and West. The index, on the other hand, which may have been added in imitation of the one in the later EL, "monumentalizes" the work and encourages an encyclopedic and utilitarian reading of LP that flattens the polyphonic voices of the letters and the conditioned nature of the propositions advanced in them. The index also names people only alluded to in the book itself (as well as famously referencing

Montesquieu himself as depicting himself under the guise of Usbek). The authors also note that references to Rica appear less frequently in the “table des matières” than one would expect.

Laurence Macé analyzes the process whereby LP was placed on the Vatican Index of forbidden books in 1762 and gives the text of the judgment that condemned it. Noteworthy is the fact that Montesquieu himself is not named as the author, nor would he be when the Vatican condemned EL. The *président* was held in high personal esteem by many churchmen. The late date of LP’s condemnation would seem to reflect a hardening of Church opposition to the Enlightenment after 1760. Philip Stewart discusses the decisions he made about the modernization of spelling and, especially, punctuation in the *Oeuvres complètes* edition of LP. The essential unit of Montesquieu’s text is the period rather than the (modern) sentence. Even editors who claim to reproduce the punctuation of the 1758 edition do not do so consistently, and indeed it is legitimate to break up some of Montesquieu’s very long periodic sentences. Useful reference is made to Beauzée’s article “Ponctuation” in the *Encyclopédie* in his discussion of contemporary understandings of the issue.

The second section of the volume is a study of over a hundred pages about various aspects of EL’s textual history. Volpilhac-Augier takes issue with a number of Georges Benrekassa’s interpretations of the Bibliothèque nationale de France manuscript and its complex layering of composition and revision. The new edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* aims to present as complete a picture as possible of the evolution of this major work, and so the author pays close attention to such material clues as paper types and watermarks. Expanding and revising the pioneering work of Robert Shackleton, she details the role of the various secretaries employed by Montesquieu, which helps us date different parts of the text. She also tries to reconstruct the long process of refinement of key notions such as the “principles” of regimes as well as the rewriting that gives the book its distinctive style and pace. A key feature of the book is its division into often very short chapters, a process that Volpilhac-Augier says began between 1739 and 1741. Care must be exercised in any determination of Montesquieu’s final intentions, since the manuscript we have was not used for the printing of the book and some of its late corrections may not have been authorized by the author himself. The appendices also offer fascinating pieces of detective work. In one of them, Volpilhac-Augier also demolishes the legend of Montesquieu’s supposed blindness in the later years of EL’s composition. In another, she shows that the placement by later editors of the poetic invocation to the Muses at the beginning of Book XX not only goes against Montesquieu’s explicit directive to leave it out, but inserts it in the wrong place (it probably belongs to Book XI) and misreads a key sentence in the original text of the invocation. Montesquieu had asked the Muses to ensure that “ce qui ne devait être qu’un amusement sera un plaisir,” thus implying there was something frivolous about his work. This was changed to “ne saurait être un amusement,” as if the seriousness of EL needed to be safeguarded.

The third section offers more wide-ranging approaches to the meaning of EL. Céline Spector, the author of the stimulating recent *Montesquieu: pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés* (PUF, 2004) wrestles with the vexed question about whether Montesquieu’s idea of justice is descriptive of a rationality internal to a society or as normative, based on a higher notion of nature. When Montesquieu defines law in terms of the “rapports nécessaires qui dérivent de la nature des choses,” she claims, he is appealing to a discernment of proportionality that takes account of historical variation but is not reductively quantitative since it is linked to the normative principle of moderation, without which there can be no freedom. This means that Montesquieu is neither an ancient or a modern as those terms as usually defined, especially by Leo Strauss, but something elusively in between.

Catherine Larrère explores the relation between economic and politics Montesquieu, starting from historiographical accounts of the emergence of economics as a separate discipline. Montesquieu pays a lot of attention to commerce in EL, yet he still does not envisage such a split. This is because he refuses

to see the state simply as a decision-maker, as both mercantilist and later physiocratic writers would do. This is to neglect the character of the state in its larger meaning as a form of regime. While the spirit of commerce has its own virtues and is not opposed to republican “virtue,” France could all too easily turn into a commercial despotism, given the nature and power of its monarchy. A critique of John Law and his system constitutes a “secret chain” running through the entire fourth part of EL. Similarly, if Montesquieu does not want the nobility to engage in trade, this is not only because of concern for their ethos of honor, but because in France nobles might well monopolize trade to the detriment of the general good. In England, where broader participation in government is linked to economic self-regulation, this threat is absent.

Jean Ehrard probes the meaning of “fundamental laws” in EL, emphasizing in particular that this expression is not a synonym for “constitution,” since the latter includes much more than statutory law and encompasses “tout l’équilibre de la société politique” (269). Do fundamental laws belong to the essence of a government or to its history? Montesquieu inclines to the first view, which is that of natural right theorists such as Pufendorf, even though his discussion of France’s laws is historical. While the rules of succession (including the Salic law that excludes women from the throne) have an historical origin, they are not revisable. The same is true for the role of the *parlement*. How much room is there for future change? Ehrard sees some ambivalence in Montesquieu on this issue. He also includes a full list of the occurrences of the expressions “lois fondamentales” and “constitution” in EL to encourage further exploration.

In the final essay, Olga Penke compares Montesquieu’s *Considérations sur la grandeur et la décadence des Romains* with Voltaire’s *Histoire de Charles XII* in terms of the renewal of history-writing in eighteenth-century France. Contemporary readers found the former lacking in narrative drive, but Montesquieu wanted to shake up conventional ideas about rise and fall and to provoke reflection on the present threat of despotism. He was skeptical of Voltaire’s focus on individuals. Voltaire was more optimistic about the reliability of modern sources than Montesquieu, who continued to view Rome as a model for reflection in part because of the richness of the available record. Voltaire was also more interested in an explicit effort to renew literary genres, and his historical work should be viewed alongside his attempt to revive epic and tragedy.

Depending on their interests, readers will want to pick and choose among the very different kinds of essay in this volume, but each is an excellent example of its kind and is well worth reading. One comes away from these studies with the impression that Montesquieu is very much an idiosyncratic thinker, one who eludes attempts to place him within any familiar narrative of the history of political and social thought.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Avant-propos

I: Autour des *Lettres persanes*

- Jean-Paul Schneider, “Les *Lettres persanes*, ‘une espèce de roman’?”
- Yannick Séité and Catherine Volpillac-Augier, “(A) propos de(s) tables (des *Lettres persanes*)”
- Laurence Macé, “Les *Lettres persanes* devant l’Index: une censure ‘posthume’”
- Philip Stewart, “Le devoir d’intervention: points, virgules, etc., dans les *Lettres persanes*”
- Tableau de concordance des différentes éditions des *Lettres persanes*

II: Une nouvelle “chaîne secrète” de *L'Esprit des lois*: l'histoire du texte

- Catherine Volphilhac-Auger
 1. Manuscrit mode(s) d'emploi: le manuscrit BnF de *L'Esprit des lois*
 2. De la main à la plume. Montesquieu et ses secrétaires: une mise au point
 3. Genèse de *L'Esprit des lois*
- Annexe I. Que faire des Muses?
- Annexe II. La cécité présumée de Montesquieu
- Annexe III. Les secrétaires de Montesquieu après 1748
- Annexe IV. Tableau chronologique partiel de la correspondance manuscrite subsistante de Montesquieu
- Annexe V. Tableau récapitulatif des secrétaires de Montesquieu, 1734-1755

III: Montesquieu: les principes d'une oeuvre

- Céline Spector, “Quelle justice? Quelle rationalité? La mesure du droit dans *L'Esprit des lois*”
- Catherine Larrère, “Montesquieu économiste? Une lecture paradoxale”
- Jean Ehrard, “La notion de ‘loi(s) fondamentale(s)’ dans l'oeuvre et la pensée de Montesquieu”
- Annexe I. La notion de ‘loi(s) fondamentale(s)’ dans *L'Esprit des lois*
- Annexe II. L'idée de “constitution”
- Olga Penke, “De l'usage de l'histoire”

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