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## CLASSICS IN THE HISTORY OF LIBERTY

### CHARLES LOUIS DE SECONDAT, BARON DE MONTESQUIEU, *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF M. DE MONTESQUIEU (1777)* VOLUME I: THE SPIRIT OF LAWS

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#### EDITION USED

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- Volume I: The Spirit of Laws
- Volume II: The Spirit of Laws (continued)
- Volume III: Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Declension of the Roman Empire; and the Persian Letters
- Volume IV: Familiar Letters; Miscellaneous Pieces (An Oration, An Essay upon Taste; Of the Pleasures of the Soul; The Temple of Gnidus; Cupid Distressed; Lysimachas; D'Alembert's Analysis of the Spirit of Laws; A Defence of the Spirit of Laws; Some Explanations of the Spirit of Laws)

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**AN EULOGIUM ON PRESIDENT MONTESQUIEU, BY MONSIEUR D'ALEMBERT.**

THE interest which good citizens are pleased to take in the Encyclopedia, and the great number of men of letters, who consecrate their labours to it, seem to permit us to regard this work as one of the most proper monuments, to preserve the grateful sentiments of our country, and that respect which is due to the memory of those celebrated men who have done it honour. Persuaded, however, that M. de Montesquieu had a title to expect other panegyrists, and that the public grief deserved to be described by more eloquent pens, we would have concealed within our own breasts our just concern, and respect for his memory; but the acknowledgement of what we owe him we hold too dear to permit us to leave the care of it to others. While a benefactor to mankind by his writings, he also condescended to be so to this work, and our gratitude pretends to no more but only to trace out a few lines at the foot of his statue.

Charles de Secondat, baron of La Brede and of Montesquieu, late president *à mortier* of the parliament of Bourdeaux, member of the French academy of sciences and belles lettres of Prussia, and of the Royal Society of London, was born at the castle of La Brede, near Bourdeaux, the 18th of January, 1689, of a noble family of Guyenne. His great great grandfather, John de Secondat, steward of the household to Henry the Second, king of Navarre, and afterwards to Jane, daughter of that king, who married Antony of Bourbon, purchased the estate of Montesquieu for the sum of 10,000 livres, which this princess gave him by an authentic deed, as a reward for his probity and services.

Henry the Third, king of Navarre, afterwards Henry the Fourth, king of France, erected the lands of Montesquieu into a barony, in favour of Jacob de Secondat, son of John, first one of the gentlemen in ordinary of the bedchamber to this prince, and afterwards colonel of the regiment of Chatillon. John Gaston de Secondat, his second son, having married a daughter of the first president of the parliament of Bourdeaux, purchased the office of president *à mortier* in this society. He had several children; one of whom entered into the service, distinguished himself in it, and quitted it very early in life. This was the father of Charles de Secondat, author of the Spirit of Laws. These particulars may perhaps appear misplaced at the beginning of the *eloge* of a philosopher whose name stands so little in need of ancestors; but let us not envy their memory that eclat which this name reflects upon it.

The early marks of his genius, a presage sometimes so deceitful, was not so in Charles de Secondat: he discovered very soon what he one day would be, and his father employed all his attention to cultivate this rising genius, the object of his hope and of his tenderness. At the age of twenty, young Montesquieu already prepared materials for the Spirit of Laws, by a well-digested extract from those immense volumes which compose the body of the civil law: thus heretofore Newton laid, in his early youth, the foundation of works which have rendered him immortal. The study of jurisprudence, however, though less dry to M. de Montesquieu than to the most part of those who apply to it, because he studied it as a philosopher, was not sufficient for the extent and activity of his genius. He enquired deeply, at the same time, into subjects still more important and more delicate,<sup>\*</sup> and discussed them in silence, with that wisdom, with that decency, and with that equity, which he has since discovered in his works.

A brother of his father, president *à mortier* of the parliament of Bourdeaux, an able judge and virtuous citizen, the oracle of his own society and of his province, having lost an only son, and wanting to preserve, in his own corps, that elevated spirit which he had endeavoured to infuse into it, left his fortune and his office to M. de Montesquieu. He had been one of the counsellors of the parliament of Bourdeaux since the 24th of February, 1714, and was received president *à mortier* the 13th of July, 1716.

Some years after, in 1722, during the king's minority, his society employed him to

present remonstrances upon occasion of a new impost. Placed between the throne and the people, he filled, like a respectful subject and courageous magistrate, the employment, so noble, and so little envied, of making the cries of the unfortunate reach the sovereign: the public misery, represented with as much address as force of argument, obtained that justice which it demanded. This success, it is true, much more unfortunately for the state than for him, was of as short continuance as if it had been unjust. Scarce had the voice of the people ceased to be heard, but the impost, which had been suppressed, was replaced by another: but the good citizen had done his duty.

He was received the 3d of April, 1716, into the academy of Bourdeaux, which was then only beginning. A taste for music, and for works of pure entertainment, had at first assembled together the members who composed it. M. de Montesquieu believed, with reason, that the rising ardour and talents of his friends might be employed with still greater advantage in physical subjects. He was persuaded that nature, so worthy of being beheld every where, found also, in all places, eyes worthy of viewing her; that, on the contrary, works of taste not admitting of mediocrity, and the metropolis being the center of men of abilities and opportunities of improvement in this way, it was too difficult to gather together, at a distance from it, a sufficient number of distinguished writers. He looked upon the societies for belles lettres, so strangely multiplied in our provinces, as a kind, or rather as a shadow, of literary luxury, which is of prejudice to real opulence, without even presenting us with the appearance of it. Luckily the duke de la Force, by a prize which he had just founded at Bourdeaux, seconded these rational and just designs. It was judged that an experiment properly made would be preferable to a weak discourse or a bad poem; and Bourdeaux got an academy of sciences.

M. de Montesquieu, not at all eager to shew himself to the public, seemed, according to the expression of a great genius, to wait for an age ripe for writing. It was not till 1721, that is to say, at 32 years of age, that he published the Persian Letters. The Siamois, and the serious and comic amusements, might have furnished him with the idea of it; but he excelled his model. The description of oriental manners, real or supposed, of the pride and phlegm of Asiatic love, is but the smallest object of these letters; it only serves, so to speak, as a pretence for a delicate satire upon our manners, and for treating of several important subjects, which the author went to the bottom of, while he only appeared to glance at them. In this kind of moving picture, Usbec chiefly exposes, with as much genteel easiness as energy, whatever amongst us most struck his penetrating eyes: our way of treating the most silly things seriously, and of turning the most important into a joke; our conversations which are so blustering and so frivolous; our impatience even in the midst of pleasure itself; our prejudices and our actions perpetually in contradiction with our understandings; so much love of glory joined with so much respect for the idol of court-favour; our courtiers so mean and so vain; our exterior politeness to, and our real contempt of, strangers, or our affected regard for them; the fantasticness of our tastes, than which there is nothing lower but the eagerness of all Europe to adopt them; our barbarous disdain for the two most



respectable occupations of a citizen, commerce and magistracy; our literary disputes, so keen and so useless; our rage for writing before we think, and for judging before we understand. To this picture, which is lively, but without malice, he opposes, in the apologue of the Troglodytes, the description of a virtuous people, become wise by misfortunes: a piece worthy of the portico. In another place, he represents philosophy, which had been a long time smothered, appearing all of a sudden, regaining, by a rapid progress, the time which he had lost; penetrating even amongst the Russians at the voice of a genius which invites her; while, among other people of Europe, superstition, like a thick atmosphere, prevents that light, which surrounds them on all hands, from reaching them. In fine, by the principles which he has established concerning the nature of ancient and modern government, he presents us with the bud of those bright ideas which have been since developed by the author in his great work.

These different subjects, deprived at present of the graces of novelty, which they had when the Persian Letters first appeared, will for ever preserve the merit of that original character which the author has had the art to give them; a merit by so much the more real, that in this case it proceeds alone from the genius of the writer, and not from that foreign veil with which he covered himself; for Usbec acquired, during his abode in France, not only so perfect a knowledge of our morals, but even so strong a tincture of our manners, that his style makes us often forget his country. This small defect in point of probability was perhaps not without design and address: when he was exposing our follies and vices, he wanted without doubt also to do justice to our advantages. He was fully conscious of the insipidity of a direct panegyric: he has more delicately praised us, by so often assuming our own air to satirize us more agreeably.

Notwithstanding the success of this work, M. de Montesquieu did not openly declare himself the author of it. Perhaps he thought that by this means he would more easily escape that literary satire, which spares anonymous writings the more willingly, because it is always the person, and not the work, which is the aim of its darts. Perhaps he was afraid of being attacked on account of the pretended contrast of the Persian Letters with the gravity of his office; a sort of reproach, said he, which critics never fail to make, because it requires no effort of genius. But his secret was discovered, and the public already pointed him out to the French academy. The event demonstrated how prudent M. de Montesquieu's silence had been. Ufbec expresses himself sometimes freely enough, not concerning the fundamentals of Christianity, but about matters which too many people affect to confound with Christianity itself; about the spirit of persecution with which so many Christians have been animated; about the temporal usurpation of ecclesiastic power; about the excessive multiplication of monasteries, which deprive the state of subjects, without giving worshippers to God; about some opinions which have in vain been attempted to be established as principles; about our religious disputes, always violent and always fatal. If he appears any where to touch upon more delicate questions, and which more nearly interest the Christian religion, his reflections, weighed with justice, are in fact very favourable to revelation; because he

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