

Interpretation

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- 3 *Matthew S. Brogdon* “Who Would Be Free, Themselves Must Strike the Blow”: Revolt and Rhetoric in Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* and Melville’s *Benito Cereno*
- 25 *Ariel Helfer* Socrates’s Political Legacy: Xenophon’s Socratic Characters in *Hellenica* I and II
- 49 *Lorraine Smith Pangle* The Radicalness of Strauss’s *On Tyranny*
- 67 *David Polansky & Daniel Schillinger* With Steel or Poison: Machiavelli on Conspiracy
- 87 *Ingrid Ashida* **Book Reviews:** *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu
- 93 *Kevin J. Burns* *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* by Jeffrey Tulis and Nicole Mellow
- 97 *Peter Busch* *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe* by Vickie B. Sullivan
- 103 *Rodrigo Chacón* *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* by Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro
- 109 *Bernard J. Dobski* *Shakespeare’s Thought: Unobserved Details and Unsuspected Depths in Thirteen Plays* by David Lowenthal
- 119 *Elizabeth C’ de Baca Eastman* *The Woman Question in Plato’s “Republic”* by Mary Townsend
- 125 *Michael P. Foley* *The Fragility of Consciousness: Faith, Reason, and the Human Good* by Frederick Lawrence
- 129 *Raymond Hain* *The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart
- 135 *Thomas R. Pope* *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* by Brian A. Smith
- 141 *Lewis Hoss* **Doubting Progress: Two Reviews**
147 *Eno Trimçev* *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics* by Matthew W. Slaboch

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The Spirit of the Laws is one of those books that seem to comprehend everything under the sun; as Montesquieu remarks in his preface, it includes an “infinite number of things.” But Montesquieu also says that a single argument runs through his text, connecting his many points and allowing readers to experience them as “truths.” “Many of the truths will make themselves felt here only when one sees the chain connecting them with others” (SOTL Pref.). In this thought-provoking book, Vickie B. Sullivan claims that she has found that central argument: if not the whole chain, then “the most important link of all,” is “despotism” (Sullivan 16).

Sullivan begins her case by contrasting it with two other interpretations, each having some basis in Montesquieu. Some scholars, with Durkheim at their head, see Montesquieu as a practitioner of empirical social science, in keeping with his announcement, “I do not write to censure that which is established in any country whatsoever. Each nation will find here the reasons for its maxims” (SOTL Pref.; Sullivan 219n1); others notice that Montesquieu does indeed criticize what is established in Turkey, Japan, China, Persia, and other faraway countries, but they attribute this to what Edward W. Said calls the “orientalist” assumption of European superiority (Sullivan 220n4). But as Sullivan shows (3–4, 7–11, 69–70), Montesquieu’s strongly negative account of despotism does not overlook the deeds of his fellow Europeans, whether he is decrying the deepening absolutism in the French monarchy (SOTL 5.10–11), Spanish genocide in America (4.6), or persecution of Jews under the Portuguese Inquisition (25.13).

Sullivan understands Montesquieu to be a proponent of moderate and free government, modeled not on the virtuous city of antiquity but on commercial England in modern times. This reading puts her in sympathetic dialogue with scholars like Aurelian Craiutu, Sharon Krause, Thomas L. Pangle, Paul A. Rahe, and Diana J. Schaub. What distinguishes her own interpretation is the claim that Montesquieu believes despotism still poses a threat in modern times, and may even prevail in Europe, because of the continuing influence of certain virulent ideas. When Montesquieu writes, “I would consider myself the happiest of mortals, if I could make it so that men were able to cure themselves of their prejudices” (SOTL Pref.), Sullivan reads it not as a melancholy wish or evasion of responsibility, but a plan of action.

Sullivan finds general confirmation of this agenda in a remarkable passage from book 12. While discussing “the laws that form political liberty in relation to the citizen,” Montesquieu writes, “The knowledge already acquired in some countries and yet to be acquired in others, concerning the surest rules one can observe in criminal judgments, is of more concern to mankind than anything else in the world” (SOTL 12.2; Sullivan 4–7, 60–63, 207–10, etc.). That Montesquieu should ascribe supreme importance to court proceedings must seem very strange at first, but his meaning becomes clearer when we realize that he is speaking of the separation of powers. Those who execute the laws should not act as judges: this is a rule that Montesquieu praises in England, but it has already been ignored in France by Louis XIII, whose successor would further blur the line between monarchy and despotism with his delusions of grandeur and contempt for constitutional limits (SOTL 6.5; cf. 8.6–7, 11.6). This gives some indication of why knowledge of rules concerning criminal judgments could be not only most important in politics, but—as Sullivan acutely notes—most important for human beings as such (5, 221n13). Montesquieu calls prejudices “not what makes one unaware of certain things but what makes one unaware of oneself,” and human beings are especially apt to forget themselves while judging one another.

It is not clear whether Sullivan has definitively proved her thesis that despotism is, in fact, the “chain” that unites the whole of Montesquieu’s great work. Such a proof may require a different sort of commentary from the one that Sullivan provides here; most obviously, it would require her to follow and account for the surface order (and disorder) of Montesquieu’s text. But Sullivan certainly demonstrates that whatever else Montesquieu may be doing in his book, he is indeed contending against certain “despotic ideas of Europe.” Her book is organized in three parts, each corresponding to a group of ideas that Montesquieu opposes in *Spirit of the Laws*. In the first place, there are

the ideas of modern political philosophers, specifically Machiavelli (chap. 1) and Hobbes (chap. 2). Next, there are Christian ideas, operative in Montesquieu's own day (chap. 3) but beginning their political influence already in late antiquity (chap. 4). And finally, there are the ideas of classical political philosophers, specifically Plato (chap. 5) and Aristotle (chap. 6).

Sullivan's excellent chapter on Machiavelli draws out the layers of agreement and disagreement in Montesquieu's remarks on "this great man" (SOTL 6.5), including the irony in that very compliment. Montesquieu refers to Machiavelli's political legacy as a disease: "One has begun to be cured of Machiavellianism," he writes, "and one will continue to be cured of it" (SOTL 21.20; Sullivan 27). Machiavelli is widely denounced for his outrageous praise of brutality, notably that of Cesare Borgia in *The Prince*. Nevertheless, as Sullivan shows (28–32), his teaching has persuaded monarchs and their courts that if a king is to be great he must act despotically, as Charles IX did when ordering the massacre of the Huguenots. Montesquieu, in contrast, admires the "great and generous courage" that noblemen of the time showed in refusing to dishonor themselves by obeying such an order (4.2). As for republics, Machiavelli praises the early Roman practice of allowing the people to join in accusing, judging, and punishing the crime of treason (*Discourses* 1.16); in his view, such a practice is needed if a people is to remain free. Montesquieu replies that such involvement actually destroys *civil* liberties by subjecting citizens to one another's arbitrary wills (6.5; Sullivan 32–41).

Although Hobbes makes only one explicit appearance in *Spirit of the Laws* (1.2), Montesquieu declares (in his *Defense*) that the book's author "always" "attacked the errors of Hobbes" (Sullivan 50). Like Machiavelli, Hobbes erases the distinction between moderate and despotic government; he understands sovereignty to be maintained on the basis of fear—which Montesquieu identifies as the principle of despotism—and he buries natural humanity under the artificial guise of a "mortal god." Thus Hobbes sought to eliminate the general disorder by overturning the tranquility of individual citizens (62–4). Montesquieu does not describe Hobbesianism as a disease, however, but only as so many errors, and this difference is reflected in Sullivan's careful discussion. What Montesquieu says generally in his preface applies to Hobbes's case in particular: "One feels the old abuses and sees their correction, but one also sees the abuses of the correction itself" (SOTL Pref.; Sullivan 64). Indeed, Sullivan had applied the same dictum in the previous chapter (48), which suggests that, for Montesquieu, *both* moderns were basically correct regarding "the abuses."

Montesquieu's predecessors see European peoples divided and governments subverted by an independent authority in their midst. That authority—in a word—is Christianity. As for Montesquieu, Sullivan is at pains to note that he does have appreciative things to say about the role of Christianity in eradicating slavery in Europe and allowing women to join in many areas of society (85–91). But as she shows in her comments on 24.13, Montesquieu sees abuses as well. Although Christians believe in the possibility of mercy and redemption for all, they can never be certain *who* will be judged and consigned to eternal torment (Sullivan 95–99). As a result, despotically minded people have an especially powerful way of playing on people's fears; making use of the "idea that the divinity must be avenged" (SOTL 12.4; Sullivan 101–2), they have mobilized the most horrifying persecutions of witches, heretics, and unbelievers.

When Sullivan turns from modern to ancient times, she brings to sight still more causes for concern. Christians have long been taught to live in prayerful "contemplation" and practice the virtue of chastity. That could seem wholesome enough, but Sullivan finds that Montesquieu objects on multiple levels. Such a "pursuit of perfection" not only suppresses birth rates—a curious preoccupation of Montesquieu's—it also leads to intrusions born of moral fanaticism, as when Christian emperors decreed that widows remain celibate rather than remarry (124–34). But perhaps the greatest problem that stems from late antiquity is that *treason* came to be conflated with *sacrilege*. In this regard at least, the problem would appear to lie not with Christianity itself, but the politicization of Christianity under Constantine.

As Sullivan shows (139–41), Montesquieu never discusses Plato's activity as a philosopher, only his actions as a "political man of Greece." Amending the laws of Lycurgus before him, Plato advocated "singular institutions" that made every possible effort "to inspire virtue" (4.6; Sullivan 141–53). The proposals of his *Republic* and *Laws* were "beautiful ideas," works of genius, but also deeply disturbing, for he advocated eugenics, upheld the notorious Spartan training in theft, gave arbitrary power to certain magistrates, and—worst of all—enslaved one class in order to grant leisure to another (Sullivan 159–62). The very formulation "beautiful ideas" turns out to be ironic, used by Montesquieu in reference to a law punishing those who commit suicide out of weakness—a law unduly harsh and requiring judges to know more than humanly possible (29.9; Sullivan 163–65). Sullivan makes a convincing case that Montesquieu is opposing Plato's influence: despotic institutions, defended in the name of virtue.

Her chapter on “Aristotle’s manner of thinking” (the title of SOTL 11.9) begins an intriguing finale to her book. Montesquieu presents Aristotle as the student who, envious of his teacher’s brilliance, “seems to have written his *Politics* only in order to oppose his feelings to Plato’s” (SOTL 29.19, 4.8; Sullivan 171–72). But even as Aristotle bridles at Plato’s most radical teachings, he still promulgates a version of his beautiful ideas. Aristotle distinguishes between kingship and tyranny “by accidental things, like the virtues or the vices of the prince” rather than by the arrangement of powers of government (SOTL 11.9). As Sullivan notes, this puts Aristotle in company with Richelieu in Montesquieu’s account (190–91). Again, Aristotle defended (some) slavery as natural, without dispelling the Greek prejudice that slavery is what barbarians are fit for. Such teachings, already problematic, would prove disastrous when Aristotle’s books returned to the West and combined with Christian thought. In particular, his opposition to usury would lend spurious justification to the persecution of Jews and slow the growth of commerce in Christian Europe (195–204).

Not a few have noticed that Aristotle and Montesquieu are much alike, but Sullivan presents Montesquieu as a sort of counter-Aristotle who succeeded where Aristotle failed. According to her conclusion, that alternative is prefigured by Alexander (210–13).¹ Montesquieu holds up Alexander as a man open to the habits and customs of barbarian peoples, who was free of the Greek prejudice that barbarians are born for slavery, who sought to unite peoples through maritime commerce, and who, of course, was not Christian. On the latter point, Sullivan suggests that Montesquieu encouraged a progressive version of Christianity that kept its advances while softening its fanaticism (214–15). But she also stresses one last parallel with Alexander: Montesquieu’s humane project is not only an act of genius, but an act of conquest (217). Sullivan thus leaves us wondering about Montesquieu’s own motives as a legislator, and whether, on close examination, he would not confess that his campaign against despotism is itself despotic.

In this instance, and indeed on every page in her book, Sullivan succeeds in drawing her readers into thoughtful inquiry about Montesquieu’s elusive text, and also—though she is basically silent about it—about the crisis of liberal constitutionalism in our time.

¹ Sullivan is not the first to stress the significance of Alexander in Montesquieu’s work; she cites the work of Catherine Volpilhac-Auger and Catherine Larrère (Sullivan 265n7). Andrea Radasanu anticipates more of Sullivan’s insights in “Montesquieu on Ancient Greek Foreign Relations: Toward National Self-Interest and International Peace,” *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (March 2013): 3–17.