Crucial to an understanding of Montesquieu’s work is the contrast he drew between ancient and modern mentalités. ‘Les politiques grecs,’ he wrote in his classic work *De l’esprit des lois* (1748), ‘qui vivaient dans le gouvernement populaire, ne reconnaissaient d’autre force qui pût les soutenir que celle de la vertu. Ceux d’aujourd’hui ne nous parlent que de manufactures, de commerce, de finances, de richesses et de luxe même.’

Ancient philosophers had conceptualised model regimes where human beings would flourish in accordance with their natural purposes and potentialities shaped by good laws well obeyed. Such moderns as Montesquieu, on the other hand, ceased to regard the state as a school for morality. No longer concerned with improving man’s soul, politics focused instead on the achievement of liberty, security and material prosperity.

Clearly something novel and distinctive, something recognisably ‘modern’, arose during the period from Machiavelli to Montesquieu. A teleological universe suffused with transcendent meaning and purposeful ends was supplanted by a more secular, ‘disenchanted’ world-view. Both the Christian conception of a life lived in humble devotion to the moral commandments of revealed religion and the classical conception of a virtuous life devoted to ethical perfection were challenged by a new political realism stressing the dominance of the passions over reason and the constructive potential of self-interest.

The authors of the eleven essays comprising this volume explore the complex relations between Montesquieu and modernity and between Montesquieu and antiquity. Assessing the content of his three major works, they conclude that whereas the label ‘modern’ suits Montesquieu, he nonetheless retained certain philosophical approaches characteristic of antiquity as well as a high regard for the primacy accorded to politics and philosophy in the
classical era.

Acknowledgements

David W. Carrithers, Introduction: Montesquieu and the spirit of modernity

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Pages:
268

Price Sterling (£):
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Ce superbe recueil d'articles conçus avec élégance devrait nous rappeler à tous que cet esprit qui guide la marche irrésistible de la modernité, personne ne nous en a donné une compréhension plus subtile et plus nuancé que le baron de Montesquieu.