In the Dutch Republic, even the dead discussed Montesquieu. Thus, in the anonymous pamphlet *Dialogues in the Realm of the Dead*, published in 1783, stadholder William IV tries to defend the behavior of his famous predecessor William III against a negative assessment by Johan Hop, chief treasurer of the Union from 1753 to 1769. When Hop claims that William III ruthlessly suppressed Dutch liberty, William IV counters by quoting Montesquieu on the occasional necessity, in extraordinary circumstances, of giving great power to a single republican magistrate. This, he adds, is what the Roman dictatorship was all about. Hop, who conveniently carries the *Esprit des Lois* around in his pocket in the realm of the dead, immediately replies that the comparison with Rome is utterly misplaced, since Montesquieu had stressed that great power had to be accompanied by brevity of tenure. William III, however, had been appointed for life. Much more to the point in judging the position of the stadholder-king, Hop continues, is yet another observation from the great Montesquieu:

> In a republic the sudden rise of a citizen to extraordinary power produces monarchy, or more than monarchy. Under monarchical government, the laws have provided for, or been accommodated to the constitution; the very principle of government checks the ruler. But when a citizen of a republic gains extraordinary power, the damage done is greater, because being unanticipated by the law, there exists no way of checking it.¹

The above exchange of opinions, although admittedly conducted in somewhat unusual circumstances, may serve to illustrate the widespread use made of Montesquieu’s *Esprit des Lois*, first published in 1748,

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¹ *Zamenspraken* in het Ryk der Dooden, 45–46. The Montesquieu quotation is from the *Esprit des Lois*, book II, chapter 3. All direct quotations from the *Esprit des Lois* in this chapter are based on the Pléiade edition of Montesquieu’s *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Roger Caillois. For the English translation I have, in some cases, made use of Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu*.
by representatives of all political persuasions in the Dutch Republic. It is, indeed, no exaggeration to claim that Montesquieu was among the most popular foreign political theorists of the second half of the century in that country. Yet despite the fact that this popularity has repeatedly been remarked upon by later historians, there still is a remarkable lack of research on Montesquieu’s Dutch impact. It is the purpose of the present chapter to explore this topic and thereby to further our understanding of the development of Dutch political thought in the later eighteenth century. In the first section, I shall discuss the formal reception of the *Esprit des Lois* and some of the interpretative problems that inevitably arise in any attempt to study the impact of a complex political treatise. The second section will deal with the ways in which the Dutch interpreted Montesquieu’s masterpiece in the light of their own republican experience. The third and final section will provide a sketch of the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary uses of Montesquieu in the years of political upheaval after 1780.

1. *The Dutch Reception of the Esprit des Lois*

Throughout the eighteenth century the Dutch republic remained one of Europe’s most important centers of printing and publishing. Most of the books and periodicals published in the French language were primarily destined for the export trade. The fact that in the third quarter of the century at least six French editions of the *Esprit des Lois* were published in Amsterdam alone therefore tells us very little about the Dutch reception of the book. What it does suggest, however, is that it was readily available to the contemporary bilingual Dutch elite-readership, well versed in both French and Dutch. The *Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt*, a prominent review journal, immediately drew the attention of a wide Dutch readership to Montesquieu’s work by devoting no less than thirty-eight pages to it. That the *Esprit des Lois* was

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4 *Maandelyke Uittreksels, of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt*, 69 (1749) 568–588 and 70 (1750) 57–75.