

PUBLISHING  
*The Prince*

HISTORY, READING, &  
THE BIRTH OF POLITICAL CRITICISM

*Jacob Soll*

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## 1. POLITICAL THEORY AS TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The French revolution was written out in full in the books of Tacitus and Machiavelli, and we could have sought the duties of the people's representatives in the histories of Augustus, Tiberius or Vespasian, or even that of certain French legislators; because, except for a few nuances of perfidy or cruelty, all tyrants are alike. For ourselves, we come to make the world privy to your political secrets, so that all our country's friends can rally to the voice of reason and the public interest.

—Maximilien Robespierre,

*Report on the Principles of Political Morality* (February 5, 1794)

Joseph de Maistre, the fanatical Catholic philosopher of the early nineteenth century, saw the French Revolution in terms of a culture war. Looking back on 1789 from the vantage point of the shaky Bourbon restoration, he blamed the Revolution on Voltaire. In his eyes, Voltaire's insistence on satire, political criticism, and irreligion weakened the thousand-year-old bonds of blind faith that had kept the order of monarchical civilization since Charlemagne. De Maistre was an extremist and a romantic, but despite his feverish approach to political theory, he understood an essential element of the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Doubt and skepticism, sharpened into tools of political criticism, had cut away at the foundation of Christian, monarchical authority. In de Maistre's Manichean world, there was no liberal middle ground—either Europe returned to the monolithic faith of church and king, or it would descend into the hellish fires of chaos. Absolute monarchy, he insisted, could not coexist with political criticism.

While de Maistre might have understood a cultural cause of the French Revolution, he certainly did not have a solid concept of its origins. The buildup of political criticism had indeed weakened the absolutist order of Old Regime Europe. An esoteric array of secular critics, from the Protestant Pierre Bayle to the champion of noble privilege, Montesquieu, along with Voltaire, Gibbon, Diderot, and others, forged a new vision of politics based on political and legal criticism.<sup>2</sup> What de Maistre did not see was that this critical, skeptical view had its roots in absolutist intellectual life. Pioneered by

Machiavelli and effectively applied by absolutist philosophers such as Jean Bodin, pragmatic political criticism was developed as a tool for princes. Ironically, this earthly science of politics, called “reason of state” by some and commonly referred to as the idea of prudence, was a product of the very world that de Maistre claimed it had destroyed.

If the secular political ideology of the Enlightenment is the foundation of modern politics and society, we still do not understand the process by which it evolved out of the absolutist political tradition of the seventeenth century. How do we explain the fact that the Venetians, the Dutch, and the English developed republican and/or revolutionary political traditions by the mid-seventeenth century, yet the arch-absolutist state of France was the setting for the great statements of political ideas that have shaped the subject since Hobbes and Locke? What was the cultural process by which monarchical authority evolved toward Kantian public enlightenment?

The goal of this book is to answer these questions by tracing the evolution of secular political culture from its Machiavellian origins into the absolutist period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, finally, to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It will expand Paul Hazard’s classic thesis that “almost every idea that appeared to be revolutionary in around 1760 or even around 1789, was already in existence in 1680,”<sup>3</sup> by showing the unlikely, though close, relationship between monarchist politics, erudite scholarship, skeptical culture, and the Enlightenment. This book will resituate the shift away from divine monarchical legitimacy and a long crisis of political authority, toward the world of books and editing—in a middle zone between the hungry world of Grub Street popular culture and the metaphysics of elite philosophers. It will reveal that the dynamic site of political criticism arose in the realm of humanist learned culture, where editors, commentators, and printers used old editorial strategies to publish historical and political information. Central to the understanding of the rise of political criticism between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment is the story of humanist erudite practices and their consequences.

Building on classical tradition and Machiavellian tradition, absolutist scholars of the sixteenth century developed a philosophy of practical politics through the creation of critical-reading methods for the analysis of historical information. This quest to create a truly accurate, critically assessed, source-based history was driven by ambitions to help strengthen the French monarchy. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, a drastic change took place. The critical historical method of “reason of state,” or the “capacity to calculate the appropriate means of preserving the state,” had been appropriated by critics of the crown.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, eighteenth-century political philosophers forged new methods of political criticism from the old tools of republican humanist and absolutist historiography. By doing so, they publicly circulated an intellectual tool that could be used not only to bolster royal

authority but also to criticize and dismantle it. The popularization of skeptical political culture was not Hazard's "crisis of consciousness" but, rather, the triumph of an old skeptical tradition that emerged in Venice in the works of Paolo Sarpi and Trajano Boccalini and found its way to France via the works of Tacitus and the royal obsession with political prudence. Thus, the republican tradition did indeed set the stage for the Enlightenment, but not necessarily by providing a philosophy of virtue. Instead, it produced a set of universal critical tools that could be used by republicans, monarchists, and subversives alike.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT IS CRITICISM?

Modern scholars have called Pierre Bayle the "father of the Enlightenment." Indeed, his *Critical and Historical Dictionary* (1697) was the first great best seller of the eighteenth century. Bayle's work was much more than a simple dictionary. It was a great compendium that showed how to use historical evidence to attack established authority. Bayle locked his readers into a circle of reading and critical questioning. The idea was that if established historical facts could be undermined with other established facts, the reader would have to exercise great critical abilities to ascertain the truth. It was not just a scholarly method. It was the mechanics of a new worldview.

Once Regent Philippe d'Orléans lifted the ban on Bayle's book after the death of Louis XIV in 1715, readers waited in line to consult it at the Bibliothèque Mazarine.<sup>6</sup> Of 500 private library catalogs between 1750 and 1780, 288 contained Bayle's masterwork, far more than any other book.<sup>7</sup> Yet while Bayle was a great innovator, he obviously did not write for an enlightened, eighteenth-century audience. He died in 1706, nine years before Louis XIV. His *Dictionary* was the product of an earlier age, researched and written in exile in Holland, at the height of Louis's quest for absolutist government. It thus reflects the concerns of the seventeenth century. It was neither an attack on absolutism nor a paean to reason. Rather, it was a monument to criticism and doubt beyond political ideology.

Bayle wrote his work in the ambiguous context of seventeenth-century humanism and skepticism. As Reinhart Koselleck has observed, Bayle drew on Richard Simon's attempts at understanding theology by subjecting the Old Testament to philological analysis.<sup>8</sup> Simon himself built on an older humanist tradition of textual criticism that scrutinized texts for historical, linguistic accuracy. In the sixteenth century, the great northern humanist Erasmus had shown that poor translations of the Bible changed its fundamental meaning: a historically mistranslated word or a poorly interpreted allegory could twist the meaning of the Bible or of a classical text.<sup>9</sup> Taking up a central theme of Dutch proto-Protestant humanism, Erasmus insisted that linguistic

and hermeneutical accuracy brought the reader closer to the true meaning of revelation. This implied that good readers made good Christians. Simon (1638–1712), a Catholic, sought to reform the reading practices of the Reformation. He attacked the Calvinist tenet of the personal interpretation of the Scriptures by showing that without careful training in textual criticism—a skill he obviously claimed to possess—readers could never truly understand their meaning. He believed that his innovation proved once and for all the necessity of the Catholic Church as a scriptural guide.<sup>10</sup> However, orthodox Catholics, such as Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, recognized dangers in Simon’s approach. In Bossuet’s eyes, Simon had illustrated that the rules of criticism operated independently of faith. The very idea of subjecting the Bible to an extensive, rational, historical critique of any sort went against the fundamentals of faith and undermined its inherent authority.

Bossuet was not the only one to see the subversive potential of Simon’s work. Pierre Bayle and Spinoza were quick to recognize the significance of Simon’s achievement.<sup>11</sup> Bayle realized that Simon’s methodology of historical erudition could be used not only for religious texts but for secular history as well.<sup>12</sup> Koselleck notes that the difference between Simon and Bayle was that Simon’s goal was “revelation” while Bayle’s was “reason.”<sup>13</sup> Bible criticism was just a step away from political criticism.

Thus, there is a great paradox at the heart of Bayle’s *Dictionary*. It reveals that the critical tradition so cherished by Enlightenment thinkers had its roots in the work of “erudite philologists, grammarians and translators of ancient languages,” the foot soldiers of royal absolutist and post-Tridentine humanism.<sup>14</sup> It also reveals the intellectual path by which the scholarly techniques of textual criticism would form the basis of the new secular order, an order that ideally would use the rational analysis of history to formulate its political theories and whose only constraints were the laws of nature themselves. In short, absolute monarchs had turned to faith in reason as a weapon, and, in turn, this new cult undermined absolutism.<sup>15</sup> Rather than the traditional view of absolutism in which *auctoritas non veritas facit legem*, the secular culture of “truth” actually competed with raw power and effectively undermined it.<sup>16</sup> Praxis would become enlightenment.

To ground the origins of secular political theory in erudite historical criticism has important implications for intellectual history. It reveals why traditional intellectual history has not successfully explained the origins of the Enlightenment. What Koselleck calls the “reign of criticism” at the end of the seventeenth century was an intellectual movement that sought not to write great books and ideas but, instead, to translate, examine, compile, reedit, and criticize existing works. J. G. A. Pocock has pointed to the importance of this concept for the eighteenth century: “The capacity to read texts critically, vital . . . to the writing of Enlightenment history, was also a great part of what the age meant by ‘philosophy.’”<sup>17</sup> No one can assign a political *grande idée* to

Bayle's *Dictionary*. That is why, until quite recently, intellectual historians have come up empty-handed when trying to connect the Enlightenment to the obscure parentage of the seventeenth century.<sup>18</sup>

As the complex page setting of Bayle's *Dictionary* illustrates, criticism involved more than simply writing (figs. 2a and 2b). Authors such as Bayle saw the production of meaning not in terms of words alone but, rather, in terms of a textual bricolage: they cited, translated, commented on, reproduced, pasted, and juxtaposed texts against each other in vast collages and compilations. Philosophy could be found not only in primary texts but also in introductions, annexes, and the margins of books. Medieval and early modern authors arranged and even rearranged. To write meant to produce discourse, but meaning was also strongly attached to the materiality of books and the presentation of texts.

This raises the question of how to study the history of political philosophy during the age of humanist textual practices. What constituted political philosophy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? What did it look like, or what was it meant to look like? The textual collage of Bayle's *Dictionary* illustrates that the study of early modern political philosophy is a more complex problem than has previously been considered.<sup>19</sup> When reading the compendia and erudite encyclopedias of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, it becomes clear that the criteria of what constituted a major work of political thought were very different during this period than they are now. Political philosophy was not clear-cut discourse, and it was a textual practice closely associated with the culture of printed information. If modern historians are to understand the complex intellectual world that produced the Enlightenment, they must think like humanists and study textual practices as political statements.

Indeed, intellectual historians who simply skip from high spot to high spot—like tourists who stay on a tour bus and ignore the gritty reality of the monuments they visit—cannot hope to understand what writers and their readers had in mind. They must explore the backstreets of bibliography and follow the steep paths of the social history of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> This does not only mean “grubbing in the archives,” as Robert Darnton insisted in his now classic critique of Peter Gay.<sup>21</sup> In this instance, it means taking into account that high culture was messier and more complicated than has been previously recognized.<sup>22</sup> So-called high culture was not as high and pristine as it appears today in the seemingly stable classic editions published by Cambridge University Press and Penguin Books. High books such as *The Prince* could lead low lives, as socially nonelite scholars and printers helped shape their meaning and as a heterogeneous reading public made multiple interpretations. In short, we have much to discover about the canon itself. Rather than obstinately embracing the canon or righteously rejecting it, the time has come to reassess its very nature and measure its nuances. As Rousseau and, ulti-

mately, Robespierre made starkly clear, the works of Tacitus and Machiavelli could be put to more radical uses than those of Voltaire. In the end, high philosophy helped fuel popular revolution.

Pierre Bayle was not the first to try to reveal the mechanics of critical practice. He knew what modern scholars have overlooked: that the tools of political criticism had circulated for nearly a century in the works of political reason of state. His *Dictionary* represented the next stage in the life of the old critical tradition. Precisely the circulation of reason-of-state literature and of an apparatus of scholarly criticism within a growing public sphere made available the methods of decoding the crown's strategies for retaining power.<sup>23</sup> Once this happened, points out political philosopher Marcel Gauchet, the state quite literally lost its mystery, and opposition to absolute power became more widespread. The process of publishing critical historical works concerning reason of state and prudence broke the sacred balance between the absolute monarchist state and its subjects, turning the crown into a subject of critical analysis.<sup>24</sup> The diffusion of political criticism during the seventeenth century illustrates the ambiguity of the concept of the "public" at that time.<sup>25</sup> Strategies and critical historical readings circulated through publication, yet they entailed very private reading. They were, after all, about dissimulation—how princes do it, how to read their strategies, and how to do it yourself. What is less clear is the process by which the world of reason and state—first royal and then individual and private—became public.

#### AMELOT DE LA HOUSSAYE AND THE MATERIAL RHETORIC OF PRUDENCE

A key to understanding the publication and popularization of codes and strategies of reason of state is an erudite scholar from the late seventeenth century, Abraham-Nicolas Amelot de La Houssaye (1634–1706).<sup>26</sup> Amelot was single-handedly responsible for reediting the greatest works of secular political theory at the end of the seventeenth century. He translated and commented on the works of Tacitus, Machiavelli, Gasparo Contarini, Paolo Sarpi, the Cardinal d'Ossat, Baltasar Gracián, and La Rochefoucauld. Before Bayle, Amelot took these works of critical history and political sociology and re-presented them with his prefaces, notes, and commentaries, all of which "helped" the reader use these books to criticize royal despotism. Authors such as Tacitus, who had been a staple of absolutist historical culture, were now presented as tools of subversion.

When eighteenth-century French thinkers read Machiavelli, they most likely saw him through Amelot's much-published critical version.<sup>27</sup> In understanding how Amelot appropriated these essential works of critical political history, introducing them into the wide market for political criticism created



by Versailles, we will see for the first time how a monarchist, absolutist program of history evolved into the basis of public political criticism.<sup>28</sup> Amelot's critical project marks the moment when the knowledge of political history and historical criticism became public and widely accessible. To be sure, he was not the first political thinker to understand that by publishing historical information, he could transform it into political criticism. This was, of course, Paolo Sarpi's great project. But beyond Sarpi and before Bayle, Amelot was the first to create a complex program to systematically publish a reading apparatus to help the public understand political criticism.

In his article "Tacitus and the Tacitist Tradition," Arnaldo Momigliano claimed that he did "not know of an adequate study of A.-N. Amelot de La Houssaye, the greatest Tacitist of France and the translator of Baltasar Gracián, who was also the writer of the *Histoire du Gouvernement de Venise* (1676), a classic in the interpretation of the Venetian constitution."<sup>29</sup> Momigliano was stating what Pierre Bayle knew at the end of the seventeenth century: that Amelot de La Houssaye was personally responsible for re-presenting and transmitting the major works of secular, historical political prudence during a period of "crisis" that we now recognize to be pivotal in the evolution of classical Renaissance culture into the Enlightenment.<sup>30</sup> The tradition of the *saeculum* (the historical realm of humankind's earthly affairs) passed through Amelot's hands, and during the thirty years of Louis XIV's reign, Amelot nurtured and protected the ancient methods of pragmatic political analysis, repackaging the political texts he edited to fit their era. A highbrow version of Menocchio, the subversive, freethinking miller from Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, Amelot appropriated the works he read and recast royal prudence as a weapon for political criticism.<sup>31</sup>

Amelot's most notable works include a translation and commentary of Paolo Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent* (1683) and *Treatise on Beneficial Matters* (1685), as well as a translation of Minucci and Sarpi's *History of the Uscoques* (1682).<sup>32</sup> Amelot's translation of *The Prince* (1683) was the primary French version of Machiavelli's seminal work throughout the eighteenth century and was still being reedited in the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> Containing Amelot's preface and commentary and, in its margins, eighty-three maxims from Tacitus, this edition was published twenty-three times between 1683 and 1789. His best-known translation was that of Baltasar Gracián's *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, better known under the French title that Amelot gave to it, *L'Homme de cour* (1684), which was a best seller in its time, with ten editions between 1684 and 1808. It is still published today, making Amelot one of the most successful translators in French history.<sup>34</sup> Amelot's later works include commentaries on Cardinal d'Ossat's *Lettres* (1698) and La Rochefoucauld's *Mémoires de la minorité de Louis XIV* (1688) and *Réflexions, sentences et maximes morales* (1711),<sup>35</sup> as well as a prefatory commentary on Frédéric Léonard's compilation of royal treaties, *Les préliminaires des traités des*

*princes* (1692). Amelot's posthumous *Mémoires historiques, politiques, critiques et littéraires* (1722), an eighteenth-century best seller, was likely a forgery.<sup>36</sup>

Amelot was, above all, a translator of Tacitus, publishing three different translations of his favorite author: *Tibère: Discours politiques sur Tacite* (1683), *La Morale de Tacite* (1686), and *Tacite: Les six premiers livres des Annales* (1690).<sup>37</sup> Five editions of French translations of the works of Tacitus were published by the Protestant academician and Richelieu's ally Perrot d'Ablancourt.<sup>38</sup> Amelot was the only other French translator of Tacitus with translations published between 1680 and 1700. He was the most important translator of Tacitus of the age of Louis XIV, with fourteen editions of his translations of Tacitus between 1683 and 1731.

In total, between 1676 and 1706, the year of Amelot's death, at least 59 editions of his eighteen different works were published in French. Between 1706 and 1808, 47 editions were published, including 5 previously unpublished, posthumous works. Thus, between 1676 and 1808 (the year Amelot's works stopped being regularly reedited), at least 106 editions of twenty-three different works by Amelot appeared in print. On the basis of these numbers, Amelot would appear to be one of the most prolific and popular writers of his time and one of the most successful translators of all time. Multiple editions of his work were published well into the eighteenth century, and eleven editions of two of his works were published during the twentieth century. His books were carefully studied and much appreciated by Pierre Bayle. Queen Christina of Sweden annotated her edition of Amelot's translation of *The Prince* while in exile in Rome. Montesquieu wrote notes in the margins of his copies of Amelot's books and cited him in *De l'esprit des loix*. Voltaire vilified Amelot but reedited his critical edition of *The Prince*. Gibbon's library contained the *Histoire du gouvernement de Venise*, and even Napoleon copied down passages from this work with Jesuit-like diligence.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Amelot has been forgotten by modern intellectual historiography precisely because of his own authorial strategy, which fits poorly into the conventional definition of what it means to be an author. Writing critical—and possibly republican—political theory during the Sun King's rule was a near impossibility for an author working in the oppressive atmosphere of Paris.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Amelot used time-tested strategies of editorial dissimulation—translation, commentary, and writing with double meanings—to mask his work. When carefully examined, Amelot's editions of Tacitus and Baltasar Gracián, for example, are facades that cover the carefully constructed edifice of his own political thought. Understanding how Amelot interpreted and represented his immense corpus of major works of critical political historiography will allow us to understand how their meaning evolved between the

Renaissance and the Enlightenment, as well as illustrating the grander picture of the evolution of secular political culture in early modern Europe.<sup>41</sup>

## REPRESENTING REASON OF STATE

Little is known about the life of Abraham-Nicolas Amelot de La Houssaye, who was born in Orléans in 1634 and died on December 8, 1706, in Paris, where he was buried in the cemetery of Saint-Gervais. Amelot occupied a gray zone in the literary political world of his time. He was not an author in the conventional sense of the term. Nor was he a member of an academy or a recipient of a royal pension. At the end of his life, he appears to have lived solely from the patronage of a wealthy benefactor, the abbé Henri de Fourcy.<sup>42</sup> Amelot was a print-shop corrector, editor, and professional publicist, and in this tradition of humanist printing and editing, he re-presented a large number of the most influential works of secular history and rhetoric of early modern Europe. In examining how he re-presented such works as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, it is clear not only how translators, editors, and printers manipulated established works to serve their own agendas but also the extent to which texts must be interpreted in the context of how and when they were reproduced, as well as how the editor or author intended them to be read at the time. In the end, does it matter if Machiavelli intended his work to be republican, since we can never definitively establish what his true intentions were? Or is it more fruitful to examine what editors such as Amelot thought of the work, how they presented it, and how their readers read and then interpreted it? Amelot had his own political agenda, and to meet it, he edited the books of existing authors, bending their meaning to fit his intentions.<sup>43</sup> With Amelot de La Houssaye, print-shop editor and Tacitean political theorist, the history of the book intersects with the history of ideas.

In his youth, Amelot was a poor student *aumonier* (ward) of the Jesuits at the Collège de Paris, working as a copyist to earn his board.<sup>44</sup> In 1667, at the age of thirty-three, he received the relatively advantageous appointment of second secretary to the ambassador to Portugal, Louis de Verjus, comte de Crécy.<sup>45</sup> Verjus recommended Amelot to Nicolas Prunier de Saint-André, the ambassador to Venice, where Amelot was once again secretary in 1669. In a strange turn of events, Verjus, on his return to Lisbon, apparently discovered that Amelot had stolen a number of important documents and valuable objects. According to a police report, Amelot sold these secret ambassadorial minutes to "foreign powers."<sup>46</sup> Verjus wrote to warn Saint-André in Venice, where Amelot was removed from any sensitive duties, forbidden to work again for the king, and, as a distraction, sent to the Biblioteca Marciana to "find as many documents as he wanted for his commerce [in illicit documents]."<sup>47</sup>

Amelot was thus removed from the service of Louis XIV. What options were left open for a former Jesuit copyist and ambassadorial secretary with a tarnished reputation and a talent for languages? As a police report states, Amelot began a business of finding documents and publishing them for money.<sup>48</sup> Amelot was not yet an author. At one level, he was a proto-newsman. At another, he worked in the spirit of the monastic tradition of the scribe in the scriptorium—living in the printing shop, where he researched, corrected, and translated various documents, which were then printed by the royal printer for a profit.<sup>49</sup> This odd mix of trafficking in diplomatic documents and editing political works began as a professional opportunity for a poor corrector and translator but turned into something more important. By publishing documents and history pertaining to reason of state, Amelot crossed the line from impoverished gadfly to subversive critic. He was giving new life to what had been secret archival documents. It was treason to sell secret treaties and ambassadorial relations. To publish them was sedition.

With his *History of the Government of Venice* (1677), Amelot discovered both the force and danger of openly publishing texts that revealed the workings of reason of state.<sup>50</sup> What brought Leopold von Ranke fame in the nineteenth century brought legal worries to his predecessor. As in the case of Ranke, Amelot's commerce in Venetian diplomatic relations served as the basis of a revolutionary method of critical political history. However, as the police report states, Amelot's Venetian archival research first landed him directly in the Bastille.<sup>51</sup>

Amelot had been thrown in jail for a book with which he and the royal printer, Frédéric Léonard, had hoped to make significant profits.<sup>52</sup> Despite Amelot's six weeks in the Bastille and despite the Venetian ambassador's threat to bring Amelot's severed head back to Venice, Amelot and Léonard's gamble paid off. One document in the archives of the Bastille states that the *History of the Government of Venice* was reprinted for a second time despite its ban, and in fewer than three years, at least twenty-two editions of the book appeared across Europe in Dutch, English, Italian, and Spanish.<sup>53</sup> With this first success, Amelot not only became an internationally known author but also learned a lesson in writing about politics under Louis XIV: while it could be a source of revenue, it had to be done with calculated prudence. To avoid further prison terms, Amelot turned to methods of writing that reflected his role in Léonard's printing shop as much as long-standing traditions of Tacitean authorship.<sup>54</sup> Rather than "writing" books himself, Amelot slipped into the traditional role of a *correcteur d'imprimerie*—a sort of in-house scholarly editor.<sup>55</sup> Working and often living in Léonard's shop, Amelot earned his bread publishing critical editions of political works.<sup>56</sup>

The nonauthor of his own works, Amelot managed to keep his literary identity ambiguous. In the preface to his first translation of Tacitus, *Tibère*:

*Discours politiques sur Tacite*, Amelot explains the ambiguity of his authorial practice.

As for myself, Reader, it is not easy to tell you precisely what my Work is, although I know well what it concerns. And in reality, it is difficult to give it an appropriate name. Because if you consider only the title, or the text of the Chapter headings, it is a pure translation of passages from Tacitus; if you examine the content of the Chapters themselves, it is a Political, and Historical, Commentary, on his Works; if you have observed, that Tiberius is always the principal subject of each Chapter, it is in part the History, in part the Examination of his reign, from the beginning to the end: the reason for which the book is entitled TIBERIUS. But if you have remarked, that the basis of the content concerns all Princes in general, it is no longer the reign of Tiberius, but the Art-of-reigning. Finally, if you examine the instructions, and the Maxims of State, which are spread throughout the body of the Work, you will find that it is an abridgment, and like an elixir of all the Works of Tacitus, rather than a Commentary on the six first Books of his Annals. Such that I can say about my work, as did Justus-Lipsius about his *Civil Doctrine*, that the invention and the form are such, that it is correct to say, that everything in it is by me, and and that nothing of it is.<sup>57</sup>

Placing himself firmly in the Tacitean tradition of Justus Lipsius, in which books of political theory were crafted like commonplace collections of classical citations, Amelot says, with a hint of irony perhaps directed at a royal censor, that his works are an “elixir” of the works of Tacitus. Thus, at the same time, all is by him and nothing is.<sup>58</sup> Amelot was making an important point: he could not be arrested for parroting the words of Tacitus, the semiofficial historian of the Bourbon regime.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, Amelot was using translation and commentary to formulate his own libertine political philosophy. How exactly did he manage to re-present such authors as Tacitus, Machiavelli, and Baltasar Gracián to the extent that he in effect became the author of their works? Using many of the editorial devices inherited from both manuscript and print traditions, Amelot manipulated the *mise en page* (page setting) and *mise en livre* (organization of compiled texts within a book) of his text and the texts on which he commented.<sup>60</sup> Through prefatory texts, footnotes, concordances, and commentaries, Amelot hijacked the texts presented in his books.<sup>61</sup> He saw the practice of pasting together collages of texts as a kind of writing, which I will refer to as *material rhetoric*.

In *The Bibliography and Sociology of Texts*, Donald McKenzie repeats the proposition made by Fredson Bowers—in his classic book *Textual and Literary Criticism*—that the form of a text affects its meaning.<sup>62</sup> In a now famous study of Congreve’s works of theater, McKenzie showed that the

author or the editor of a work controls its format, typographical conventions, and page settings. These material aspects have an “expressive function” that influences the reception and interpretation of a work.<sup>63</sup> Thinkers such as Lipsius and Bayle thought about writing and rhetoric in the material terms of how different text presentations and page settings would appear to the reader. Their discursive vision was far more complex than the simple linear narratives studied by historians of political philosophy and literature. In studying humanist compilers and historians, it is thus necessary to understand how they perceived their own authorial practice as well as how their page settings affected the meaning of the texts they represented. The idea of *material rhetoric* goes one step further than only taking into account the material form of texts. Material rhetoric implies that the act of changing the meaning of a text by changing its formal presentation was a conscious method of expression for humanists and should be studied as such.

Amelot’s editorial practice not only sought to comment on authors such as Tacitus; by manipulating the texts of the works he edited, he changed their meaning to fit the intellectual market of his time. This is particularly relevant in the case of Amelot’s greatest best seller, *L’Homme de cour*.<sup>64</sup> In this work as in others, Amelot’s material rhetoric not only modifies the meaning of the primary text by way of the constant intervention of his commentaries; it frames the text between various “paratexts” that both introduce and then reexplain how the text is to be read.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Amelot reorganizes the text with numerical maxims (which are not in Gracián’s original) and then gives lists and indexes of these maxims. In addition, he provides a collection of courtly maxims by other authors, drawing parallels with the primary text by page references so as to help the reader interpret the “oracle of prudence” in the context of the world of the court.<sup>66</sup>

That Amelot was famous and infamous for prefacing, translating, and commenting on political works was an advantage at one level: under the guise of paraphrasing the sanctioned Tacitus, he could write about sensitive subjects such as tyranny and flattery.<sup>67</sup> However, the very methods that veiled Amelot’s authorial responsibility also diminished his reputation in the pantheon of historical philosophy. Bayle would be remembered as the author of the *Dictionnaire*, but Amelot would be remembered only vaguely—as Momigliano characterized him—as “the author of the *Histoire du gouvernement de Venise* and the French translator of Tacitus and Baltasar Gracián.”

My goal here is not just to resuscitate Amelot but to reconstruct the long-term scholarly tradition of which he was a part. Amelot’s works serve as a lens through which to view a tradition that began in earnest in the sixteenth century and evolved in unforeseen and revolutionary ways during the Age of Enlightenment. They provide us with a unique opportunity to revise the way in which we study the history of philosophy today. They show that we need

to relearn the material, textual practices inherent in the production of early modern political philosophy and literature. Seventeenth-century readers recognized the complexity of Amelot's critical project. It becomes very clear that what they saw as authorship and political philosophy differs greatly from the piously removed readings of literary scholars and the pure discourse analysis of modern historians of philosophy. Indeed, many modern traditions of literary criticism seem almost scholastic in their lack of teleological consciousness. For early modern critics, ideas were important, but so was the materiality of texts; therefore, we must focus on both. By juggling page settings and various texts, Amelot was speaking an editorial language that was familiar, yet innovative within the genre of critical editions.

Fortunately, Amelot's works were widely reviewed in the burgeoning erudite press, and it is thus possible to form an idea of how seventeenth-century readers read political philosophy. One of the most voracious readers of the second half of the seventeenth century, Pierre Bayle, reviewed almost all of Amelot's works.<sup>68</sup> In the June 1686 edition of the *Nouvelles de la république des lettres*, Bayle wrote the fourth of six different reviews that he published between 1684 and 1688 on Amelot de La Houssaye's works. The work in question, *La Morale de Tacite: De la flaterie* (1686), was Amelot's second translation and compilation of maxims of Tacitus, accompanied by voluminous commentary (figs. 3a and 3b). *La Morale* was printed in Paris by Martin and Boudot, whose books (the title page tells us) were sold in Amsterdam by Henri Desbordes, the publisher of the *Nouvelles*. Bayle, the exile, was never far from Amelot, the Paris publicist, who published a quarter of his works on the Protestant printing presses of Holland. Over the years, Bayle kept up with the vicissitudes of Amelot's career.<sup>69</sup> More than that, Bayle was intrigued by Amelot's consciously created page layout. In his glowing review of *La Morale*, Bayle pauses from his examination of the question of flattery to describe Amelot's material rhetoric.

Here is the order the author follows. First he shows the Latin passage by Tacitus that concerns flattery. Underneath, side by side, he puts his own translation and next to it the translation of the late Mr. D'Ablancourt. Underneath this he gives his attacks against this famous translator. After that, he gives his commentary on this passage, which is itself nothing but a fabric woven from passages from Tacitus, Pliny the Younger and Paterculus, which are cited at the bottom of the page.<sup>70</sup>

Step-by-step, Bayle goes over Amelot's page, describing the layout of each material device. The so-called father of the Enlightenment was above all a reader of the seventeenth century, steeped in its rich mix of Renaissance literary and textual practices.<sup>71</sup> Bayle recommended that his readers focus on Amelot's notes and prefaces.<sup>72</sup>

Bayle was not the only critic who recognized Amelot's authorial practice for what it was. A great, though unrecognized, critic of the end of the seventeenth century, the lieutenant of the Châtelet (police chief) Gabriel Nicolas de La Reynie (1625–1709), wrote his reports not for the republic of letters but, instead, for the crown.<sup>73</sup> Much like the literary critics who were the subjects of his investigations, La Reynie looked not just at ideas but at how they were presented.

Amelot is working as a print-shop corrector and he has translated Paolo Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent*, and far from sweetening a text that is filled with sympathy for heretics, Amelot misses no occasion in his preface and his notes which are found in the margins, to mark and favor the libertine sentiments of Sarpi.<sup>74</sup>

La Reynie recognized that the works Amelot translated, such as *The Prince* and the *History of the Council of Trent*, were in themselves subversive. Re-edited in French with Amelot's notes, they were even more so.

At the same time, the Sieur Amelot has also translated from Italian *The Prince* by Machiavelli and he has also published this work in Holland filled with notes, in which he has mixed maxims that are so dangerous that they deserve to be condemned for the good of Morals and Politics. For this he deserves much blame.<sup>75</sup>

However, the lieutenant of the Châtelet did not arrest Amelot. The former Jesuit novice was hiding behind the works of others, and this made it less pressing and perhaps harder to arrest an author who was well-connected with the powerful Louvois Le Tellier family. La Reynie understood his man, and more important, he understood the force of critical political history. He recommended that Amelot be put under surveillance but not harassed. Amelot and his critical eye would be far more dangerous in a foreign country, he aptly noted.<sup>76</sup> La Reynie's instinct would be proven correct only ten years later, when Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary* showed exactly how influential a good French critic could be if able to work in the freer air of the more tolerant Dutch Republic.

It seems a perfect contrast, then, that Pierre Bayle found Amelot's critical version of Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent* laudable for the same reason that La Reynie condemned it. In his review of Amelot's translation, he speaks not so much of Sarpi's work but, rather, of how Amelot reframed it. It is Amelot's commentary that he recommends to the reader.

The publication of the first edition of the *History of the Council of Trent* well-informed the Public as to the importance of this work, the usefulness of its notes, and the beauty of its Preface, in which one sees reigning overall the force of [Amelot's] esprit. . . .<sup>77</sup>



Although working on opposite sides of the critical fence, Bayle and La Reynie offer valuable insights in how to study political philosophy during the age of humanist criticism. Long before Koselleck, they knew that the key to political criticism was textual criticism. They also knew that the publication and circulation of secular history was a potential dagger of Brutus. But they did not know how effectively it would cut to the heart of the monarchical state only half a century later.

In 1690, Amelot published his third and final translation of Tacitus, *Tacite: Les six premiers livres des Annales*. This heavily annotated translation is the only seventeenth-century French edition of Tacitus that contains an illustration of the Roman historian on its frontispiece. Yet Tacitus is only part of the authorial bill. Sitting at a table in a library, dressed in Renaissance clothing, Tacitus is shown writing a book. Around him are crowns and symbols of the Roman Empire. This scene is presented on a stage, on the front of which is written, “Tacite, par le Sieur Amelot de la Houssaie.” Amelot is billed like a theater director and Tacitus as his star. Tacitus provides the raw talent, but Amelot must interpret it and present it. In this context, the printing shop is backstage. It has been said that a “book is like the tip of an iceberg,” that it is “the visible one-fifth or so that is left of the writing and re-writing, editing and re-editing, research and revision that lie beneath it and have produced it.”<sup>78</sup> In the case of Amelot de La Houssaie, we may go so far as to say that his political thought is also like the tip of an iceberg of humanist rhetorical and editorial practices. These editorial practices and their relationship to political philosophy are crucial to understanding the origins of secular culture in France.

Above all, tracing the humanist, monarchist origins of eighteenth-century political criticism allows us to situate the Enlightenment in its own era. At one level, a project that situates the origins of the Enlightenment in the tyrannical politics of absolutism might appear pessimistic. Yet this study neither seeks to cast a negative light on secular political theory nor insists on the existence of a negative “dialectic of Enlightenment.”<sup>79</sup> In showing the complex origins of secular political theory, it reveals the complexity of the secular tradition in western Europe. There were certainly *grandes idées* of the Enlightenment, and implicit to their formulation and expression was the evolution of an older culture of criticism. Enlightenment philosophies did not simply evolve from the messianic hope of Christianity into a new secular mythology. Nor was it the clear outcome of a high-minded tradition of republican or merchant virtue; nor did it spring primarily from a spontaneous movement of popular sedition or from a simple trend of de-Christianization. Rather, in its original essence, the critical spirit of the eighteenth century grew from a practice—or as the French would say, a *geste*—embedded in the learned culture of Renaissance humanism, both republican and, later, monarchist. It came from a tradition whose origins were elite but whose uses spanned class and ideology.

The ideas of the Enlightenment would find a home in this culture based on what Peter Burke so aptly called the “Renaissance sense of the past”—the great humanist movement that, for the first time since antiquity, sought to understand the past not as an immobile constant but, rather, in terms of change, difference, and human possibility.<sup>80</sup> It would permit some Europeans to believe that they at least had a chance to wrest the *gubernaculum*, or tiller of human affairs, from the hand of God.<sup>81</sup>

In the end, this book seeks to show that Enlightenment thinkers were products of their own time. Voltaire and Montesquieu were educated during the seventeenth century, and Robespierre himself, as the quotation at the beginning of this introduction so dramatically illustrates, was a lawyer and Latinist trained in the great French humanistic legal tradition. These thinkers attempted to mold abstract ideas such as empathy, humanity, justice, liberty, reason, and revolution out of the ideas and intellectual traditions most available to them. In this light, Robespierre’s desperate tyranny seems less criminal than it does hopelessly Oedipal. Much like the Soviet apparichiks who transformed into capitalists but retained their totalitarian tendencies, the apostles of revolutionary terror could not shake off the weight of their humanist origins. They, too, would remain true to the grand, yet potentially treacherous, heritage of critical history.

Historians must recognize that the thinkers who produced one of the grandest moments in human history were nurtured and educated by the ancien régime; it was in a way their muse. But this does not diminish their contribution. Indeed, it renders it more complex and surely richer. Michel Foucault warned against what he called the “blackmail of the Enlightenment”—that if one was not wholeheartedly for the historical concept of Enlightenment reason, one risked casting a vote by default for the authoritarian alternative.<sup>82</sup> In response, Foucault proposed a model of perpetual Kantian critique of the Enlightenment, which he characterized as a “complex historical process” in a “state of tension.”<sup>83</sup> To avoid a teleological turn as we analyze and critique the Enlightenment, we can ground our own analysis in an earlier tradition. Before Foucault, Habermas, and even Immanuel Kant, Amelot de La Houssaye and Pierre Bayle developed critical historical methods that are still the foundation of historical epistemology today.<sup>84</sup> Had Bayle lived a century later, his *Dictionary* surely would have had an ironic chapter on the Enlightenment, because for Bayle, the practices of doubt and protest were stronger than ideology.<sup>85</sup> Bayle’s complex page setting is surely testimony to the fact that books could be subversive, but, of course, only readers had the power to make revolutions.

True to the spirit of Pierre Bayle, the first clues in the hunt for the origins of secular political culture are found in the world of erudition. The origins of the political criticism so treasured by modern democracy began not humbly

by the sweat of an honest dissident but, rather, in the halls of the Florentine chancellery and, later, in the grand antechambers of the French monarchy. Its seeds were the classical works of Greek and Roman nobility, and its harvesters were the humanist scholars, masters of reading, who were the proud and often eccentric gatekeepers to the political wisdom of the ancient world.