

Voltaire

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Voltaire



Voltaire at 24 by Nicolas de Largillière.

Born 21 November 1694

Paris, France

Died 30 May 1778 (age 83)

Paris, France

Occupation Writer and philosopher

Parents François Arouet, father; Marie
Marguerite d'Aumart, mother

François-Marie Arouet (21 November 1694 – 30 May 1778), better known by the pen name **Voltaire**, was a French Enlightenment writer, essayist, deist and philosopher known for his wit, philosophical sport, and defense of civil liberties, including freedom of religion and the right to a fair trial. He was an outspoken supporter of social reform despite strict censorship laws in France and harsh penalties for those who broke them. A satirical polemicist, he frequently made use of his works to criticize Christian Church dogma and the French institutions of his day. A known Freemason he was a member of the Loge des Neuf Sœurs (Lodge of the Nine Sisters) in Paris along with friend and fellow member Benjamin Franklin.

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Early years

The French author François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire was born in Paris in 1694, the last of the five children of François Arouet (1650–1 January 1722) a notary who was a minor treasury official, and his wife, Marie Marguerite d'Aumart



Bust of Voltaire by the artist Antoine Houdon, 1781.

(c.1660–13 July

1701) from a noble family from the Poitou province. Voltaire was educated by Jesuits at the Collège Louis-le-Grand (1704-11), where he learned Latin and Greek; later in life he became fluent in Italian, Spanish, and English. From 1711 to 1713 he studied law. Before devoting himself entirely to writing, Voltaire worked as a secretary to the French ambassador in Holland, where he fell in love with a French refugee named Catherine Olympe Dunoyer. Their elopement was foiled by Voltaire's father, and he was forced to return to France. Most of Voltaire's early life revolved around Paris until his exile. From the beginning Voltaire had trouble with the authorities for his energetic attacks on the government and the Catholic Church. These activities were to result in numerous imprisonments and exiles. In his early twenties he spent eleven months in the Bastille for allegedly writing satirical verses about the aristocracy.

After graduating, Voltaire set out on a career in literature. His father, however, intended his son to be educated in the law. Voltaire, pretending to work in Paris as an assistant to a lawyer, spent much of his time writing satirical poetry. When his father found him out, he again sent Voltaire to

study law, this time in the provinces. Nevertheless, he continued to write, producing essays and historical studies not always noted for their accuracy. Voltaire's wit made him popular among some of the aristocratic families. One of his writings, about Louis XV's regent, Philippe II, Duke of Orléans, led to his being imprisoned in the Bastille. While there, he wrote his debut play, *Œdipe*, and adopted the name Voltaire which came from his hometown in southern France. *Œdipe's* success began Voltaire's influence and brought him into the French Enlightenment. Voltaire was a prolific writer, and produced works in almost every literary form, authoring plays, poetry, novels, essays, historical and scientific works, over 20,000 letters and over two thousand books and pamphlets.

Poetry

From an early age, Voltaire displayed a talent for writing verse, and his first published work was poetry. He wrote two long poems, the *Henriade*, and the *Pucelle*, besides many other smaller pieces.

The *Henriade* was written in imitation of Virgil, using the Alexandrine couplet reformed and

rendered monotonous for dramatic purposes. Voltaire lacked both enthusiasm for and understanding of the subject, which both negatively impacted the poem's quality. The *Pucelle*, on the other hand, is a burlesque work attacking religion and history. Voltaire's minor poems are generally considered superior to either of these two works.

Prose and romances

Many of Voltaire's prose works and romances, usually composed as pamphlets, were written as polemics. *Candide* attacks religious and philosophical optimism, *L'Homme aux quarante ecus* certain social and political ways of the time, *Zadig* and others the received forms of moral and metaphysical orthodoxy, and some were written to deride the Bible. In these works, Voltaire's ironic style without exaggeration is apparent, particularly the extreme restraint and simplicity of the verbal treatment. Voltaire never dwells too long on a point, stays to laugh at what he has said, elucidates or comments on his own jokes, guffaws over them or exaggerates their form. *Candide* in particular is the best example of his style.

Voltaire also has, in common with Jonathan Swift, the distinction of paving the way for science fiction's philosophical irony, particularly in his *Micromegas*.

Philosophies

In general criticism and miscellaneous writing, Voltaire's writing was comparable with that in his other works. Almost all his more substantive works, whether in verse or prose, are preceded by prefaces of one sort or another, which are models of his caustic yet conversational tone. In a vast variety of nondescript pamphlets and writings, he displays his skills at journalism. In pure literary criticism his principal work is the *Commentaire sur Corneille*, although he wrote many more similar works — sometimes (as in his *Life and notices of Molière*) independently and sometimes as part of his *Siècles*.

Voltaire's works, especially his private letters, constantly contain the word "*l'infâme*" and the expression (in full or abbreviated) "*écrasez l'infâme*." This expression has sometimes been misunderstood as meaning Christ, but the real

meaning is "crush that infamous thing". Particularly, it is the system which Voltaire saw around him, the effects of which he had felt in his own exiles and the confiscations of his books, and which he had seen in the hideous sufferings of Calas and La Barre.

Voltaire is often incorrectly credited with the quote "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." These words were actually written by Evelyn Beatrice Hall (under the pseudonym S. G. Tallentyre), in her 1906 book *The Friends of Voltaire*. Hall intended to summarize in her own words Voltaire's attitude towards Claude Adrien Helvétius and his controversial book *De l'esprit*, but her first-person expression was mistaken for an actual quotation from Voltaire.^[1]

Voltaire's largest philosophical work is the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, comprising articles contributed by him to the *Encyclopédie* and several minor pieces. It directed criticism at French political institutions, Voltaire's personal enemies, the *Bible*, and the Roman Catholic Church.

On philosophy of Brahmins, India and Hinduism:

He considered Indian civilization to be the ancestor civilization to western culture (Christians, Jews) and he considered Brahmins or Hindus to be the first philosophers. In his book *Dictionnaire philosophique*, under the heading "Brahmins" the first sentence reads: "Is it not probable that the Brahmins were the first legislators of the earth, the first philosophers, the first theologians?"

He was also fond of mildness, gentleness and sublime nature of Hindu philosophy or Brahminical thoughts.

He was critical of Christian missionaries attempting to malign the Hindu religion and summarized it the following way:

"This is only a small part of the ancient cosmogony of the Brahmins. Their rites, their pagodas, prove that among them everything was allegorical; they still represent virtue beneath the emblem of a woman who has ten arms, and who combats ten mortal sins represented by monsters. Our missionaries have not failed to take this image of virtue for that of the devil, and to assure us that the devil is worshipped in India. We have never been among these people but to enrich ourselves and to

calumniate them. "

Views on New France

Voltaire was a critic of France's colonial policy in North America, dismissing the vast territory of New France as "a few acres of snow" ("*quelques arpents de neige*") that produced little more than furs and required constant - and expensive - military protection from the mother country against Great Britain's 13 Colonies to the south.

Correspondences

Voltaire also engaged in an enormous amount of private correspondence during his life, totalling over 21,000 letters. His personality shows through in the letters that he wrote: his energy and versatility, his unhesitating flattery when he chose to flatter, his ruthless sarcasm, his unscrupulous business faculty and his resolve to double and twist in any fashion so as to escape his enemies.

Deism

Voltaire, like many key figures of the European Enlightenment, was a Deist. He did not believe that

absolute faith was needed to believe in God. He wrote, "What is faith? Is it to believe that which is evident? No. It is perfectly evident to my mind that there exists a necessary, eternal, supreme, and intelligent being. This is no matter of faith, but of reason." [1]

Rejecting strictly standardized religion, Voltaire believed in a universe based solely on reason, and without supplementation or foundation in any particular or singular religious text or tradition of revelation. In fact, Voltaire's combination of reason and respect for nature reflected the contemporary Pantheism, increasingly popular throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which continues as a form known as Deism, or as "Voltairean Pantheism", today.

From translated works on Confucianism and Legalism, Voltaire drew on Chinese concepts of politics and philosophy - which were based on rational principles, to look critically at European organized religion and hereditary aristocracy.

Christianity

Voltaire, though he is often thought of as an atheist, did in fact participate in religious activities,

and even had a chapel erected on his estate at Ferney. The primary source for this misconception is the line from one of his poems that effectively translates into "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." However, if one reads the entire work, it reveals Voltaire's true sentiments. This of course is not to say that Voltaire was a strict Roman Catholic, because he did indeed have many issues with religious dogma of the day. Nevertheless, Voltaire was certainly not an atheist as many would believe. Many also conceive Voltaire as an atheist because of his criticism for the Church. It may be pointed out that Voltaire's quarrel was with the institution of the Church, being the worldly body, not the existence of God.

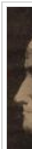
In terms of religious texts, Voltaire was largely of the opinion that the Bible was 1) an outdated legal and/or moral reference, 2) by and large a metaphor, but one that still taught some good lessons, and 3) a work of Man, not a divine gift. These beliefs did not hinder his religious practice, however, though it did gain him somewhat of a bad reputation in the Catholic Church. It may be noted that Voltaire was indeed seen as somewhat of a nuisance to many believers, and was almost universally known; Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote to his father the

year of Voltaire's death, saying, "The arch-scoundrel Voltaire has finally kicked the bucket...."

There is an apocryphal story that his home at Ferney was purchased by the Geneva Bible Society and used for printing Bibles, but this appears to be due to a misunderstanding of the 1849 annual report of the American Bible Society [2]. Voltaire's chateau is now owned and administered by the French Ministry of Culture.

Legacy

Voltaire perceived the French bourgeoisie to be too small and ineffective, the aristocracy to be parasitic and corrupt, the commoners as ignorant and superstitious, and the church as a static force useful only as a counterbalance since its "religious tax" or the tithe helped to create a strong backing for revolutionaries.



V

Voltaire distrusted democracy, which he saw as propagating the idiocy of the masses. To Voltaire, only an enlightened monarch or an



Voltaire's statue and tomb in the crypt of the Panthéon.

enlightened absolutist, advised by philosophers like himself, could bring about change as it was in the king's rational interest to improve the power and wealth of his subjects and kingdom. Voltaire essentially believed monarchy to be the key to progress and change.

He supported "bringing order" through military means in his letters to Russia's Catherine the Great and Prussia's Frederick the Great, in which he strongly praised the Partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

He was, however, deeply opposed to the use of war and violence as means for the resolution of controversies, as he repeatedly and forcefully stated in many of his works, including the "Philosophical Dictionary," where he described war as an "infernal enterprise" and those who resort to it "ridiculous murderers."

He is best known today for his novel, *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* (Candide, or Optimism, 1759), which satirized the philosophy of Leibniz. *Candide* was also subject to censorship and Voltaire jokingly claimed that the actual author was a certain "Dr DeMad" in a letter, where he reaffirmed the main polemical stances of the text. [3]

Voltaire is also known for many memorable aphorisms, such as: "*Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*" ("If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him"), contained in a verse epistle from 1768, addressed to the anonymous

author of a controversial work, *The Three Impostors*.

Jean-Baptiste Rousseau (not to be confused with philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau) sent a copy of his "Ode to Posterity" to Voltaire. Voltaire read it through and said, "I do not think this poem will reach its destination."

Voltaire is remembered and honored in France as a courageous polemicist who indefatigably fought for civil rights — the right to a fair trial and freedom of religion — and who denounced the hypocrisies and injustices of the *ancien régime*. The *ancien régime* involved an unfair balance of power and taxes between the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobles), and the Third Estate (the commoners and middle class, who were burdened with most of the taxes).

Thomas Carlyle argued that while he was unsurpassed in literary form, not even the most elaborate of Voltaire's works was of much value for matter and that he never uttered an original idea of his own.

Voltaire did not let his ideals interfere with the acquisition of his fortune. He was a millionaire by

the time he was forty after cultivating the friendship of the Paris brothers who had a contract to supply the French army with food and munitions and being invited to participate with them in this extremely profitable enterprise. According to a review in the March 7, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker* of Voltaire's *Garden*, a mathematician friend of his realized in 1728 that the French government had authorized a lottery in which the prize was much greater than the collective cost of the tickets. He and Voltaire formed a syndicate, collected all the money, and became moneylenders to the great houses of Europe. Voltaire complained that lotteries exploited the poor.

The town of Ferney, France, where Voltaire lived out the last 20 years of his life (though he died in Paris), is now named Ferney-Voltaire. His *château* is now a museum; as of July 2007, it is closed for restoration, with no date available for its reopening to the public. Voltaire's library is preserved intact in the Russian National Library, St Petersburg. His remains were interred at the Panthéon, in Paris, in 1791.

The pen name "Voltaire"



Voltaire at the residence of Frederick II in Potsdam, Prussia. Partial view of an engraving by Pierre Charles Baquoy, after N. A. Monsiau.

The name "Voltaire," which he adopted in 1718 not only as a pen name but also in daily use, is an anagram of the Latinized spelling of his surname "Arouet" and the letters of the sobriquet "le jeune" ("the younger"): AROVET Le ieune. The name also echoes in reversed order the syllables of a familial château in the Poitou region: "Airvault". The adoption of this name after his incarceration at the Bastille is seen by many to mark a formal separation on the part of Voltaire from his family

and his past.

Richard Holmes in "Voltaire's Grin" also believes that the name "Voltaire" arose from the transposition of letters. But he adds that a writer such as Voltaire would have intended the name to carry its connotations of speed and daring. These come from associated words such as: "voltige" (acrobatics on a trapeze or horse), "volte-face" (spinning about to face your enemies), and "volatile" (originally any winged creature).

Bibliography

Major Works

- *Œdipe* (1718)
- *Zaïre* (1732)
- *Lettres philosophiques sur les Anglais* (1733), revised as *Letters on the English* (circa 1778)
- *Le Mondain* (1736)
- *Sept Discours en Vers sur l'Homme* (1738)
- *Zadig* (1747)
- *Micromégas* (1752)
- *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755)
- *Candide* (1758)
- *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764)

- *La Princesse de Babylone* (1768)
- *Épître à l'Auteur du Livre des Trois Imposteurs* (*Letter to the author of The Three Impostors*) (1770)

Plays

Voltaire wrote between fifty and sixty plays, including a few unfinished ones. Among them are these:

- *Œdipe* (1718)
- *Eriphile* (1732)
- *Irène*
- *Mahomet*
- *Mérope*
- *Nanine*
- *Zaïre* (1732)

Historical

- *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* (1731)
- *The Age of Louis XIV* (1752)
- *The Age of Louis XV* (1746 - 1752)
- *Annals of the Empire - Charlemagne, A.D. 742 - Henry VII 1313*, Vol. I (1754)
- *Annals of the Empire - Louis of Bavaria, 1315 to Ferdinand II 1631* Vol. II (1754)

- *History of the Russian Empire Under Peter the Great* (Vol. I 1759; Vol. II 1763)

See also

- Classical liberalism
- Contributions to liberal theory
- List of Freemasons

External links

- An analysis of Voltaire's texts (in the "textes" topic) (in French)
- Works by Voltaire at Project Gutenberg
- Voltaire's writings from Philosophical Dictionary
- Société Voltaire
- Voltaire's Candide and Leibniz
- VisitVoltaire.com
 - more on Émilie du Châtelet (biography and portraits, and more)
- Institut et Musée Voltaire, Geneva, Switzerland
- Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, United Kingdom
- Worldly and Personal Influences on Voltaire's Writing
- A complete bibliography

- Biography and quotes of Voltaire
- e-texts of works by Voltaire
 - Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary searchable at dailytangents.com
 - HTML at bartleby.com
 - extracts from *Dictionnaire philosophique*
 - Free book downloads in HTML, PDF, text formats at ebooktakeaway.com
- Whose Line Is It Anyway?
- Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy on Voltaire
- The Life of Voltaire Essay by Caspar J M Hewett
- Voltaire on the 10 French Franc banknote.
- Voltaire's works: works: text, concordances and frequency list
- Eighteenth Century Bibliography
- "Voltaire's Bastards" by John Ralston Saul a book review on this title.

Footnotes

1. ^ Boller, Jr., Paul F.; George, John (1989). *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-505541-1.

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Preceded by Jean Bouhier	Seat 33 Académie française 1746–1778	Succeeded by Jean- François Ducis
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