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VOLTAIRE

1694 - 1778

François Marie Arouet—better known by his pseudonym, Voltaire—was the leading figure of the French Enlightenment. A poet, playwright, essayist, novelist, short-story writer, historian, and philosopher, Voltaire was the apostle of freethinking liberalism.

Voltaire was born in 1694, in Paris. He was of middle class origin, and his father was a lawyer. In his youth, Voltaire attended the Jesuit college of Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Afterward, he studied law for a while, but soon dropped it. As a young man in Paris, he soon acquired the reputation of being a very witty fellow, full of clever jokes and satiric verses. Under the *ancien regime* in France, however, such cleverness could be dangerous, and as a result of some of his political verses, Voltaire was arrested and thrown into the Bastille. He spent almost a year in prison, where he occupied his time by writing an epic poem, the

Henriade, which later won considerable acclaim. In 1718, shortly after Voltaire was released from prison, his play *Oedipe* was produced in Paris, where it was an enormous success. At twenty-four, Voltaire was famous, and for his remaining sixty years, he was a leading French literary figure.

Voltaire was clever with money as well as with words, and he gradually became an independently wealthy man. In 1726, however, he ran into some trouble. Voltaire had already established himself as the wittiest and most brilliant conversationalist of his time (and perhaps of all time). He lacked, however, the modesty which some French aristocrats felt was appropriate for a commoner. This led to a public dispute between Voltaire and one such aristocrat, the Chevalier de Rohan, in which Voltaire's wit got him the better of the verbal fighting. Soon afterwards, however, the Chevalier had Voltaire beaten up by a group of ruffians and, later on, thrown into the Bastille. Voltaire was soon released from jail on the condition that he leave France. He therefore went to England, where he stayed for about two and a half years.

Voltaire's stay in England proved to be a major turning point in his life. He learned to speak and read English, and became familiar with the works of such famous Englishmen as John Locke, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and William Shakespeare. He also became personally acquainted with most of the leading English thinkers of the day. Voltaire was impressed by Shakespeare and by English science and empiricism; but what most impressed him about the English was their political system. English democracy and personal liberties presented a striking contrast to the political conditions which Voltaire knew in France. No English lord could issue a *lettre de cachet* and thereby have Voltaire summarily thrown into jail; and if for any reason Voltaire were to be detained improperly, a writ of habeas corpus would soon get him released.

When Voltaire returned to France, he wrote his first major philosophical work, the *Lettres philosophiques*, usually called the *Letters on the English*. That book, which was published in

1734, marks the true beginning of the French Enlightenment. In the *Letters on the English*, Voltaire presented a generally favorable description of the British political system and of the ideas of John Locke and other English thinkers. Publication of the book aroused the anger of the French authorities, and Voltaire was again forced to leave Paris.

Voltaire spent most of the next fifteen years in Cirey, in eastern France, where he was the lover of Madame du Châtelet, the brilliant and educated wife of a marquis. In 1750, a year after her death, Voltaire went to Germany at the personal invitation of Frederick the Great of Prussia. Voltaire spent three years at Frederick's court in Potsdam. At first he got along well with the brilliant and intellectual Frederick, but eventually they quarreled, and in 1753, Voltaire left Germany.

After leaving Germany, Voltaire settled on an estate near Geneva, where he could be safe from both the French and Prussian kings. However, his liberal views made even Switzerland a bit dangerous for him. In 1758, therefore, he moved to a new estate in Ferney, near the French-Swiss border, where he would have two possible directions in which to flee in case of trouble with the authorities. He stayed there for twenty years, pouring out literary and philosophical works, corresponding with intellectual leaders throughout Europe, and entertaining visitors.

Through all these years, Voltaire's literary output continued undiminished. He was a fantastically prolific writer, perhaps the most voluminous author on this list. All told, his collected writings run to well over 30,000 pages. They include epic poems, lyric verse, personal letters, pamphlets, novels, short stories, plays, and serious books on history and philosophy.

Voltaire had always been a strong believer in religious toleration. However, when he was in his late sixties, a number of particularly horrifying instances of persecution of Protestants occurred in France. Aroused and outraged, Voltaire dedicated himself to an intellectual crusade against religious fanaticism. He wrote large numbers of political pamphlets opposing religious intolerance. Also, he took to ending all his personal letters with the

words *Ecrasez l'infâme*, which means, "Stamp out the infamous thing." To Voltaire, "the infamous thing" was religious bigotry and fanaticism.

In 1778, when he was eighty-three years old, Voltaire returned to Paris, where he attended the premiere of his new play, *Irene*. Large crowds applauded him as the "grand old man" of the French Enlightenment. Hundreds of admirers, including Benjamin Franklin, visited him. But Voltaire's life was soon over. He died in Paris on May 30, 1778. Because of his outspoken anticlericalism, he could not receive a Christian funeral in Paris; but thirteen years later, victorious French revolutionaries had his remains dug up and reburied in the Panthéon in Paris.

Voltaire's writings are so voluminous that it would be very difficult to list even his major works in a short article. More important than the titles, though, are the basic ideas which he promoted throughout his career. One of his strongest beliefs was in the necessity for freedom of speech and of the press. A remark frequently attributed to him is: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Although Voltaire never actually made that explicit statement, it certainly reflects his attitude.

Another leading principle of Voltaire's was his belief in freedom of religion. Throughout his career, he steadfastly opposed religious intolerance and persecution. Although Voltaire believed in God, he firmly opposed most religious dogmas, and constantly presented the view that organized religion was basically a sham.

Quite naturally, Voltaire never believed that the titled aristocrats of France were wiser or better than he, and his audience learned that the so-called "divine right of kings" was a lot of nonsense. Although Voltaire himself was far from a modern-style democrat (he tended to prefer a strong but enlightened monarch), the main thrust of his ideas was plainly opposed to any form of hereditary rule. It is therefore not surprising that most of his followers came to favor democracy. His political and

religious ideas were thus in the mainstream of the French Enlightenment, and they contributed substantially to the French Revolution of 1789.

Voltaire was not himself a scientist, but he was interested in science and was a firm supporter of the empirical outlook of Francis Bacon and John Locke. He was also a serious and capable historian. One of his most important works was his universal history, the *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*. This book differed from most previous histories in two main respects: first, Voltaire recognized that Europe was only a small part of the world, and he therefore devoted a considerable portion of his work to Asian history; second, Voltaire took the view that cultural history is, in general, far more important than political history. His book is therefore concerned more with social and economic conditions and the development of the arts, than with kings and the wars they fought.

Voltaire was not as original a philosopher as several others on this list. To a considerable extent, he took the ideas of other men, such as John Locke and Francis Bacon, restated them, and popularized them. However, it was through Voltaire's writings, more than anyone else's, that the ideas of democracy, religious toleration, and intellectual freedom were disseminated throughout France, and for that matter, throughout much of Europe. Though there were other important writers (Diderot, d'Alembert, Rousseau, Montesquieu, etc.) in the French Enlightenment, it is fair to say that Voltaire was the preeminent leader of that movement. In the first place, his pungent literary style, long career, and voluminous output assured him a far greater audience than any of the other writers. In the second place, his ideas were characteristic of the entire Enlightenment. And in the third place, Voltaire preceded all the other important figures in point of time. Montesquieu's great work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, did not appear until 1748; the first volume of the famed *Encyclopedie* came out in 1751; and Rousseau's first essay was written in 1750. By contrast, Voltaire's *Letters on the English* was published in 1734, and he had already been famous for sixteen years when that appeared.

Voltaire's writings, with the exception of the short novel *Candide*, are little read today. They were, however, very widely read during the eighteenth century, and Voltaire therefore played an important role in the changing climate of opinion that ultimately resulted in the French Revolution. Nor was his influence confined to France: Americans such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin were also acquainted with his works, and many of Voltaire's ideas have become part of the American political tradition.



Voltaire's funeral.