Voltaire

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**Born:** November 21, 1694 in Paris, France  
**Died:** May 30, 1778 in Paris, France  
**Nationality:** French  
**Occupation:** Philosopher

The French poet, dramatist, historian, and philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) was an outspoken and aggressive enemy of every injustice but especially of religious intolerance. His works are an outstanding embodiment of the principles of the French Enlightenment.

François Marie Arouet rechristened himself Arouet de Voltaire, probably in 1718. A stay in the Bastille had given him time to reflect on his doubts concerning his parentage, on his need for a noble name to befit his growing reputation, and on the coincidence that Arouet sounded like both a rouer (for beating) and roué (a debauchee). In prison Voltaire had access to a book on anagrams, which may have influenced his name choice thus: arouet, uotare, voltaire (a winged armchair).

Youth and Early Success, 1694-1728

Voltaire was born, perhaps on Nov. 21, 1694, in Paris. He was ostensibly the youngest of the three surviving children of François Arouet and Marie Marguerite Daumand, although Voltaire claimed to be the "bastard of Rochebrune," a minor poet and songwriter. Voltaire's mother died when he was seven years old, and he was then drawn to his sister. She bore a daughter who later became Voltaire's mistress.

A clever child, Voltaire was educated by the Jesuits at the Collège Louis-le-Grand from 1704 to 1711. He displayed an astonishing talent for poetry, cultivated a love of the theater, and nourished a keen ambition.

When Voltaire was drawn into the circle of the 72-year-old poet the Abbé de Chaulieu, "one of the most complete hedonists of all times," his father packed him off to Caen. Hoping to squelch his son's literary aspirations and to turn his mind to the law, Arouet placed the youth as secretary to the French ambassador at The Hague. Voltaire fell in with a jilted French refugee, Catherine Olympe Dunoyer, pretty but barely literate. Their elopement was thwarted. Under the threat of a *lettre de cachet* obtained by his father, Voltaire returned to Paris in 1713 and was articled to a lawyer. He continued to write, and he renewed his pleasure-loving acquaintances. In 1717 Voltaire was at first exiled and then imprisoned in the Bastille for verses offensive to powerful personages.

As early as 1711, Voltaire, eager to test himself against Sophocles and Pierre Corneille, had written a first draft of *Oedipe*. On Nov. 18, 1718, the revised play opened in Paris to a sensational success. The *Henriade*, begun in the Bastille and published in 1722, was Voltaire's attempt to rival Virgil and to give France an epic poem. This work sounded in ringing phrases Voltaire's condemnation of fanaticism and advanced his reputation as the standard-bearer of French literature. However, his growing literary, financial, and social successes only partially reconciled him to his father, who died in 1722.

In 1726 an altercation with the Chevalier de Rohan, an effete but influential aristocrat, darkened Voltaire's outlook and intensified his sense of injustice. Rohan had mocked Voltaire's bourgeois origin and his change of name and in response to Voltaire's witty retort had hired ruffians to beat the poet, as Voltaire's friend and host, the Duc de Sully, looked on approvingly. When Voltaire demanded satisfaction through a duel, he was thrown into the Bastille through Rohan's influence and was released only on condition that he leave the country.

England willingly embraced Voltaire as a victim of France's injustice and infamy. During his stay there (1726-1728) he was feted; Alexander Pope, William Congreve, Horace Walpole, and Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke,
praised him; and his works earned Voltaire £1,000. Voltaire learned English by attending the theater daily, script in hand. He also imbibed English thought, especially that of John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton, and he saw the relationship between free government and creative speculation. More importantly, England suggested the relationship of wealth to freedom. The only protection, even for a brilliant poet, was wealth. Henceforth, Voltaire cultivated his Arouet business cunning.

At Cirey and at Court, 1729-1753

Voltaire returned to France in 1729. A tangible product of his English stay was the *Lettres anglaises* (1734), which have been called "the first bomb dropped on the Old Regime." Their explosive potential included such remarks as, "It has taken centuries to do justice to humanity, to feel it was horrible that the many should sow and the few should reap." Written in the style of letters to a friend in France, the 24 "letters" were a witty and seductive call for political, religious, and philosophic freedom; for the betterment of earthly life; for employing the method of Sir Francis Bacon, Locke, and Newton; and generally for exploiting the intellect toward social progress. After their publication in France in 1734, copies were sized from Voltaire's bookseller, and Voltaire was threatened with arrest. He fled to Lorraine and was not permitted to return to Paris until 1735. The work, with an additional letter on Pascal, was circulated as *Letters philosophiques*.

Prior to 1753 Voltaire did not have a home; but for 15 years following 1733 he had a refuge at Cirey, in a château owned by his "divine Émilie," Madame du Châtelet. While still living with her patient husband and son, Émilie made generous room for Voltaire. They were lovers; and they worked together intensely on physics and metaphysics. The lovers quarreled in English about trivia and studied the Old and New Testaments. These biblical labors were important as preparation for the antireligious works that Voltaire published in the 1750s and 1760s. At Cirey, Voltaire also wrote his *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*.

But joining Émilie in studies in physics did not keep him from drama, poetry, metaphysics, history, and polemics. Similarly, Émilie's affection was not alone enough for Voltaire. From 1739 he required travel and new excitements. Thanks to Émilie's influence, Voltaire was by 1743 less unwelcome at Versailles than in 1733, but still there was great resentment toward the "lowborn intruder" who "noticed things a good courtier must overlook." Honored by a respectful correspondence with Frederick II of Prussia, Voltaire was then sent on diplomatic missions to Frederick. But Voltaire's new diversion was his incipient affair with his widowed niece, Madame Denis. This affair continued its erotic and stormy course to the last years of his life. Émilie too found solace in other lovers. The idyll of Cirey ended with her death in 1749.

Voltaire then accepted Frederick's repeated invitation to live at court. He arrived at Potsdam with Madame Denis in July 1750. First flattered by Frederick's hospitality, Voltaire then gradually became anxious, quarrelsome, and finally disenchanted. He left, angry, in March 1753, having written in December 1752: "I am going to write for my instruction a little dictionary used by Kings. 'My friend' means 'my slave.'" Frederick was embarrassed by Voltaire's vocal lawsuit with a moneylender and angered by his attempts to ridicule P. L. M. de Maupertuis, the imported head of the Berlin Academy. Voltaire's polemic against Maupertuis, the *Diatribe du docteur Akakia*, angered Frederick. Voltaire's angry response was to return the pension and other honorary trinkets bestowed by the King. Frederick retaliated by delaying permission for Voltaire's return to France, by putting him under a week's house arrest at the German border, and by confiscating his money.

Sage of Ferney, 1753-1778

After leaving Prussia, Voltaire visited Strasbourg, Colmar, and Lorraine, for Paris was again forbidden him. Then he went to Geneva. Even Geneva, however, could not tolerate all of Voltaire's activities of theater, pen, and press. Therefore, he left his property "Les Delices" and bought an estate at Ferney, where he lived out his days as a kingly patriarch. His own and Madame Denis's great extravagances were supported by the tremendous and growing fortune he amassed through shrewd money handling. A borrower even as a schoolboy, Voltaire became a shrewd lender as he grew older. Generous loans to persons in high places paid off well in favors and influence. At
Ferney, he mixed in local politics, cultivated his lands, became through his intelligent benevolence beloved of the townspeople, and in general practiced a self-appointed and satisfying kingship. He became known as the "innkeeper of Europe" and entertained widely and well in his rather small but elegant household.

Voltaire's literary productivity did not slacken, although his concerns shifted as the years passed at Ferney. He was best known as a poet until in 1751 Le Siècle de Louis XIV marked him also as a historian. Other historical works include Histoire de Charles XII; Histoire de la Russie sous Pierre le Grand; and the universal history, Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations, published in 1756 but begun at Cirey. An extremely popular dramatist until 1760, when he began to be eclipsed by competition from the plays of Shakespeare that he had introduced to France, Voltaire wrote--in addition to the early Oedipe--La Mort de César, Éripyle, Zaïre, Alzire, Mérope, Mahomet, L'Enfant prodigue, Nanine (a parody of Samuel Richardson's Pamela), L'Orphelin de la Chine, Sémiramis, and Tancrède.

The philosophic conte was a Voltaire invention. In addition to his famous Candide (1759), others of his stories in this genre include Micromégas, Vision de Babouc, Memnon, Zadig, and Jeannot et Colin. In addition to the Lettres Philosophiques and the work on Newton, others of Voltaire's works considered philosophic are Philosophie de l'histoire, Le Philosophe ignorant, Tout en Dieu, Dictionnaire philosophique portatif, and Traité de la métaphysique. Voltaire's poetry includes—in addition to the Henriade—the philosophic poems L'Homme, La Loi naturelle, and Le Désastre de Lisbonne, as well as the famous La Pucelle, a delightfully naughty poem about Joan of Arc.

Always the champion of liberty, Voltaire in his later years became actively involved in securing justice for victims of persecution. He became the "conscience of Europe." His activity in the Calas affair was typical. An unsuccessful and despondent young man had hanged himself in his Protestant father's home in Roman Catholic Toulouse. For 200 years Toulouse had celebrated the massacre of 4,000 of its Huguenot inhabitants. When the rumor spread that the deceased had been about to renounce Protestantism, the family was seized and tried for murder. The father was broken on the rack while protesting his innocence. A son was exiled, the daughters were confined in a convent, and the mother was left destitute. Investigation assured Voltaire of their innocence, and from 1762 to 1765 he worked unceasingly in their behalf. He employed "his friends, his purse, his pen, his credit" to move public opinion to the support of the Calas family.

Voltaire's ingenuity and zeal against injustice were not exhausted by the Calas affair. Similar was his activity in behalf of the Sirven family (1771) and of the victims of the Abbeville judges (1774). Nor was Voltaire's influence exhausted by his death in Paris on May 30, 1778, where he had gone in search of Madame Denis and the glory of being crowned with laurel at a performance of his drama Irène.

Assessment of Voltaire

John Morley, English secretary for Ireland under William Gladstone, wrote of Voltaire's stature: "When the right sense of historical proportion is more fully developed in men's minds, the name of Voltaire will stand out like the names of the great decisive moments in the European advance, like the Revival of Learning, or the Reformation." Gustave Lanson, in 1906, wrote of Voltaire: "He accustomed public common sense to regard itself as competent in all matters, and he turned public opinion into one of the controlling forces in public affairs." Lanson added: "For the public to become conscious of an idea, the idea must be repeated over and over. But the sauce must be varied to please the public palate. Voltaire was a master chef, a superb saucier."

Voltaire was more than a thinker and activist. Style was nearly always nearly all to him in his abode, in his dress, and particularly in his writings. As poet and man of letters, he was demanding, innovative, and fastidious within regulated patterns of expression. Even as thinker and activist, he believed that form was all—or at least the best part. As he remarked, "Never will twenty folio volumes bring about a revolution. Little books are the ones to fear, the pocket-size, portable ones that sell for thirty sous. If the Gospels had cost 1200 sesterces, the Christian
Voltaire’s life nearly spanned the 18th century; his writings fill 70 volumes; and his influence is not yet exhausted. He once wrote: “They wanted to bury me. But I outwitted them.”

Further Readings


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