ALFRED OWEN ALDRIDGE

Voltaire and the Century of Light

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VOLTAIRE
and the Century of Light

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A. OWEN ALDRIDGE

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The best effect of a book is to make men think.
VOLTAIRE, *Panégyrique de Louis XV*

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To Adriana once more

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Abbreviations

FR	*French Review*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MP	*Modern Philology*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
RLC	*Revue de littérature comparée*
RR	*Romanic Review*
RSH	*Revue des sciences humaines*
SVEC	*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*

Preface

There have been many previous biographies of Voltaire, including some by eminent men of letters, such as John Morley, James Parton, Georg Brandes, and André Maurois. The one which best presents the spirit of the man is that of Voltaire's young disciple Condorcet, who, while still in the eighteenth century, presented Voltaire as an ordinary citizen, "comprising in his ambitions and activities, all the interests of man in all countries and in all centuries, rising up against all error and all oppression and contending for and spreading all useful truth." In the second half of the next century appeared a multivolume study under the influence of the sociological criticism of the time, which portrayed Voltaire as epitomizing "all of the eighteenth century." The author, Gustave Desnoiresterres, understandably entitled his work *Voltaire et la société au xviiie siècle* (1867–1876). Subsequent biographers have pillaged Desnoiresterres, few acknowledging the extent of their indebtedness to this generally forgotten scholar, and few adding any factual information of importance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a period dominated by symbolism, surrealism, and psychoanalysis, Voltaire was no longer à la mode, and Edouard Herriot predicted in the preface to a collection of biographical documents that he would return to favor only "when the French public would become tired of rigmarole, neo-mysticism, pragmatism, and such literary nonsense." This time has come in our day, in which the rational and social ideals of the Enlightenment are once again widely understood and appreciated.

The greatest contribution to Voltaire scholarship since the biography of Desnoiresterres has been the publication by Theodore Besterman of a new edition of Voltaire's correspondence. This monumental edition of over one hundred volumes adds scores of new letters and summarizes essential background in its notes.

Four notable works of biography and criticism have also appeared in recent years. René Pomeau's *La Religion de Voltaire*

(Paris, 1956, revised ed. 1969) contains almost every known scrap of information relating to Voltaire's attitude toward theology and the history of religion, arranged for the most part chronologically. Peter Gay's *Voltaire's Politics* (Princeton, 1956) also uses a biographical framework for the presentation of his subject's thoughts on government, international relations, and practical politics. Theodore Besterman's *Voltaire* (New York, 1969), the first biography since that of Desnoiresterres to offer a significant amount of new material, utilizes a topical as well as chronological organization, including discussions of Voltaire and Shakespeare, Voltaire's religion, the doctrine of progress, and Voltaire's narrative skill. Finally, Ira O. Wade's *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* (Princeton, 1969) offers, precisely as its title promises, a thorough survey of every aspect of Voltaire's intellectual life.

Although taking advantage of the contributions of these predecessors, the present biography pursues an independent direction by combining the methods of comparative literature and the history of ideas. In an effort to capture Voltaire's personality as well as his thought, it also supplements evidence from his own letters and literary works with anecdotes and personal recollections of his contemporaries. It attempts to portray a man as well as a great writer and thinker. Even though we can hardly follow Condorcet in considering Voltaire as an ordinary citizen, we must accept his appraisal of Voltaire as one of mankind's greatest foes of error and oppression and the protector and propagandist of truth, in short, the human epitome of the Enlightenment.

VOLTAIRE
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ONE

A Family and a Name

1694–1713

The true name of the man known throughout the world as Voltaire was François-Marie Arouet. Thus he was designated on his baptismal record, which indicates that he was born in Paris on 21 November 1694. It is typical of the character of the man that throughout his life he should have tried to shroud with mystery the circumstances of his birth, and even the exact date. He tried to pass as nine months older than he actually was, perhaps out of perversity, perhaps out of sheer love for deception, or even out of an instinct for self-protection—on the theory that the older he would seem, the less danger of persecution he would face.[1] Voltaire was a histrionic hypochondriac, and he liked to appear as moribund as possible in order to lend color to his constant complaints of physical suffering.

Because of several ambiguous references in Voltaire's writings to the circumstances of his birth, some nineteenth century scholars have suggested that he was illegitimate, and the question is still in doubt. In a short poem written at the age of 50, Voltaire described himself as "the bastard of Rochebrune" [2782]. This Rochebrune was an accomplished lyric poet as well as a family friend, and Voltaire's words could have therefore both their literal sense that one of his parents had transgressed the marriage bed, and the figurative one, that Voltaire had descended from Rochebrune as a poet, but merely in an indirect or a left-handed manner. In another poem Voltaire seems to make a quite compromising reference to his mother:

[1] Voltaire himself admitted exaggerating his age in order to escape persecution [15339]. The preceding number in brackets refers to a document in Theodore Besterman, ed., *Voltaire's Correspondence*, vols. 1–107 (Geneva, 1953–1965). Further references to this edition will be incorporated in the text in brackets as above rather than in separate footnotes.

I am far removed, in faith,
From having a virgin for mother. [1393]

These ambiguous lines could have an obvious disrespectful meaning, or one quite innocent, merely alluding to the fact that Voltaire's mother was adequately prolific, having borne four other children before Voltaire. For more than a century, the voice of moderation tended to accept the innocuous meaning over the sensational.

A few years ago, however, a letter came to light that clearly indicates that Voltaire himself believed that he was the son of Rochebrune. This still does not mean that he was illegitimate, merely that he preferred to be considered another man's bastard rather than his legal father's son. There is no warrant for using this circumstance, however, as the key to quirks, aberrations, or eccentricities in Voltaire's behavior and personality. The mere fact of imagining frailties in either his mother or father, whichever he considered the more at fault, would not in his society have given him cause for adopting the pose of a rebel, either in the style of Byron or in that of the *révoltés* or angry young men of our times.

Voltaire was certainly a man in revolt—in old age much more than in youth—but he protested against social injustice, oppression, and unreason, not against his personal fate. It is as misleading in the twentieth century to consider him defiant and self-pitying out of a sense of personal injury, as it was in the nineteenth century to portray him as cynical and misanthropic.

The subject of our biography posed another mystery for posterity when he adopted the name Voltaire, the origin of which has never been definitely established. As far as records show, he used it first in a letter in 1718, which he signed, shortly before his legal coming of age at 25, Arouet de Voltaire. The most plausible theory to account for the name is that it is an anagram for *Arouet l. j.*, the equivalent of Arouet, Jr., in English. This theory is confirmed by the simple circumstance that one of Voltaire's favorite teachers at the Jesuit boys school which he attended had provided him an example of the name game. This teacher, the abbé d'Olivet, an eminent classical scholar, had adopted the title Father Thoulier, an obvious anagram, when he entered the Jesuit order shortly before becoming Voltaire's tutor.[2]

[2] Jean d'Alembert, *Histoire des membres de l'Académie française* (Paris, 1786), VI, 182–83.

Voltaire never showed any more pride in his family tradition than affection for his parents. He made no attempt to glorify his ancestors, nor did he even evince any curiosity about them. By and large he ignored his forebears and ridiculed his family. Yet neither ancestors nor immediate family was in any sense obscure or undistinguished. The Arouets may be traced back in an uninterrupted line to a tanner who plied his trade in 1525. Voltaire's father, who was also named François, was a member of the legal profession, numbering among his clients such dignitaries as Saint-Simon, Boileau, and the celebrated Ninon de Lenclos, and he had been on drinking terms with the tragedian Corneille. He confided to his son that "this great man was the most boring creature he had ever seen and the man whose conversation was on the lowest level" [9211]. Voltaire's mother made a similar judgment about the poet and critic Boileau, who was their neighbor: he was, as she put it, "a good book, but a foolish man" [9093]. A household with clients and acquaintances such as these could not have been totally deprived of culture. Voltaire's godfather, the abbé de Châteauneuf, was an urbane and indulgent ecclesiastic, brother of the more famous marquis de Châteauneuf, ambassador to Holland and later to Turkey. Another of the free-thinking churchmen who frequented the home was the abbé Gédoyn, a scholar and literary critic of great ability. He passionately espoused the side of the Ancients in the controversy then raging over the relative importance of classical and modern learning, and in conversation made no secret of his preference for the religion of Homer and Cicero to that of the Christian apostles.

Voltaire's rejection of his family name has been interpreted as evidence of an aristocratic superciliousness in his temperament. He has been charged with affectation, pretending to make light of his birth in order to draw attention to the fact that it was not entirely humble. Probably the gesture had no deeper meaning than an assertion of independence—the manifesto of a determination to build a career entirely on his own talents and efforts. One cannot read into it either aristocratic or democratic tendencies. If the adoption of a fabricated name is a denial of bourgeois birth, it is also a rejection of the concept of the transmission of nobility. Throughout his life Voltaire cultivated various representatives of the aristocracy and profited by them, once even making use of the pope for his own ends. But this does not make him a champion of aristocratic titles any more than a defender of the papacy. In

his life Voltaire leaped over the bourgeoisie to consort with the nobility, but it was luxury rather than aristocracy that he sought. As far as his own genealogy was concerned, he had, in his own words, "a tremendous indifference for all such insignificant things." The man "who serves his country well has no need of ancestors," he wrote in his tragedy *Mérope* [Act I, Scene 3].

Voltaire wrote a sketch of his life remarkable for two peculiarities.[3] First, he insisted upon "his dissipation," particularly as a young man, although documentary evidence from his later life indicates that he virtually never overindulged his appetites. Second, he maintained that "nothing is more insipid than the details of infancy and the time spent at school." Here his theory goes completely contrary to that of modern psychology as well as to the practice of his contemporaries, Benjamin Franklin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in their autobiographies strongly emphasized the period of childhood in forming their mature characters.

At birth Voltaire was so weak that he could not be taken to the church for baptism, and the ceremony had to be performed privately at home. Condorcet, in noticing this circumstance, compared him with Fontenelle, who had also been too puny to be taken to the church, but lived to the age of one hundred. Both were born in "a state of weakness and debility," but developed their intellectual faculties and retained them through long careers. A distant relative, seeing Voltaire three days after his birth, remarked that the infant did not look at all strong, having suffered from a fall of the mother.[4] Voltaire himself put it more succinctly, "I was born dead."[5] Every morning the family nurse ran downstairs to tell the mother that her child did not have another hour

[3] Written in 1759, and entitled *Mémoires pour servir à la vie de M. de Voltaire écrits par lui-même*, this work is primarily a satirical attack on Frederick the Great. Voltaire's second personal narrative, written in 1775–1776 and entitled *Commentaire historique sur les oeuvres de l'auteur de "La Henriade,"* is much closer to conventional autobiography, even though composed in the third person. Throughout the present book the first work will be cited as Voltaire's memoirs; the second, as his autobiography. Since both are short, no page references will be supplied.

[4] Gustave Desnoiresterres, *Voltaire et la société au xviiie siècle*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1867–1876), I, 4. Further references to this work, incorporated in the text, will be identified by the letter D.

[5] Jean Dagen, ed., *Chamfort. Maximes et pensées* (Paris, 1968), No. 818.

to live, and each day the abbé de Châteauneuf, the godfather, went upstairs to discuss ways of keeping the child alive.[6]

Ten years previously, Mme Arouet had given birth to twins, only one of whom survived—a boy, Armand, whom Voltaire later alternately patronized and despised. Before the advent of Voltaire, his mother had also been delivered of another son, who soon died, and a daughter who lived, Marguerite-Catherine, with whom Voltaire maintained amicable relations. This sister eventually had children of her own, one of whom became celebrated in the eighteenth century, under her married name, Mme Denis, as Voltaire's niece and housekeeper. Two centuries later it has been discovered that she was also his mistress.

Sainte-Beuve was the first author to realize the importance in biography of studying the mother to learn about the man, but with Voltaire this method will produce scant results. His mother died during his seventh year, and in his multitudinous writings he devotes to her no more than half a dozen lines, and these are all either flippant or purely anecdotal. All that can be said with assurance about her is that she had greater pretensions to noble birth and connections than Voltaire's father. Without exaggeration one may say that Voltaire had greater affection for his godfather, the abbé de Châteauneuf, and for the latter's octogenarian mistress, Ninon de Lenclos, than for his own father and mother. Voltaire's remoteness from family ties may explain why his writings and personal relations reveal little warmth or tenderness. He was scrupulously loyal to his friends and passionate in encounters with his mistresses and enemies, but practically devoid of sentiment.

Although Voltaire wrote extensively about his father, he said virtually nothing in his favor. The elder Arouet, like his ancestors, was hard working and businesslike, but had little imagination. He recognized a place for literature and the arts, but devoted his own time and energies exclusively to records and accounts, not from avarice or cupidity, but from a regard to his own economic independence and the comfort of his family. Voltaire's father, while not one of the wealthiest men of his time, enjoyed an income sufficient to place him and his family in comfortable circumstances. He was somewhat austere in demeanour, but certainly not cruel or unreasonable. One day during Voltaire's youth Arouet lost patience

[6] Théophile I. Duvernet, *La Vie de Voltaire* (Geneva, 1786), p. 10. This work will hereafter be cited in the text as Duvernet.

with his gardener and snapped at him so fiercely that the laborer feared for his life. Voltaire then took his father to see a play entitled *The Grumbler*, previously asking the actor playing the title role to insert in one of the tirades of the play the identical words with which his father had berated the gardener. Arouet recognized them, took the hint and henceforth reformed his conduct [16522]. Voltaire told this story to prove that his father had an irascible character, but it could show instead that he was fair and amenable to reason—even to that of a precocious son.

In his will the elder Arouet reminded his two sons of an admonition which he had tried to impress upon them and which, he sadly felt, they had not taken to heart—that is, to learn to know one's place in society and to keep it. In his words, "good sense requires that we accommodate ourselves to the level of those over whom we feel that we have a superiority of mind and knowledge and which we should never allow them to perceive."[7] Voltaire had none of his father's accommodating spirit. He aspired to social equality with the highest born of his time, and he seldom tried to conceal his intellectual superiority. He did inherit, however, his father's financial acumen and ability for hard work. Even though on the surface he posed as a fastidious model of elegant taste, in private he labored tirelessly—even heroically—on his literary projects. At the same time he exhibited an uncanny flair for engineering one financial coup after another.

Voltaire's brother, Armand, nine years his senior, was as opposite to him in disposition and temperament as any member of the same family could possibly be. Where Voltaire was pleasure-loving, witty, and irreverent, Armand was austere, sober, and fanatically religious. As children, their natural antagonism was exacerbated by the abbé de Châteauneuf and his friends, who pitted them against each other in the composing of epigrams. Despite the difference in age, Voltaire was sometimes the victor.

The abbé de Châteauneuf began Voltaire's education at the age of three by making him learn by heart a deistical poem about Moses, *La Moïsade* by Lourdet, one of the first open attacks against religion in France. The poem portrays Moses as an imposter who pretended to have received divine visions as a device to foist his personal rule and political ideas upon a gullible people [given in full by Duvernet, pp. 313–15]. Since this poem is only three pages long, it is quite plausible that Voltaire learned it by heart. He

[7] Ira O. Wade, "Voltaire's Change of Names," PMLA 44 (1929), 559.

could still recite it when he was 26 years old [1105]. As Voltaire's contemporary biographer remarked, this courageous philosophical poem sowed the seeds of his incredulity and established his opinion that in all countries religious dogmas and solemnities derive from the charlatanism of some false prophet. Perhaps de Châteauneuf selected this irreligious work with a malicious intent to irritate the older brother, but he succeeded in banishing all reverence from the young Voltaire's mind and preventing him from accepting intellectual authority of any kind.

The explanation for Armand's contrary fanaticism is that he was sent at an early age to the seminary of the Oratorian fathers, noted for their learning and sanctity, and that the fathers were overly successful in promoting his piety. Armand's austere and morbid disposition soon led him to affiliate himself with the Jansenists, adherents of a theology which, although Catholic, strongly resembled that of the Protestant Calvinists. They embraced original sin and denied free will; the more fanatical practiced flagellation, worked themselves into convulsions, and convinced themselves that they had witnessed miracles. Arouet despaired of both of his sons: the elder seemed to be wasting his career and fortune on a proscribed religion and its penniless proselytes; the younger seemed to be dissipating his on pleasure and libertinism. Although the two brothers were temperamentally incompatible, and Voltaire ridiculed Armand mercilessly for religious fanaticism and stinginess, he never completely sundered their fraternal bonds. When, in middle age, he thought that Armand was in danger of death, he was deeply affected and expressed a willingness to go to his brother's bedside should his presence be desired [2015].

Probably because of the excessive and annoying piety of Armand, Arouet did not entrust his younger son to the Oratorian fathers, but kept him at home until he attained the advanced age of ten. Then Voltaire was placed in the care of the urbane Jesuits at their elite Collège Louis-le-Grand, so called because of the praise it had received from the Grand Monarch of France several years previously. The school was the favorite of the high aristocracy, an indication of the social position of Arouet and of the elevated hopes he entertained for his son. The ordinary boarders slept in a dormitory, the most privileged had private rooms with separate quarters for their retainers, and those in between occupied large rooms with four or five others and a préfet or tutor. Voltaire's tutor was the abbé d'Olivet, who reminded him many years later how they had

shivered together in front of an inadequate fire [12907]. Like all students, Voltaire was required to wear a robe and *toque* or flat hat, a source of chagrin to the older and more worldly students.

The Jesuits were then, as now, renowned as excellent educators, but the curriculum at Louis-le-Grand suffered from excessive traditionalism. Apart from a little Greek, a smattering of mathematics, and considerable theology, Latin was almost the only subject of study, but it was presented in every imaginable form: grammar, poetry, meditations, sermons, history, and drama—the pagan philosophers alternating in an incongruous mixture with the Christian saints. This is why Voltaire later complained that his studies were not relevant to the issues of his time. "I did not know that Francis I was taken prisoner at Pavia, nor where Pavia was; the very land of my birth was unknown to me. I knew neither the constitution nor the interests of my country; not a word of mathematics, not a word of sound philosophy. I learned Latin and nonsense (sottises)."[8] Voltaire, nevertheless, remembered with gratitude that he had been reared for seven years "by men who took indefatigable and unrewarded pains to form the manners and minds of youth." He felt that the power struggles of the Jesuits in "remote corners of the earth," which some people held against the order, were not sufficient reason for him to be ungrateful toward those who had inspired him "with the taste for belles-lettres and of the sentiments which would remain until the tomb" as the consolation of his life [3044].

This apparent inconsistency in blaming his studies for irrelevance but praising his teachers for their humanism should not surprise us. Voltaire frequently gave blatantly contradictory opinions on many subjects throughout his life. His attitude toward the Jesuits, moreover, may quite logically be divided into two quite separate aspects. He opposed virtually everything about the Jesuits as members of a religious order based upon authority and blind obedience to tradition, but he respected and loved individual priests who, as scholars, men, and friends, had introduced him to the universe of study and literary composition, and shared with him the pleasures of esthetic achievement. In later life he remarked that one speaks ill of the Jesuits as a body, but one is happy to live with its members [2619]. Voltaire would devote much of his life to attacking

[8] Louis Moland, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1877–1885), XVIII, 471. Further references to this edition, incorporated in the text, will be identified by the letter M.

the control that religion held over society, but he would be covertly joined or encouraged in this struggle by many Catholic priests sympathetic to his ideals. And Voltaire never succeeded in shaking off the superficial religious accoutrements which Jesuit training had instilled in him. As an adult, he sometimes lay in bed reciting litanies to the Virgin, succumbing to a mere mechanical habit [1630].

Although Voltaire summarized the results of his seven years at school as the acquisition of Latin and "sottises," he added that the high quality of this Latin was by no means to be disparaged. For him the best feature of Louis-le-Grand was the custom of having the students present Latin comedies and tragedies for their parents. From other sources Voltaire might have learned to love the theater as a spectator, but at school he acquired the habit of acting, which developed into a passion for every phase of the theater, including that of writing for it. At the age of twelve he composed a tragedy, *Amulius and Numitor*, which as an adult he threw in the fire, although some scraps have survived.[9]

In estimating the high quality of Voltaire's teachers, we must take into account that all of them published books of criticism and erudition, and that some of them were honored for their scholarship by being elected to the illustrious French Academy. Voltaire's favorite teacher was Father Porée, whose classes were regarded as hours of delight, and who, according to Voltaire, was unexcelled in making study and virtue attractive. Nineteen of his students, including Voltaire, eventually entered the French Academy. One of the foremost academic periodicals of the century was the *Journal de Trévoux*, the scholarly organ of the French Jesuits. Its editor, Father Tournemine, who served as librarian at Louis-le-Grand, recognized the literary potentialities of the young Voltaire, and a strong attachment developed between them. In the hours of recreation, when the other boys were exercising and playing games, Voltaire "strengthened his mind in conversation with Fathers Tournemine and Porée." If his schoolmates taunted him for his bookishness, he retorted that "each person jumps and amuses himself in his own way" [Duvernet, p. 15].

Another of Voltaire's teachers was Pierre Charlevoix, who was to become the author of the definitive study of French America, *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France* (1744). In 1709, Charlevoix had just returned from four years at a Jesuit col-

[9] Henri Beaune, *Voltaire au collège* (Paris, 1867), p. cxlix.

lege in Canada, and his recollections may have stimulated Voltaire's interest in the New World.[10] In later life, Voltaire recalled that he had known this Jesuit intimately and that he was a very truthful man [M. 17:266], but he also called him an author as insipid as he was badly informed [M. 24:9].

Voltaire's professor of rhetoric, Father Paullou, in commenting on Voltaire's precocious literary talents, remarked that he had never encountered another pupil "whose reason was as fully exercised, whose taste was as refined, whose manner of thinking was as bold, or who was as much devoured by the thirst for celebrity" [Duvernet, p. 15]. The only teacher whose esteem Voltaire could not win was Father Lejay, also in charge of rhetoric, a pedant who felt himself humiliated by his pupil [Duvernet, p. 16].

Voltaire's tutor, the abbé d'Olivet, only twelve years his senior, eventually became one of the most accomplished Latin scholars in Europe, as well as Voltaire's life-long friend. He frequently administered corporal punishment to Voltaire's backside during the latter's fourteenth year [8960]. Voltaire even suggested that d'Olivet obtained sexual stimulation from physical contact with his charges [14321]. Apart from this, Voltaire is never known to have made a disparaging remark about his tutor. D'Alembert once warned Voltaire that he was a bad colleague who hates everybody and "does not love you more than anyone else" [14348]. It is true that d'Olivet became an active supporter of Voltaire's earliest literary enemy, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, swearing that he was a fine honest man, but it is vastly more important that d'Olivet later campaigned vigorously for Voltaire's admission to the French Academy.[11] When in 1725 d'Olivet published a translation of *On the Nature of the Gods* by his preferred author Cicero, a favorite of Voltaire as well, the prefatory material caused the authors of the *Mémoires de Trévoux* to accuse his book of a tendency toward atheism, or at least toward religious indifference. This raises the possibility that not only de Châteauneuf at home, but also d'Olivet at school may have nurtured Voltaire's religious scepticism. René Pomeau has also indicated that the liberal catechism of Father Peter Canisius, which was used at Louis-le-Grand, "manifested deistic tendencies in the bosom of orthodoxy."[12]

Many of the anecdotes concerning Voltaire's life at Louis-le-

[10] Leon Pouliot, *François Xavier Charlevoix S.J.* (Sudbury, Ont., 1957).
[11] Henry A. Grubbs, *Jean-Baptiste Rousseau* (Princeton, 1941), pp. 170–71.
[12] René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris, 1969), p. 50.

Grand have come to us from Voltaire's semiofficial biographer, the abbé Théophile-Imarigeon Duvernet, a free-thinking ecclesiastic who was introduced to him by d'Alembert. In 1765 he proposed to write a critical history of the Jesuit order, a project which Voltaire thought would be of great service to all men in exposing the "priests who had deceived them and who had made them applaud for being deceived." Duvernet gave up this project in 1777, however, in order to write the life of his idol, deriving much of his information from direct interviews with Voltaire and his life-long friend Thieriot. For this reason, Duvernet's anecdotes are likely to be authentic.

Duvernet came to the conclusion after serious investigation that nearly all of Voltaire's schoolmates became deists, believing in a single god and holding in contempt all institutions called divine [Duvernet, p. 17]. Duvernet is also the source for the anecdote that one day in class, after Voltaire had provoked Father Lejay by one of his sallies, the priest in a rage ran to Voltaire's bench, seized him by the collar and cried out, "Rascal, some day you will be the standard-bearer of deism in France."

During Voltaire's last year at Louis-le-Grand, one of his classmates said he had heard that Voltaire and one of his other schoolmates had made a pact to become priests. This rumor was reported to Voltaire, probably as a joke, for he answered that he himself was too worldly and his friend too intelligent to do such a stupid thing [5]. Voltaire saw nothing but absurdity in the reasoning of those in his age group who entered religious orders; these novitiates expatiated on the dangers of the world, the charms of which they had not tasted, and on the peacefulness of the religious life, the incommodities of which they could not foresee.

Voltaire realized, moreover, that many of the men who devoted their lives to religion did so for personal advantage, without any kind of dedication to sanctity or social service. In his *Philosophical Letters* he described abbés as "undefinable beings," who are neither regular nor secular. The word *abbé* comes from the Hebrew word for *father*, he further explained in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, but the title was misapplied to those who had no other claim than "having shaven heads, wearing a clerical collar and a short coat, and waiting for a clerical living."

All of Voltaire's time at school was not devoted to ridiculing the curriculum and mocking the priesthood. He established several friendships, which would remain throughout his life. Among his

intimates were the marquis d'Argenson and his younger brother, the comte d'Argenson. These friendships would stand Voltaire in good stead in later life, when both brothers would become royal ministers. The duc de Richelieu was another schoolmate, but his exalted birth created a wall of reserve that made real intimacy difficult; as a man of action and military leader in later life, Richelieu became Voltaire's avowed hero. Matters of birth made no difference to the comte d'Argental, another classmate who was to be one of Voltaire's most loyal admirers. He eventually entered the diplomatic service and always stood ready with literary advice or practical assistance. Pierre Robert Cideville, René de Longueil (marquis de Maisons), and Claude-Phillippe Fyot (marquis de la Marche) were others whose friendship would last beyond the schoolroom.

Voltaire began writing poetry at such an early age that he recalled in one of his poems, "In leaving the cradle, I stuttered in verse," a statement which preceded Alexander Pope's almost identical declaration in English: "I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came" [*Epître XXXVI*, "A une dame" (1732); "Epistle . . . to Dr. Arbuthnot" (1735)]. Both poets were probably inspired by a line in Ovid: *Sponte sua numeros carmen veniebat ad aptos* [*Tristia*, IV, 10, 25]. Voltaire came to regret bitterly one of his schoolboy compositions, a French translation of an ode in Latin that Father Lejay had composed in homage to Sainte Geneviève, the patron of the city of Paris. Voltaire's verses were so good that the Jesuits had them printed in 1710 with the author's name. Almost half a century later, in the year of the publication of *Candide*, Voltaire's enemies resurrected these verses in order to embarrass him, describing them not as a translation, but as an original work of piety and devotion.[13]

On the first day of 1710, Voltaire was awarded the first prize for Latin verse, a copy of *The History of the Civil Wars in France*, 1657, by Davila.[14] The prizes were distributed by the reigning poet of the time, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, no relation to the later and greater Jean-Jacques. During the ceremonies Rousseau inquired about Voltaire, who was described to him by one of the priests as a lad with an amazing talent for poetry. To Rousseau he seemed "to be about seventeen years old, with a rather poor physiognomy, but with a lively and alert expression" [1040]. Rousseau had no

[13] Beaune, *Voltaire au collège*, pp. clviii–clix.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. xcvi.

business in commenting on anyone's undistinguished looks, since he was himself conspicuous for an ugly contorted mouth [1105]. Later Voltaire became one of Rousseau's enemies, and looking back on this episode he charged that Rousseau's father, a cobbler, had made shoes for Arouet and that Rousseau was suspected of homosexuality. The first charge was irrelevant and the second probably false, but Voltaire cared little about accuracy in attacking his enemies.[15]

One day a veteran soldier came to Louis-le-Grand to ask the priests to write him some verses soliciting charity, which he could present to the Dauphin, in whose regiment he had served. Father Porée turned him over to Voltaire, who wrote a poem that affected the heir to the throne so favorably that the veteran was given a stipend in gold.

The fame of Voltaire's poem travelled beyond the court to the ears of Ninon de Lenclos, who asked the abbé de Châteauneuf to bring him to her apartments. Ninon was the most notorious French courtesan of the seventeenth century, the presiding deity of a literary salon famous for its combination of erotic and intellectual pleasures. As her contemporaries said, nature combined in her the voluptuousness of Epicurus and the virtue of Cato. At the age of seventeen she had become the mistress of the cardinal de Richelieu, giving him, as Voltaire elegantly expressed it, her first favors and receiving in return the cardinal's last. Her own last favors were given to Voltaire's godfather, the abbé de Châteauneuf, who was still relatively young when he first paid his addresses to Ninon. According to Voltaire, she did not succumb immediately, but made a point of making her suitor wait until her seventieth birthday [M. 23:512]. She treated friendship as an inviolable obligation, but held it as a maxim that "love is a pastime involving no moral obligation." Her prayers consisted of a single sentiment, "Make me an honest man, but never an honest woman" [3871]. Ninon was so favorably impressed with Voltaire that she left him one thousand francs in her will for the purchase of books. When Voltaire met her she was approaching eighty. He remarked that she had nothing on her bones "but yellow skin turning into black" [M. 26:384], and that her face bore "the most hideous marks of old age and her body all its infirmities" [M. 18:354]. Voltaire long remembered epigrammatic verses by one of Ninon's rejected lovers, Chapelle, affirming that no one should be surprised at Ninon's

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. clxi–clxiii.

frequently praising the sublime virtue of Plato, for she was old enough to have been his mistress [3871]. Ninon replied that she would rather sleep with Plato than with Chapelle.

Voltaire once declared to Father Porée that "he loved to weigh in his small scales the great interests of Europe," evidence of his early dedication to history and diplomacy [Duvernet, p. 28]. Duvernet indicates that Voltaire devoted himself to two subjects ordinarily remote from the schools of his time: one, the history of his great contemporaries; the other, political science [Duvernet, p. 18]. This may be the reason his teachers selected Davila's *History* as his prize.

Voltaire was happy at school with his studies, his verse, and his amateur theatricals. In our times, he would probably have continued in graduate school, but for him the only possibilities of further formal education lay in the disciplines of theology and law, neither of which he respected. "I want no other career," he told his father, "than that of a man of letters." Arouet replied, "That is the condition of a man who wants to be useless to society, to be an expense to his parents, and to starve to death" [Duvernet, p. 24]. Later Voltaire observed that nearly every man who makes a name in arts and letters cultivates them in spite of the opposition of his parents [M. 23:88]. Voltaire became a man of letters through a kind of pride—he looked at literature as a profession in which birth and wealth count for little. As he said later in life, "One becomes a *maître des requêtes* with money, but with money one cannot make an epic poem; and I wrote one" [1936]. When confronted by his unsympathetic father, however, Voltaire reluctantly accepted law as a last resort, and was obliged to attend lectures in a building resembling a barn [Duvernet, p. 25]. What chiefly disgusted him, apart from the haphazard and antiquated manner of the teaching, was the trivia he was required to memorize, "the profusion of useless things" with which he was obliged to fill his brain [1954]. His indulgent father proposed to buy him an office, that of counsellor to the Parliament, vaunting the great prestige attached to it. Voltaire replied that he was not interested in prestige that had to be purchased—he knew how to obtain a much greater kind—that which cannot be bought [Duvernet, p. 27]. Voltaire would probably have made an excellent trial lawyer had he set his mind to it. He knew how to marshall evidence and present it forcibly. But his passion for freedom—intellectual and personal—kept him from any desire to become an officer attached

to a law court or a legislature. The only bodies with which he ever wished to be affiliated were the French Academy and the French royal court. His whole experience confirmed his resolve of never belonging to any corps, but of attaching himself to nothing but his liberty and that of his friends [508].

Although Voltaire spent seven years in a Jesuit school, his life was not in the least sheltered from mundane contacts. At the age of eleven the abbé de Châteauneuf introduced him to the Epicurean votaries of the Temple, an ancient monastery in Paris occupied in the early years of the eighteenth century by private householders. Those who frequented this society were dissolute noblemen and no less dissolute ecclesiastics, the chief of whom was Philippe Vendôme, grand prior of France. He resided in an adjacent palace, but his debauchery was so notorious that the court forced him to live most of the time away from the capital. Life among the habitués of the Temple fluctuated between orgies and intellectual conversation. Voltaire's delicate constitution kept him in youth, as in old age, from excessive eating and drinking, but his epigrams, verses, and repartée were the equal of any of the princes and philosophers of the Temple. According to Duvernet, they all wrote poetry, a circumstance that gave Voltaire the audacity to remark, when seating himself at table next to Louis Armand de Bourbon, the prince of Conti, "We are here all princes and all poets" [Duvernet, p. 27]. Although Voltaire never fully adopted the philosophy of Epicurus, which he considered as questionable as the others, he nevertheless gave it credit for possessing more method and verisimilitude and less barbarousness than the scholasticism taught by his Jesuit masters [M. 23:89].

TWO

Love and Libertinage

1713–1721

The marquis de Châteauneuf, brother of Voltaire's godfather, had been named ambassador to the Netherlands in June 1713 and, perhaps at the intercession of Arouet, he appointed the young Voltaire as one of his attachés. Voltaire jumped at this chance to enter international society. Throughout much of his later life he aspired to a diplomatic post, and several times offered his services as an international negotiator. From all reports, when Voltaire arrived in Holland in the fall of 1713 his poor physiognomy had not much improved. Various observers during his twenties pictured him as slender, with piercing eyes, and a malicious expression. One discerned in him "the air of a satyr," and everyone without exception called him "dry." Voltaire portrayed himself in 1716 as "thin, long, dry and emaciated" [37].

At the turn of the century Holland was filled with exiled French Protestants and adventurers of all nations. Voltaire found the opera at the Hague detestable, but in compensation he had the society of "Calvinist ministers, Arminians, Socinians, rabbis, and Anabaptists, who all talked marvelously well and all had reason on their side" [126]. The English poet Matthew Prior, who had occupied a post similar to Voltaire's a few years previously, described the delights of a Dutch Saturday night, riding in a chaise with a book of Horace in one hand and a nymph on the other.

> That search all the province, you'd find no man there is
> So bless'd as the Englischen Heer Secretaris.

Voltaire lost no time in finding his own nymph, Catherine Olympe Du Noyer, daughter of a shrewd literary adventuress, Anne Marguerite Du Noyer, who eked out an uncertain living by publishing a periodical scandal sheet. According to Voltaire, this lady col-

lected spurious anecdotes of the follies of various people in high life and then passed them off as truth [M. 23:432]. When Voltaire arrived on the scene, Olympe, then aged twenty-one, had just finished a passionate affair with a French officer, who had deserted her for a career in England. She was thus ripe for the nineteen-year-old Voltaire. The lovers might have been left in peace to pursue their amorous inclinations had Mme Du Noyer not counted on marrying off Olympe to a man of means. The impecunious Voltaire was far from satisfying this requirement, and the "inconvenient mother," as she called herself, went about breaking up the romance. The struggle between mother and lovers resembled a comic opera in its elements: clandestine meetings, secret letters passed by domestics, orders to burn these letters upon receipt, and even Olympe masquerading as a boy in order to spend the night with her lover. All these ridiculous details have survived in a series of letters from Voltaire to Olympe, which were printed by Mme Du Noyer seven years afterwards in a volume of gossip and scandal, *Lettres historiques et galantes* (1720). The letters, as printed, cannot be considered as authentic documents. Even the terrible Mme Du Noyer in her commentary remarked that they resembled the conventional literary genre of letters of gallantry. She noted stylistic echoes from *Les Lettres portugaises* (1669), and passages imitated from the epistles of Heloise to Abelard. Voltaire, in the midst of ardent protestations of love in one of his letters, even lapsed into literary criticism of one of Mme Du Noyer's previous volumes. This is hardly more credible than his supposed declaration to Olympe in another letter, "I love your virtue as much as your person." It is necessary to stress the physical basis of Voltaire's attachment, since in his later writing he tried to give the impression that his constitution was so frail that he was virtually impotent. This was pure fabrication.

Some biographers have suggested that Voltaire was the dupe of Mme Du Noyer, but there is little foundation for such a belief. He never once proposed marriage to Olympe, and even if he had done so Mme Du Noyer would not have welcomed him as a son-in-law. As soon as she had the slightest inkling of the liaison between them, she complained to the French ambassador and persuaded him to confine Voltaire to his quarters. Olympe's father was Catholic, and Mme Du Noyer was Protestant, having come to Holland in part for religious reasons. As a means of removing his mistress from her mother's control, Voltaire devised the scheme

of returning Olympe to her father, to France, and to the Catholic faith. As part of his plan, he instructed Olympe to write for aid to her cousin, the bishop of Evreux, reminding him that "the King wishes the conversion of Huguenots." Voltaire, on his part, returned to Paris and sought to involve Father Tournemine in the same cause of repatriating his inamorata. In the guise of a "little beardless missionary," as Mme Du Noyer called him, Voltaire was not compounding with Catholicism or moderating his scepticism in the least. He was merely serving his private ends.

In the meantime, the ambassador was writing to Voltaire's father thunderous letters, "strewn with blood," detailing his son's indiscretions, folly, and insubordination. Arouet, enraged, obtained a *lettre de cachet*, or order for his son's imprisonment, and cut him off completely (but only temporarily) in his will [20]. Voltaire heroically determined to emigrate to America rather than submit to authority, but at the same time he unheroically wrote an appeasing letter, offering to live on bread and water if he were allowed to throw himself at his father's knees before taking ship. Arouet relented, and agreed to pardon his errant son on condition that he take the position of a lawyer's clerk in Paris as a kind of apprentice. And Voltaire accepted. Olympe was not in the least inconsolable. Another Frenchman, Guyot de Merville, two years Voltaire's senior, became her lover almost immediately, and by so doing passed into the ranks of Voltaire's future enemies, for no other reason, Voltaire later exclaimed, than that "he had had the same mistress as I twenty years ago" [1465]. Olympe eventually married a titled Englishman, inherited an estate from her father's brother, and in middle age became very religious.

When Voltaire returned to Paris, he took up lodgings in the apartment of the solicitor in whose office he was scheduled to expiate his indiscretion. The only feature of his apprenticeship that appealed to Voltaire was the presence in the same office of another young man, Nicolas-Claude Thieriot, who shared his devotion to refinement, luxury, poetry, and wit, but possessed absolutely none of his talent or industry. Thieriot was lazy, undependable, surly, and selfish; whereas Voltaire was indefatigably loyal, cheerful, and generous. In short, Voltaire was a friend, Thieriot a parasite. Voltaire adopted Thieriot as his companion and charge for much of his later life. Thieriot accepted his largess without embarrassment, offering little in return but occasional services as a liaison between Voltaire and his printers. Thieriot capitalized so

flagrantly on this friendship that he eventually became widely known as Voltaire's trumpet.

Voltaire professed to despise the counting-house atmosphere of the solicitor's office, but he nevertheless acquired there knowledge and experience, both legal and financial, which later proved invaluable in the management of his own funds. During his long life Voltaire made and lost several fortunes; he always lived in the best of circumstances; and he died a wealthy man. His continual affluence may perhaps be attributed to a certain amount of good luck—an element that cannot be underrated in Voltaire's life—but we must recognize also the shrewd good sense that he inherited from his father and the practical business training he acquired from his legal studies.

In the year 1714, the French Academy announced its award in a prize competition for the best poem celebrating the completion of a new choir in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Voltaire, who had submitted an entry, was greatly chagrined to learn that his poem had been overlooked in favor of a mediocre piece by a sixty-five year old rimer, the abbé Du Jarry. The public also took exception to the prize committee's choice, in particular because of an absurd line of geographical description, "From the burning poles to the glacial poles." No one, least of all the author, could identify the burning poles. Du Jarry had received the prize largely on the insistence of the abbé Lamotte, one of the vociferous champions of the Moderns in the controversy between the Ancients and Moderns. Voltaire took revenge by circulating a bitter satire, *Le Bourbier* [*The Dung Heap*, 1714], in which he described the base of Mount Parnassus as a black, evil-smelling mud hole inhabited by Lamotte and other defenders of the Moderns. Rousseau, to whom Voltaire turned for approval, replied that talented poets should not demean themselves by entering competitions [25].

Le Bourbier attacks Voltaire's enemies savagely, but it is not scatological or obscene. This cannot be said about another satire he wrote in the same year, *L'Anti-Giton* [*The Anti-Pederast*], based upon the character Giton, an effeminate boy in the *Satyricon* of Petronius. Dedicated to Mademoiselle Adrienne Lecouvreur, one of the most glamorous actresses of the Comédie française, the poem describes the progress of homosexuality from Greece to Paris, and calls on Lecouvreur to bring "honest love" back again to the theater. The poem reveals that the young Voltaire had already begun to cultivate relations backstage. Hard at work on a tragedy,

Œdipe, he was doing his best to ingratiate himself with the principal actors and actresses, particularly with their "amiable sovereign," Lecouvreur, in order to prepare the way for their accepting his own work. The talented and tender actress eventually became Voltaire's mistress for a brief period, and they remained devoted friends until her death.

When Arouet got wind of his son's satires, he realized as well as Rousseau had that they could have dangerous effects, and he prevailed upon an elder statesman, Louis-Urbain Lefèvre de Caumartin, marquis de Saint-Ange, to accept Voltaire as a guest in his château near Fontainebleau, and to impose his advanced age and wisdom as a restraining influence. Caumartin had been a counselor of state during the apogee of the glorious reign of Louis XIV. He knew the history and personalities of the court, read avidly, and never forgot anything he had heard or read. He was a mine of information for Voltaire, who was burning to learn the history of his country. In Voltaire's words, he "carried in his mind the living history of his time" ["Epître à . . . Vendôme," 1716]. Two of Voltaire's most serious works, *La Henriade*, the epic poem of the French nation, and *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, its philosophical history, took form under the wing of Caumartin. The fact that Caumartin was in his eighties and Voltaire just entering his twenties made no difference to their attaining a close attachment. In affairs of the intellect age does not count, and Voltaire had already learned at the Temple the art of bridging the generations. He later recounted that Caumartin's sublime and touching "traits" concerning Henry IV fired his imagination and gave him the notion of writing his epic poem [2426].

While Voltaire and Caumartin conversed at Saint-Ange over the glories of the reign of Louis XIV, the monarch himself was breathing his last in Versailles. He died on 1 September 1715, and the duc d'Orleans became regent, ushering in a new regime of relative enlightenment and tolerance. The reign of Louis XIV had been plagued by interminable controversy engendered by Jansenists and Gallicanists, and by an external standard of formal religious observance and imposed rigid morality. The regent, however, was an epicurean of the school of the Temple. As Duvernet observed, "he despised the theologians, was not at all disturbed at their being publicly ridiculed, and meddled in their affairs only to keep them from troubling the state" [Duvernet, p. 5].

The epicurean philosophy of the regent and of the Temple must

be sharply distinguished from the moral earnestness of the mature Voltaire and the later Enlightenment. The men of the Temple taught that one should make the best of any trials or unavoidable pain and seek maximum enjoyment through intellectual distraction and physical indulgence. Voltaire epitomized this attitude in a verse epistle of 1715 to one of the abbés of his circle, who was mourning the death of his mistress. Voltaire's recipe for true wisdom at this time consisted in knowing how to flee from sadness into the arms of voluptuousness. Both in life and in print, Voltaire celebrated more successfully the pleasures of Venus than those of Bacchus. Since he lacked the physical capacity for debauchery demonstrated by the Grand Prior, who had gone to bed drunk every night for forty years and had publicly flaunted his mistresses and contempt for religion, Voltaire stood out in the circle by advocating "a little more wine and less brandy" ["Epître à M. le duc D'Aremberg," 1715]. In matters of religion, the Templars were blasphemers, not reformers. They attacked god, not the religious system; Voltaire in his maturity would attack the system, not god.

In the period from 1714 to 1716, however, Voltaire joined in the iconoclasm of his companions. A certain abbé reported to the police that Voltaire flagrantly taught that the Old Testament "is nothing but a tissue of stories and fables, the Apostles were good folk, idiotic, simple, and credulous, and the church fathers, in particular Saint Bernard, who angered him most, were nothing but charlatans and suborners" [269]. Voltaire saw nothing wrong with the Templars' combination of dissipation and culture, and he used their lavish suppers as occasions for trying out his literary works. He took particular pleasure one night in July 1716 in reading his drama *Œdipe* to the abbé de Bussy, the abbé Chaulieu, and the Grand Prior, and accepting their suggestions for improvement. "I believe that in order for me to do good work," he remarked to the abbé Chaulieu, "all that I need is to drink four or five times with you. Socrates gave his lessons in bed, and you give yours at the table, which means that yours are doubtless more gay than his" [35].

The private life of the regent offered the wits and poets ample scope for scurrilities and libels. Voltaire wrote at least two poems in the vein of his *Anti-Giton*, in one of which he accused the regent of incestuous relations with his daughter, the duchesse de Berry. Even the easy-going regent retaliated against this defamation, bordering on *lèse majesté*. He ordered Voltaire exiled to Tulle, a

dreary town about 300 miles from Paris. Arouet, still looking after his wayward son, intervened, however, to have the place of exile changed to Sully, on the grounds that family connections there would provide the necessary examples to correct the young man's "impudence and moderate his vivacity" [28]. Voltaire followed the royal edict to the extent of going to Sully, but instead of residing with members of his own family, no trace of whom has ever been found, he lived in luxury in the magnificent château of the duc de Sully, where he was regaled with balls, receptions, and gala evenings of all kinds. Even though he encountered "less philosophizing than drinking," his sojourn there would have been ideal had he been free to leave at will [41]. Only constraint kept him from complete relaxation and contentment. From the indulgent regent, he soon received a pardon, however, terminating his exile in the autumn of 1716.

During his idyllic sojourn at Sully, Voltaire acquired the second of his recorded mistresses, Mlle Suzanne-Catherine de Livry, a young lady with about the same character, charms, and attainments as Olympe. Among the delights of the "white nights" of Sully (i.e., those without sleep) were amateur theatricals in which Voltaire and Suzanne played opposite each other. They later lived together for a season in Paris, and for her benefit Voltaire had his portrait painted. One of his close drinking and versifying companions, Lefèvre de la Faluère, usually known by his mother's name, Génonville, spent enough time in their joint company to become independently attached to Suzanne, and with amiable grace he induced her into his own bed. Voltaire, who had ample grounds for rage and hurt pride, on learning of Suzanne's philandering, decided that he must learn "to dispense with the bagatelles of life," and, therefore, generously accommodated himself to the situation ["Epître à M. le duc de Sully," 1720; see also "Epître à M. de la F. de Génonville," 1719]. Instead of making himself ridiculous by acting the betrayed lover, he retained both his friend and his good humor—at least superficially. After Génonville died at an early age, Voltaire romantically looked back upon their Bohemian relations as an idyllic *ménage à trois* ["Epître aux Mânes de M. de Génonville," 1729].

When Voltaire returned from Sully to Paris, he openly abandoned his legal studies, took up bachelor quarters, and concocted further dangerous libels on the regent. These passed without offense, but another poem filled with social criticism—which was

not by Voltaire but was generally considered to be—stirred up court resentment. The poem was called *J'ai vu* [*I Have Seen*], because nearly each of its lines opened with this phrase. It was attributed to Voltaire because it strongly favored Jansenists over Jesuits (Voltaire presumably being tarnished with his brother's fanaticism), and it ended "I have seen these evils and I am only twenty years old" [Duvernet, p. 37]. Indignantly Voltaire complained that he could not be the author of such a wretched poem, but no one believed him. He merely acquired through his denial the "reputation of a great poet and a very modest man" [D. I, 119]. As a working principle of his literary career, Voltaire subsequently adopted the tactic of repudiating any work if it ever seemed likely to produce unfortunate consequences. "As soon as there should appear the slightest danger," he wrote to d'Alembert much later about his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, "I beg of you to warn me in order that I may disavow the work in all the public prints with my usual candor and innocence" [11252]. Voltaire protested his innocence so frequently that it became a matter of routine. In the spring of 1717 there circulated in the streets of Paris a Latin inscription *Puero regnante*, referring to the seven-year-old king of France. It began with the title "boy reigning," continued with a reference to "a man notorious for poisonings and incests administering,"—unmistakingly pointing to the regent—and ended with "France about to perish." This also was attributed to Voltaire—no doubt correctly.

One day in May, Voltaire, strolling in the gardens of the Palais Royal, encountered the regent, who addressed him casually: "Monsieur Arouet, I promise to show you something you have never seen before." "What is that?" "The Bastille." "Oh! My Lord, I consider it already seen" [D. I, 120]. This conversation is merely a tradition, but Voltaire was in fact shortly arrested and confined in the state prison. His downfall had come partly through literary pride in talking to a police spy or informer. In the time of the regent, "half of the nation had become spies on the other" [M. 16:341]. Voltaire admitted to one of these agents provocateurs, ironically named Beauregard, that he was the author of *Puero regnante*, even though Beauregard had pretended to believe that the Latin squib was generally considered to be the work of a Jesuit. Voltaire replied that the Jesuits, like the jay in the fable, borrow peacock feathers for their own adornment. He also told his attentive listener that the regent's daughter was about to leave

the city for a clandestine pregnancy. And he naturally had to talk of the regent himself: "Do you know what that bugger has done to me? He exiled me because I revealed to the public that his Messalina of a daughter was a whore" [45]. This was more than enough to convict him.

When the officers came to his lodgings to arrest him, Voltaire was still in bed. He was treated politely and he and his valet were allowed to put their clothes on in another room. Even in this grave situation, his mocking humor led him to place his captors in a ridiculous situation. As they told it afterwards, Voltaire "out of an acrid disposition and in order to furnish them useless activity" made them believe that he had deposited papers containing verses and songs in the latrine. The officials had nothing better to do than to order a search there over two consecutive days, as we learn from the police commissioner's report. After finding nothing but "water and floating objects," the police realized that they had been victims of a practical joke, and the search was abandoned.[1]

On the way to the Bastille, Voltaire kept up his jokes, remarking that he did not think it was proper for the officials to work on a holiday (he was arrested on Whitsunday), and that he expected to be very happy in prison provided that he be daily furnished with milk and that he be allowed to stay for a minimum of a fortnight [48]. This shows conclusively that Voltaire's courage and boldness were not limited to the printed page. His father, however, faced with the dismal prospect of his son being "buried alive" in the dreaded Bastille, cried out, "I had indeed foreseen that his idleness would bring on some disgrace. Why did he not take up a profession?" [Duvernet, p. 37]. In the orders for his arrest, Voltaire had significantly been described as "without profession" [D. I, 127].

Although history is filled with accounts of the horrors of the dungeons of the Bastille, Voltaire seemed to have been adequately comfortable there, more than once dining at the governor's table, and he studied Homer in Latin and Greek [53]. During his captivity he wrote some mock-serious verses describing his condition, "betrayed by everyone, going without sleep, and drinking warm and eating cold" [*La Bastille*, 1717]. He also wrote a large segment of his epic poem *La Henriade*. In his *Historical Commentary*, he reveals that he began his poem on impulse, carried away by his

[1] Jacques Gabriel Prod'homme, *Voltaire raconté par ceux qui l'ont vu* (Paris, 1929), p. 11.

enthusiasm for history, not even confident that he would bring it to a conclusion. He gave the impression that he composed with such ease that the poem almost wrote itself. At another time he tried to make his secretary believe that the second canto had come to him in a dream, and that he remembered it long enough upon waking to put it word for word on paper.[2] There may be some truth to his assertion, for many years later he wrote in his private notebook that in a dream he recited the first canto of *La Henriade* in a version quite different from the final one.[3] He may, on the other hand, have invented the story of dream composition in order to protect himself from the accusation of plagiarism. While in the Bastille he had access to a book containing a poetic "Vision ou Caprice" written by hand on its margins by a previous prisoner, Constantin de Renneville. Voltaire was later accused of stealing from it, and a modern scholar has shown that it is indeed the source of a passage in *La Henriade* in which Henry visits the underworld lake of wicked kings.[4]

On 11 April 1718, after a year and a month of imprisonment, the order came for Voltaire's discharge in the custody of his father at his country home. Undoubtedly Arouet's influence had a great deal to do with obtaining this release, further evidence that, despite his opposition to Voltaire's poetic career, he nevertheless loved his erratic son and was concerned for his welfare. Following a series of appeals and intercessions, Voltaire was eventually given permission to return to Paris and remain there. Not only his personal interest but that of the public, he argued, was at stake [60].

During his incarceration, the actors of the Comédie française, who had earlier given their promise to stage his tragedy *Œdipe*, had delayed performing it, but after his return they began rehearsals. The play was presented for the first time on 18 November 1718, three days before Voltaire's twenty-fourth birthday, and it earned a triumphant run of forty-five successive performances. Voltaire later observed that it is extremely difficult to succeed in drama

[2] Longchamp and Wagnière, *Mémoires sur Voltaire et sur ses ouvrages* (Paris, 1826), I, 23. This work will henceforth be cited in the text as Longchamp.

[3] Theodore Besterman, ed., *Notebooks* in *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, LXXXII (Toronto, 1968), 709. The *Notebooks* make up volumes 81 and 82 of this edition, and are paged consecutively through the two volumes. Future references to this material will cite Notebooks and the page numbers alone.

[4] Ira O. Wade, *Studies on Voltaire* (Princeton, 1947), p. 11.

before the age of thirty-four, since drama is a genre requiring a knowledge of the world and of the human heart [M. 23:91]. Voltaire was perhaps mistaken. Shakespeare, Calderón, Corneille, and Racine had written plays revealing much about human nature before the age of thirty-four, as Goethe and Schiller were to do many years after Voltaire's judgment.

Voltaire's first play concerns the Greek story of the king of Thebes, married to Jocasta, widow of the former King Laius, whom Œdipus had slain. Œdipus makes the tragic discovery that he is actually the son of Jocasta and Laius, that is, of his own wife and the man he has killed. Voltaire drew upon previous dramatic portrayals of the theme by Sophocles and Corneille, but seems to have been totally unaware that Dryden and Lee had produced an English version in 1679. Even if he had known this text, he would probably at that time have ignored it. He remarked in conversation early in 1730 that "English plays are like their English puddings: nobody has any taste for them but themselves."[5] Later, however, he introduced several features of English heroic plays into his own work. Some members of Voltaire's audience fancied that the theme of incest had been inspired by the conduct of the regent, but the life of Ninon de Lenclos, whose nineteen-year-old son shot himself after realizing that he had actually made love to his mother, presents closer parallels to the plot. In the plays of Sophocles and Corneille, Jocasta is over sixty; whereas in Voltaire's version she is merely thirty-five. He realized that a woman of the age of Ninon as he had known her would have been incapable of arousing great passion.

The references in *Œdipe* to the slain king of Thebes were applied by the contemporary audience to the defunct Louis XIV. Voltaire clearly indicated that kings, adored as gods during their lifetime, are forgotten at death. A bold line in the play, delivered by a friend of Hercules, seemed to disparage hereditary monarchy in general.

> Qu'eussé-je été sans lui? rien que le fils d'un roi.
>
> [I, 1]

> What would I have been without him? nothing
> but the son of a king.

[5] James M. Osborn, ed., *Joseph Spence, Observations* (Oxford, 1966), entry 1033.

Voltaire used even stronger terms in the next act:

> Un roi pour ses sujets est un Dieu qu'on révère
> Pour Hercule et pour moi, c'est un homme ordinaire.
> [II, 4]

> A king for his subjects is a God one reveres,
> For Hercules and me just a man like his peers.

Although some of Voltaire's contemporaries believed that the play was intended to symbolize the internal conflict in the Catholic church between Jansenists and Jesuits, he unleashed his fury against the whole of organized religion. In a real sense he declared philosophical war in the couplet:

> Nos prêtres ne sont point ce qu'un vain peuple pense;
> Notre crédulité fait toute leur science.
> [IV, 1]

> Conceive of our priests not as a duped people must;
> All their science is naught but our credulous trust.

Voltaire had seized on one of the principal methods of the deists for attacking religious authority with impunity—portraying the superstitions, bigotry, and priestcraft of pagan religions in such a way that the strictures would fall upon Christianity. He attacked the determinist doctrines held by both the ancients and the Jansenists by revealing that the crime in the play was not that of the protagonist, but of the gods. As one of his contemporaries appropriately remarked, "this irreligious rimer," in making us love Œdipus, constrains us to hate the gods.[6] In his autobiography, Voltaire maintained that because of his youth and addiction to a life of pleasure, he was not aware of the risks he was taking.

It is said that one day Voltaire appeared on the boards himself, carrying the train of the high priest, a character of his own invention, and clowning to the merriment of the audience. It is hard to visualize such a scene, for in those days the barriers between comedy and tragedy were virtually impassable on the French stage. Shakespeare, who often mixed the two genres, was not then known in France—either to Voltaire or to the general public. When Vol-

[6] R. Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris, 1969), p. 88.

taire later discovered the practice in Shakespeare, he repudiated it as barbarous. According to another tradition, Voltaire's father obscured himself in the crowd during one performance, and, torn between joy and chagrin, murmured continually, "Oh, the rascal; oh, the rascal" [Longchamp, I, 21–22].

The audience may have been stunned by Voltaire's political and anticlerical allusions, but the players were more concerned about such dramatic technicalities as whether there should be a love interest in the play. In writing to Father Porée years later Voltaire maintained that the players had not wanted to accept his drama unless he would add a certain amount of the gallantry and courtship that had become indispensable on the French stage, but that he had stood firm in his insistence on classical purity and Greek tradition. He worked, he said, as though he had been living in ancient Athens [D. I, 139]. According to his theory, love belongs to tragedy if it is the principal theme, as in *Phèdre* or *Le Cid*, but not if it is only tangential. Many years later he wrote that he had never been able to console himself for having introduced, against his better judgment, a reference to an old love of Jocasta for Œdipus, and thus having enervated his theme [Notebooks, p. 456]. There may not be love interest in *Œdipe*, but there is plenty of emotion. In the printed edition of the play, 1719, Voltaire remarked that passions must always be given to the principal characters of a drama, and he made a great deal of his originality in portraying Jocasta as a young woman, rather than as the mother she was traditionally, which certainly introduced a strong element of eroticism. The regent attended at least two performances of *Œdipus*, and a special performance was given for the king at his palace. It was also produced in London in its original French version at a command performance, 10 April 1722, for King George I.[7]

Voltaire asked for permission to dedicate his work to the regent in a clever letter, underscoring that he was not appealing for a subscription (euphemism for financial support) and signing himself "secretary of foolery" [70]. This was a reference to a chance encounter when the regent was leaving a council meeting, accompanied by four secretaries of state. "Arouet, I have not forgotten you," said the regent; "I have in mind for you the Department of Foolery." "My Lord," said the young Voltaire, "I would have too

[7] Emmet L. Avery, ed., *The London Stage 1660–1800. Part 2: 1700–1729* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1960), 672.

many rivals. Here are four of them already."[8] In his letter Voltaire indicated that he had begun work on an epic poem "on that one of your ancestors whom you resemble the most," a reference to Henri IV and the future *Henriade*. The regent thereupon bestowed upon Voltaire a pension of twelve hundred francs as a "gratification"—the first step in the accumulation of Voltaire's fortune, apart from Ninon's legacy, probably long since expended. The regent also ordered for Voltaire a commemorative gold medal with the king portrayed on one side and the regent himself on the other.

Voltaire sent printed copies of *Œdipe* not only to the French court, but also to King George I of England. Lord Bolingbroke, who had received a copy from one of his close friends, Mme de Ferriol, mother of Voltaire's schoolmate, d'Argental, expressed delight at the prodigious success of the young author [71]. With literary flair, he applied to Voltaire the words which Corneille had placed in the mouth of his great hero, the Cid: "His merit has not awaited the passing of years, and his first attempt turns out to be a master stroke" [Act II, Scene 2]. Voltaire also sent a copy to J.-B. Rousseau, who in reply warmly described Voltaire as "a man destined one day to become the glory of his century" [73]. Rousseau recognized a kinship between himself and the young author in that both had been persecuted for their verses, but took consolation in the principle that "misfortunes are necessary to men and nothing purifies their virtue except adversities." This is a sentiment that Voltaire never found palatable and which he satirized in his masterpiece *Candide*. His own life was on the whole happy, successful, and glittering, with few adversities—except his highly publicized ill health. Voltaire's later philosophy incorporated a kind of stoic acceptance; he believed that one must know how to suffer, one is born for that. But he refused to acknowledge any relationship between virtue and suffering [2095].

While promoting his own glory as the modern Sophocles, Voltaire did not neglect the interests of Mlle de Livry, his erstwhile mistress. Her taste for amateur theatricals, nurtured at Sully, now developed in Paris into a passionate desire for the real stage. Voltaire not only introduced her to his friends in the acting profession, but arranged for her to play the role of Jocasta in *Œdipe* toward the end of its run (23 April 1719). It is only natural, as a contem-

[8] Dagen, ed., *Chamfort. Maximes et pensées*, No. 870.

porary wag expressed it, that the mistress of a great playwright should become an actress, and he, her defender [D. I, 176]. But Voltaire was no Pygmalion. Suzanne delivered her lines with the heavy accent of the provinces, which appeared ludicrous to the sophisticated Parisians. They laughed audibly during passages that were intended to be touching or tragic. When one of the actors, Poisson, joined in the ridicule, Voltaire took personal offense and hurled insults at the actor. After the play Poisson, an expert swordsman, waited outside with a challenge for a duel. Voltaire, whose athletic skills were minimal, would certainly not have been blamed for refusing on the grounds that they were mismatched or even that dueling was illegal, but he resorted to an attitude which he later condemned in others—rejecting the encounter on the grounds that actors belong to an inferior social station. Poisson was now worked up to a frenzy of anger and threatened to beat Voltaire with a cudgel. Voltaire then called for police protection. His abrupt change from bravado to prudence, from blowing hot to blowing cold, represents no real flaw in his character and this much of the episode could be passed over without comment. The sequel, however, shows Voltaire guilty of conduct which is now condemned as barbaric and cowardly. On the next morning he hired two hooligans to administer a beating to Poisson, who realized what was coming and fled. Voltaire then used his influence to have his adversary jailed. Through a kind of justice for poets, Voltaire would shortly find himself in the position of Poisson, and someone else in the role of disdainful bully. He would discover that the aristocracy did not consider his own social station much higher than that of Poisson. This realization would work a tremendous change in Voltaire's social attitudes, and he would eventually balance his account with the theatrical profession by championing the rights of actors to be treated with the same consideration and ceremony as ordinary citizens.

At the opening performance of *Œdipe*, the duchesse de Villars, a mature and distinguished lady "possessed of an admirable countenance, tall stature and good health," asked to have the author presented to her, and then invited him to visit the magnificent château she inhabited with her husband, a famous general in the wars of Louis XIV. Voltaire gladly accepted the invitation, profiting by serious conversations with the general, in which he stored up facts for his future history. He also enjoyed more intimate talk with the duchess. Apparently she resisted Voltaire's entreaties to pass

the bounds of gallantry, not because of scruples, but because she was somewhat of a tease and, moreover, already had an adequate roster of lovers. Voltaire, in a sprightly verse epistle addressed to her (1719), admitted that in return for his lavish praise of her beauties all he had received was a few evening snacks with cooling beverages. He confided to the marquise de Mimeure that because of his disappointed passion he was wearing "a philosopher's cloak" [82]. A month later he reported himself completely cured of his amorous inclinations, and expressed a sentiment that he frequently repeated and professed to believe throughout his life, "I am not at all made for the passions" [83]. Voltaire constantly posed as being nearly or quite impotent, just as he perpetually kept up the pretence of being on the brink of death.

While Voltaire worked on his epic *La Henriade*, he sent sections of the poem as he composed them back to Thieriot in Paris to be read aloud in various salons for criticism and admiration. From one of the châteaux in which he was passing his life, he asked Thieriot to inform him "how my son [the poem] is getting along in the world, if he has many enemies, and if people generally believe that I am his father" [148]. Voltaire loved to hear praise of his work reported at second hand, as well as the direct comments of friends when he tried out various passages. At one of his readings of *La Henriade*, either the applause seemed forced or sluggish, or Voltaire wanted to interject dramatic spice into the evening, for he cried with chagrin, "It is then good only for burning," and threw the pages he had been reading into the fire. An eminent jurist who was present, the President Hénault, immediately leaped to the grate, pulled out the manuscript before it caught fire, but not before he singed the lace on his elegant cuffs. He later compared the scene to a painting by Raphael, which depicts Augustus preventing Virgil from burning the *Æneid*. Knowing Voltaire, however, we can be reasonably sure that he had another copy of his manuscript in reserve.