**Voltaire,**

pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), French writer.

“The age of Voltaire” has become synonymous with “the Enlightenment,” but although Voltaire's eminence as a philosophe is self-evident, the precise originality of his thought and writings is less easily defined. Born in Paris into a wealthy bourgeois family, he was a brilliant pupil of the Jesuits. His rejection of his father's attempts to guide him into a career in the law was sealed in 1718, when he invented a new name for himself: Voltaire is an anagram of Arouet *l(e)* *j(eune)* (the verb *volter*, “to turn abruptly,” evoking perhaps a playful or “volatile” quality); de Voltaire, with the addition of the aristocratic preposition, is an early sign of his social ambition.

**Early Life and Works**

In the same year that he coined his new name, Voltaire enjoyed his first major literary success when his tragedy *œdipe* was staged by the Comédie Française. Meanwhile, he was working on an epic poem that had as its protagonist Henri IV, the much-loved French monarch who brought France's civil wars to a close, and who, in Voltaire's treatment, becomes a forerunner of religious toleration; *La Ligue* (later enlarged to become *La Henriade*) was first published in 1723. His reputation as a poet and dramatist was now comfortably established, and he decided to travel to England to oversee the publishing of the definitive edition of *La Henriade*. His departure for London was precipitated when he unwisely became involved in a humiliating argument with an aristocrat, who had him briefly interned in the Bastille.

Voltaire arrived in London in the autumn of 1726, and what had begun partly as self-imposed exile became a crucially formative period for him. He learned English and mixed with a number of figures prominent in England's political and cultural life. An old saw has it that Voltaire “came to England a poet and left it a philosopher.” In truth, he was a philosopher before coming to England, and it would be more accurate to say that Voltaire came to England a poet and left it a prose writer. Voltaire thought of himself first and foremost as a poet, and during his long life he would never abandon the writing of verse, for which he had a remarkable facility (many of his letters are sprinkled with seemingly spontaneous passages of verse). In England, however, he came into contact with models of prose unlike those to which he was accustomed in France: Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, which Voltaire read on first publication, or Addison's *Spectator*, a periodical he used in order to learn to read English. It is hardly coincidental, therefore, that before returning to France in 1728, Voltaire began writing his first two major essays in prose: a history, the *Histoire de Charles XII*; and a book about the English that is now best known under the title *Lettres philosophiques*, but first published in English translation (London, 1733) as the *Letters Concerning the English Nation*.

The furor created by the publication in France in 1734 of the *Lettres philosophiques* led Voltaire to leave Paris and take refuge in the château of his mistress, Mme. du Châtelet, at Cirey-en-Champagne. From 1734 until Mme. du Châtelet's death in 1749, this was his haven from the world. During this period, he studied and wrote intensively in a wide variety of areas, including science (*Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*, 1738), poetry (*Le mondain*, 1736), drama (*Mahomet*, 1741), and fiction (*Zadig*, 1747). In the 1740s, Voltaire was briefly on better terms with the court: he was made royal historiographer in 1745, and the following year, after several failed attempts, he was finally elected to the Académie Française. He had turned fifty and was now the leading poet and dramatist of his day; perhaps even Voltaire did not imagine that the works that would make him even more celebrated still lay in the future.

An initially idyllic interlude was provided by Voltaire's stay at the court of Potsdam (1750–1753), and in 1752 he published both *Le siècle de Louis XIV* and *Micromégas*. Throughout his career, however, Voltaire was prone to involvement in literary quarrels, and Berlin was no exception; his attack on Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis, president of the Berlin Academy, caused Frederick II to lose patience with him. Voltaire left Berlin in a flurry of mutual recriminations, and although these were later forgotten, Voltaire's dream of having found the ideal enlightened monarch were definitively shattered. His correspondence with Frederick, which had begun in 1736 when the latter was still crown prince, survived and, after a hiatus, it continued until Voltaire's death; they corresponded on literary and philosophical matters, and Voltaire sent Frederick many of his works in manuscript. Their exchange of more than seven hundred letters remains as an extraordinary literary achievement in its own right.

**Later Life and Works**

In January 1755, after a period of wandering, Voltaire acquired a property in Geneva which he called “Les Délices.” A new and more settled phase now began as, at the age of sixty-one, he became master of his own house for the first time: in a letter of March that year, he wrote that “I am finally leading the life of a patriarch.” The Lisbon earthquake of November 1755 may have disturbed his philosophical certainties and caused him to doubt the Leibnizian optimism that Alexander Pope had helped to popularize, but it did not disturb his new-found personal happiness. His *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* appeared within weeks of the earthquake, and it is revealing that his instant literary response should have been in verse. His prose response to the catastrophe, in *Candide*, took longer to mature and was published in 1759. In the meantime, he had written articles for the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, and in 1756 he published his univeral history, the *Essai sur les moeurs*.

In 1757, d'Alembert's critical article Genève in the *Encyclopédie* had provoked a scandal in that city. Geneva turned out not to be the model republic that Voltaire had imagined or hoped it was, and after a number of tussles with clerical authority, he resolved to leave the city. A return to Paris would not have been welcomed by the government, so he purchased a house and estate at Ferney, where he installed himself in 1760–on French soil now, but within striking distance of the border. It was in this symbolically marginal position that Voltaire was to live for the rest of his life. Henceforth he would play the part of the *seigneur*, caring for his estate and even building a church for the villagers: it bears the deist (and immodest) inscription *Deo erexit Voltaire*. This new-found role did not mean that, like Candide, Voltaire had found happiness in cultivating his garden and in ignoring the world beyond. On the contrary, it was in 1760 that Voltaire first issued the rallying cry with which he would henceforth sign many of his letters: *Écrasons l'infâme* (“Crush the Infamy'). The stability of his base at Ferney seems to have given Voltaire the opportunity over the following years to launch and encourage the campaigns that soon made him the most famous writer in Europe.

The Calas affair was a defining moment in this crusade for tolerance. The Huguenot Jean Calas was tortured and broken on the wheel in 1762 after being found guilty, on the basis of dubious evidence, of murdering his son. Voltaire successfully led a determined campaign to clear Calas's name, writing many letters and publishing a number of works, including *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763). Other campaigns followed—a successful one to obtain the rehabilitation of another Huguenot family, the Sirvens, accused of having murdered a daughter recently converted to Catholicism, and an unsuccessful one to achieve a pardon for a nineteen-year-old man, La Barre, condemned to be burned at the stake for having committed certain trivial acts of sacrilege (and for having in his possession a copy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*). These struggles brought Voltaire to even greater public prominence, and it in no way diminishes his undoubted determination and courage to say that he obviously relished his new role: in a letter of 1766, he wrote to a friend, “Oh how I love this philosophy of action and goodwill.”

Although many of Voltaire's later writings concerned his crusade for tolerance and justice, he continued to write in a wide variety of forms, from tragedy to biblical criticism, and from satire to short fiction (*L'ingénu*, 1767; *Le taureau blanc*, 1773). In February 1778, Voltaire was persuaded by his friends to make a symbolic return to Paris, ostensibly to oversee preparations to stage his latest tragedy, *Irène*. It was the first time he had set foot in the capital since 1750, and he was received in triumph. A succession of friends called on him, and despite his deteriorating health, he attended a performance of his new play at the Comédie Française, in the course of which his bust was crowned on stage with a laurel wreath. His health did not permit his return to Ferney, and he died in Paris two months later. Even in death, Voltaire, a celebrated amateur actor, seemed to have stage-managed his departure from the scene so as to gain maximum publicity.

**Voltaire's Legacy**

Voltaire's afterlife is complex, his reputation changing with successive regimes. The French Revolution looked back to him as a heroic precursor of its struggle, and in 1791 his remains were brought back to Paris and with great ceremony placed in the Panthéon. For much of the nineteenth century, the name of Voltaire was synonymous with anticlericalism, and the philosophe was widely, if implausibly, seen as an Antichrist. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair, Voltaire's reputation as a crusader for tolerance was reemphasized, and in the latter years of the Third Republic, under the influence of the Sorbonne literary historian Gustave Lanson, Voltaire became a fixture of the republican school and university curriculum. The latter half of the twentieth century has taken a more nuanced approach to Voltaire's religious views, especially in the wake of René Pomeau's *La religion de Voltaire*, which stresses the depth of Voltaire's deist convictions.

**Editions**

In a career that stretched over sixty years, Voltaire's extant writings ran, it has been estimated, to some fifteen million words: everything concerning the *œuvre* seems larger than life, and it is hard to make any simple assessment of it. “Complete” editions appeared in Voltaire's lifetime; the last, published by Cramer in Geneva in 1775, ran to forty volumes (the so-called *édition encadrée*). The first complete edition of Voltaire's writings after his death, known at the Kehl edition, was published on the eve of the Revolution (1785–1789) in seventy octavo volumes (there was also a duodecimo edition in ninety-two volumes). Many complete editions followed in the nineteenth century, culminating in the Moland edition (1877–1883) in fifty-two volumes, which remains—pending the completion of the Oxford edition—the standard edition of reference. Theodore Besterman's “definitive” edition of Voltaire's correspondence (1968–1977) includes more than 15,000 letters, but these surviving letters must represent only a fraction of the total number written by Voltaire in his lifetime, probably in excess of 40,000. This edition is part of the larger *Complete Works of Voltaire*, a complete and critical edition of all Voltaire's writings currently being published by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford; when complete, it will exceed two hundred volumes.

**Voltaire and Enlightenment**

Voltaire's contribution to the history of Enlightenment philosophy is minimal, and he cannot be considered a significant or original thinker. In terms of the history of ideas, his single most important achievement was to have helped in the 1730s to introduce the thought of Newton and Locke to France (and so to the rest of the Continent); and even this achievement is, as Jonathan Israel has shown, hardly as radical as has sometimes been thought: the English thinkers in question served essentially as a deistic bulwark against the more radical (atheistic) currents of thought in the Spinozist tradition. Voltaire's deist beliefs, reiterated throughout his life, came to appear increasingly outmoded and defensive as he grew older and as he became more and more exercised by the spread of atheism. Voltaire's failure to produce an original philosophy was, in a sense, counterbalanced by his deliberate cultivation of a philosophy of action; his “common sense” crusade against superstition and prejudice and in favor of religious toleration was his single greatest contribution to the progress of Enlightenment. “Rousseau writes for writing's sake,” he declared in a letter of 1767, “I write to act.”

It was therefore Voltaire's literary and rhetorical contributions to the Enlightenment that were truly unique. Interested neither in music (like Rousseau) nor in art (like Diderot), Voltaire was fundamentally a man of language. Through force of style, through skillful choice of literary genre, and through the accomplished manipulation of the book market, he found means of popularizing and promulgating ideas that until then had generally been clandestine. The range of his writing is immense, embracing virtually every genre. In verse, he wrote in every form—epic poetry, ode, satire, and epistle, and even occasional and light verse; his drama, also written in verse, includes both comedies and tragedies (and although the tragedies have not survived in the modern theater, many live on in opera; for example, Rossini's *Semiramide* and *Tancredi*). It is above all the prose works with which modern readers are familiar, and again the writings cover a wide spectrum: histories, polemical satires, pamphlets of all types, dialogues, short fictions or *contes*, and letters both real and fictive. The conspicuous absentee from this list is the novel, a genre that, like the prose *drame*, Voltaire thought base and trivial. To understand the strength of his dislike for these “new” genres, we need to remember that Voltaire was a product of the late seventeenth century, the moment of the Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, and this literary debate continued to influence his aesthetic views all through his life. Controversial religious and political views were often expressed in the literary forms (classical tragedy, the verse satire) perfected in the seventeenth century; the “conservatism” of these forms seems, to modern readers at least, to compromise the content, though this apparent traditionalism may in fact have helped Voltaire mask the originality of his enterprise: it is at least arguable that in a work such as *Zaïre* (1732), the form of the classical tragedy made its ideas of religious toleration more palatable.

Yet this would also be a simplification, for notwithstanding his apparent literary conservatism, Voltaire was in fact a relentless reformer and experimenter with literary genres, innovative almost despite himself, particularly in the domain of prose. Although he never turned his back on verse drama and philosophical poetry, he experimented with different forms of historical writing and tried his hand at different styles of prose fiction. Above all, he seems to have discovered late in his career the satirical and polemical uses of the fragment, notably in his alphabetic works, the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764), containing 73 articles in its first edition, and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770–1772). The latter work, whose first edition contained 423 articles in nine octavo volumes, is a vast and challenging compendium of his thought and ranks among Voltaire's unrecognized masterpieces. When he died, Voltaire was working on what would have been his third “philosophical” dictionary, *L'opinion en alphabet*.

Voltaire's ironic, fast-moving, deceptively simple style makes him one of the greatest stylists of the French language. All his life, Voltaire loved to act in his own plays, and this fondness for role-playing carried through into all his writings. He used something like 175 different pseudonyms in the course of his career, and his writing is characterized by a proliferation of different personae and voices. The reader is constantly drawn into dialogue—by a footnote that contradicts the text, or by one voice in the text that argues against another. The use of the mask is so relentless and the presence of humor, irony, and satire so pervasive that the reader has finally no idea of where the “real” Voltaire is. His autobiographical writings are few and entirely unrevealing: as the title of his *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l'auteur de la Henriade* suggests, it is his writings alone that constitute their author's identity.

In fact, we rarely know with certainty what Voltaire truly thought or believed; what mattered to him was the impact of what he wrote. The great crusades of the 1760s taught him to appreciate the importance of public opinion, and in popularizing the clandestine ideas of the early part of the century, he played the role of the journalist. He may have been old-fashioned in his nostalgia for the classicism of the previous century, but he was wholly of his day in his consummate understanding of the medium of publishing. He manipulated the book trade to achieve maximum publicity for his ideas, and he well understood the importance of what he called “the portable.” In 1766, Voltaire wrote to d'Alembert: “Twenty in-folio volumes will never cause a revolution; it's the little portable books at thirty *sous* which are to be feared.”

Voltaire was also modern in the way he invented himself by fashioning a public image out of his adopted name. As the patriarch of Ferney, he turned himself into an institution whose fame reached across Europe. As an engaged and militant intellectual, he stood at the beginning of a French tradition that looked forward to Émile Zola and to Jean-Paul Sartre, and in modern republican France his name stands as a cultural icon, a symbol of rationalism and the defense of tolerance. Voltaire was a man of paradoxes: the bourgeois who as *de* Voltaire gave himself aristocratic pretensions, but who as plain Voltaire later became a hero of the Revolution; the conservative in aesthetic matters who appeared as a radical in religious and political issues. He was, above all, the master ironist, who, perhaps more than any other writer, gave to the Enlightenment its characteristic and defining tone of voice.

[See also [Châtelet, Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil du](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-120#); [Deism](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-168#); [Letters](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-395#); [Literary Genres](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-407#); [Men and Women of Letters](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-445#); [Philosophes](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-539#); [Publishing](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-583#); and [Toleration](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-711#).]

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