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VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDES TOWARD CERTAIN SOCIAL PROBLEMS
AS EXPRESSED IN HIS CORRESPONDANCE (1733-1753)

A THESIS

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ability. Therefore, at an early age, Voltaire learned to know the
 state of Parisian society.

As a child, Voltaire was frail, and ill health continued throughout
 out his life. But still he lived to be eighty-four years old, and his
 activity was always remarkable. He was a member of the Académie Française
 of Louis-le-Grand years before he was ever involved politically with such men as
 Chevillon and D'Argental who remained his life-long friends. He also
 gained a deep affection for some of the French authors whose literary
 taste and ability as teachers he admired. In fact, indeed, Voltaire con-
 sidered a good classical education indispensable to good studies in

For this reason, in 1734, when he was only sixteen, he had to
 leave his father with a gift of money to go to Paris, the capital of France.
 In Paris, he lived with his father, who was then in the house of the
 Marquis de Chaulieu, a friend of his father's. He was in Paris for
 several years, and during this time he was in contact with many of the
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CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF VOLTAIRE UNTIL HIS RETURN FROM PRUSSIA (1753)

François-Marie Arouet, who later changed his name to Voltaire, was born in Paris on November 21, 1694.¹ He was the son of François Arouet, a distinguished notary, and of Marguerite d'Aumard, a member of a famille de petite robe. Thus, by birth, Voltaire was of the upper bourgeoisie. His father was prosperous and had professional contacts which helped Voltaire in his associations with the noble class with which he later mingled as a result of his literary genius and financial ability. Therefore, at an early age, Voltaire learned to know the élite of Parisian society.

As a child, Voltaire was frail, and ill health continued throughout his life. But still he lived to be eighty-four years old, and his activity was always remarkable. He was educated at the Jesuit collège of Louis-le-Grand where he made many important contacts with such men as Cideville and D'Argental who remained his life-long friends. He also gained a deep affection for some of the Jesuit fathers whose literary taste and ability as teachers he admired. In this school Voltaire received a good classical education through which he gained practice in

1

For this material on Voltaire's life, the following books have been consulted with profit: Cleveland B. Chase, The Young Voltaire (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1926); George R. Havens, Selections from Voltaire (New York: The Century Company, 1933); Gustave Lenson, Voltaire (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1906); André Maurois, Voltaire (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1933); John Morley, Voltaire (London: The Macmillan Company, 1926); William A. Nitze and E. Preston Dargan, A History of French Literature (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926); S. G. Tallentyre, Voltaire in his Letters (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons. The Knickerbocker Press, 1919).

poetry and drama, interest in history and politics and perhaps a beginning of his scepticism. In 1711, Voltaire left the collège eager to pursue a literary career. However, his father believed that his son should become a lawyer and sent him to a law school where he was quite bored. It was while studying law that he met Thieriot who became his lifelong friend and correspondent. During this same period, Voltaire was attracted by the Société du Temple, a group of men of distinguished birth who were Epicureans in philosophy. With these free-thinkers, Voltaire started his mockery of government and of society. To them also he read parts of OEdipe (1718), his first tragedy, whose success procured for him a place in the Cour de Sceaux, the leading salon of the day, in which the Duchesse du Maine presided as hostess.

In hopes of ending this dangerous life which his son was living, in 1713 the elder Arcuet sent him to Holland as an attaché to the French ambassador. There Voltaire fell in love with Mlle Olympe Dunoyer whom he called Pimpette. However, the great importance of this visit was the fact that Voltaire realized for the first time how different Holland was from France, especially from the standpoint of freedom of thought. Again in Paris, Voltaire continued his merry life with his friends of the Temple. He started writing satirical verses against governmental authorities and, in 1717, the Regent imprisoned him in the Bastille for a poem, Les J'ai vu, which was later proved not to have been written by Voltaire. This only increased his bitterness toward the government. During his stay in the Bastille which lasted from May 16, 1717, to

April 11, 1718, Voltaire wrote over half of his Henriade, a work on Henry IV, which was inspired during his stay in 1715 with M. de Caumartin who gave him a good deal of information on the seventeenth century. This work was first written between the lines of a book since Voltaire lacked paper on which to write. Immediately upon being released from the Bastille, Voltaire went to the Regent and suggested that he might continue to provide his board but not his lodging. This was his witty manner of insinuating his desire for a pension.

With the presentation of Oedipe in 1718, Voltaire was rated as the leading dramatist of the day, although Artémire (1720) and Mariamme (1724) were unsuccessful. It was at about this time that he changed his name to Voltaire in order that he might be more easily considered a member of the noble society to which he aspired. This change of name, however, caused him a good deal of trouble a few years later.

In 1722, while reading his new poem, La Henriade, in the home of the Marquise de Villette, at La Source, Voltaire met Lord Bolingbroke, former secretary of state of England, who was highly educated and with whom Voltaire associated again later, once in 1724 while both of them were in Paris, and again during Voltaire's exile in England between 1726 and 1729, when the Frenchman spent some time in his home. It is evident that Bolingbroke had a lasting influence on the young Voltaire.

It is interesting to note how the changing of his name indirectly caused Voltaire to be exiled to England. In 1725, while attending the opera, Voltaire made a witty remark in answering the Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot, who had asked him if his name were "Monsieur de Voltaire" or

"Monsieur Arouet". A few days later the quarrel was renewed at the Comédie-Française only to be interrupted by the fainting of Mlle Lecouvreur, a celebrated actress. Two or three days later while attending a dinner at the home of the Duc de Sully, Voltaire was beaten by three lackeys while the Chevalier de Rohan directed the affair. Voltaire immediately challenged the chevalier to a duel, but the lord refused and had him shut up in the Bastille. Voltaire was soon released, but the authorities decided to exile the poet who in 1726 embarked for England, the country known to him as a land distinguished for political and religious liberty.

Voltaire found it easy to enter English society with the aid of Horace Walpole, English ambassador at Paris who wrote letters of recommendation for him to the Whig administration then in power, and Lord Bolingbroke, the Tory secretary of state. Through these men, Voltaire became acquainted with both the Whig and the Tory parties, which gave him a great advantage in studying English government and society. Swift, Pope, and the philosopher Samuel Clarke were among the leading English writers whom he met. In 1726, Voltaire settled at Wandsworth, near London, in the home of a merchant named Falkener who later became one of Voltaire's correspondents.

During his two years in England, Voltaire increased his knowledge of the English government, literature, language, ideas and customs. He came in contact with many refugees who had left France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, talked with Quakers concerning their religion, and regularly attended the theatre studying the difference

between the free English drama and the French classic drama, which resulted in his introduction of Shakespeare in France. Voltaire succeeded in publishing the Henriades in 1738. Also he began the Histoire de Charles XII in England. In that country where one enjoyed greater freedom of the press, Voltaire's works were literary and financial successes. There is some doubt as to when Voltaire returned to France. However, through his correspondence, it is known that he was back in his native country in 1729. While he was still in England, Voltaire wrote to his friend Thieriot his impressions, using the English language which he was then learning. The ideas here presented were later used in the Lettres philosophiques which were published in France in 1734, only to be burned by official order. The Lettres philosophiques were his first great work. In them he praised the English government and society and in so doing, he criticized France. Among the subjects treated in this work are religion, government, commerce, vaccination, gravitation, the theatre, etc. After their appearance, Voltaire was forced to flee to Cirey, in Lorraine, where he could escape persecution.

Between the years 1711 and 1778, Voltaire wrote over ten thousand letters. He corresponded with all types of people--kings, queens, nobles, bourgeois, peasants, etc. Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, the Comte and the Marquis d'Argenson, Diderot, Rousseau, Pope Benoit XIV, Cideville, Thieriot, the Abbé Prévost, the Duchesse du Maine, the Marquise du Deffand, and hundreds of others were among his correspondents. Other persons to whom he wrote and who are mentioned in this study are the Comte d'Argental, an old school friend of Voltaire; Mlle Quinault, an

actress; Monsieur de la Noue, entrepreneur des spectacles; Berger, a Parisian merchant; the Prince Antiochus Cantemir of Moldavia (now a part of Roumania); the philosopher Helvétius; Monsieur de Formont, a minor writer; the Abbé Moussinot, his financial agent; Darget, a French secretary at Frederick's court; La Valère de Gémonville, conseiller in the parlement de Paris; Pitot de Launai of the Académie des sciences; the Comte de Gaylus, an archæologist; Hénault, président of the parlement de Paris; the Abbé d'Olivet, his tutor at the collège of Louis-le-Grand; Lefranc de Pompignan, a minor poet satirized by Voltaire; the Duc de Richelieu, maréchal de France; Mme Denis, his niece; Monsieur de Moncrif, the writer; Madame La présidente de Bernières, wife of the président of the parlement de Rouen; M. de Mauvertuis, president of the Berlin Academy; Monsieur de Champonin, Voltaire's neighbor at Cirey; M. de la Roque, at one time editor of the Mercure; Norberg, who had been chaplain of Charles XII of Sweden; and the Cardinal Passionei. Only after reading many of his letters will one be able to know the real Voltaire. He is found there in every type of mood--gay, serious, ironical, respectful, angry and enthusiastic. Several of his letters were written in English; some were written in Italian. Nearly every letter to his friends was ended with such a farewell as, "Adieu, la consolation de ma vie", or "Il est affreux de vivre sans vous," and "Je ne vis que pour vous et mon travail." At times he wrote letters when he was so ill that he could hardly hold his pen in hand. For the most part, they are simply written and are always full of interest.

At Cirey, where he remained for fourteen years as the guest of

Mme du Châtelet, Voltaire worked indefatigably, sometimes sleeping but two or three hours a night. He was deeply in love with "la divine Emilie", a woman of great intelligence who understood the most difficult mathematical and scientific calculations and who was interested in Newton and Leibnitz. The two of them worked on various scientific projects in the laboratory which they had established at Cirey. At times, well-known chemists were called in to help carry on the experiments. Mme du Châtelet was a tireless worker and discussed intelligently with Voltaire both science and belles-lettres. She also acted in some of his dramas in their private theatricals. It was during his stay at Cirey that Voltaire wrote the first part of his Siècle de Louis XIV., one of his three great historical works. Voltaire differed from the average historian of his time in that history to him was not merely a narrative of dates and battles, but a record of the progress of civilization, the development of tolerance, the increase of prosperity and comfort, and the encouragement of literature and art. In reference to his history of Louis XIV, Voltaire wrote:² "Ce n'est point simplement la vie de ce prince que j'écris, ce ne sont point les annales de son règne, c'est plutôt l'histoire de l'esprit humain, puisée dans le siècle le plus glorieux à l'esprit humain."

During his stay at Cirey, Voltaire was frequently ill, sometimes

² XXXV, 30. A.M. l'abbé Dubou, Cirey, le 30 octobre, 1738. All of the volume numbers in these footnotes refer to the Moland, Ouvrages complètes de Voltaire (Paris: Garnier frères, libraires-éditeurs, nouvelle édition, 1880).

to the extent that he found it necessary to dictate his letters to Mme du Châtelet. To Frederick, Voltaire wrote in 1740:³

On soupe quelquefois sans avoir mis d'intervalle entre le travail et le repas; on se relève le lendemain avec une digestion laborieuse, on travaille avec la tête moins nette; on s'efforce, et on tombe malade.

However, in spite of his illness, "l'éternel malade" labored on by the side of his companion. Throughout the period of fourteen years spent at Cirey, Voltaire's literary output included Le Mondain (1736), which caused him to seek refuge in Holland for a short time; Alzira (1736); the Éléments de Newton (1738); the Discours sur l'homme (1738) after Pope's Essay on Man; Mahomet (1741), in which he exposed the danger of religious fanaticism; Mérope (1743), a tragedy of human appeal; and Zadig (1747), a philosophical novel. Some of his dramas were produced in Paris but were soon forbidden. During this time, Voltaire had a succession of quarrels with such people as the journalist Fréron, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the Abbé Desfontaines. Also in 1736, he began his long correspondence with Frederick the Great of Prussia.

While at Cirey, Voltaire made several hurried trips to Paris and to some of the provinces. In 1745, he was made court historiographer earning two thousand francs a year as a result of writing a poem in honor of the conduct of Louis XV in war. His acquaintance with Mme de Pompadour also helped him obtain this position. In 1746, Voltaire was elected to

³ XXXV, 458-459. A Frédéric II, Roi de Prusse, (no place given) le 18 juin, 1740.

financial speculation. The break came when Voltaire was elected by trick to the French Academy which he had so severely criticized previously. In the same year, he was made "Gentilhomme ordinaire de la Chambre du Roi," the office which he sold at a price of sixty thousand livres, although he kept the title. Because of a quarrel which arose as the result of Mme du Châtelet's losing at the gaming table while at the court of Louis XV, Voltaire and his mistress had to flee overnight to the castle of the Duchesse du Maine at Sceaux, then later to the court of Stanislas, in Lorraine. There, Mme du Châtelet met and fell in love with Saint-Lambert for whom she abandoned Voltaire. In 1749, the divine Emily died leaving Voltaire to grieve over her death which was the greatest personal affliction of his life. He then went to Paris where he lived with his niece, Mme Denis. Again in the French capital, Voltaire played his tragedies in opposition to Crébillon père, his rival. However, in 1750, after receiving a leave of absence from Louis XV, he left for Potsdam, near Berlin, to live with his literary friend and correspondent Frederick the Great who since 1736 had extended to him many invitations.

The first few months in Prussia were filled with enthusiasm and delight for both Voltaire and Frederick. The French philosopher there felt free to discuss in his witty and clever manner any subject which came to his mind. He was an honored guest at many fêtes; whole theatres rose at his entrance, and royal apartments were given to him to work in. Voltaire and the king spent a short time together each day, during which time the Frenchman helped his German majesty with his poetry which he wrote in French. However, this glory could not last forever. Voltaire became involved in a lawsuit against a Jew, Hirschel, as a result of

his attacks on the Jews

financial speculation. The break came when Voltaire succeeded by trickery in publishing against the will of Frederick, a satire against Maupeou, president of the Berlin Academy. Although the German monarch was willing to allow free discussion in private, he did not wish to have his court brought into ridicule as a result of public controversies. On March 26, 1753, Voltaire obtained permission to depart. At Frankfort he was arrested by royal order and detained until July 7. At that time, he was forced to return the king's decorations and a work of poetry which belonged to Frederick. Voltaire produced both and was released. He then turned to Switzerland and bought a property near Geneva which he called Les Délices where he remained until 1758.

During the years that Voltaire had spent in Prussia, his literary accomplishment was slight. He completed his Siècle de Louis XIV in 1751; wrote Micromégas, a philosophic conte, in 1752; started the Poème sur la loi naturelle and continued his active correspondence.

The purpose of this study of Voltaire will be to discuss certain social problems as treated in his correspondence up to the time of his return from Prussia (1753). The subjects included are among those which were of great importance in the eighteenth century. Liberty has been treated because the advancement of freedom in thought was one of Voltaire's greatest ambitions. During a century of such strict censorship, problems concerning publications were numerous. The subject of finance is important in connection with Voltaire because the system of John Law at that time brought about a new interest in money and also because Voltaire himself was a man of wealth and had numerous financial dealings. A chapter on the social customs of the period will be included because Voltaire directed many attacks on the French society of his time.

English, after his return to CHAPTER II

career to his thoughts; here he met with

VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD LIBERTY AND TOLERANCE

Perhaps the greatest obstacle which Voltaire fought during his long literary career was the lack of freedom of expression which France offered her writers in the eighteenth century. As a result of Voltaire's continuous struggle, the world has enjoyed since his time a little more tolerance and freedom of speech with much more safety from persecution. Using ridicule as his weapon in his attempt to bring about fewer restrictions on the freedom of the press, he was soon hated by the governmental authorities to the extent that he realized at an early age that his would be a life of persecution and of exile.

As a lover of freedom, Voltaire naturally admired England, using it as an example of an ideal country for writers. He often made comparisons between France and England in which he showed the weakness of the former and the superiority of the latter. When Voltaire was thirty-two years of age, he went to England where he spent much time learning about the English government, literature, language, ideas and customs. So fascinated was he with this country where everyone enjoyed political and religious liberty that he wrote his impressions of it in letters to his friends. He incorporated these impressions into the Lettres philosophiques, which appeared in France in 1734. He admired England for her government which honored men of letters. After returning to France, Voltaire continued his praise of the English people. To Thieriot, he wrote, in

English, after his return to France: "An author at London may give a full career to his thoughts; here he must stint them. We have here but the tenth part of our soul."¹ Often in his letters, Voltaire mentioned the fact that if one wished to think aloud, he must go to England or to Holland. Continuing his comparison of France and England, Voltaire spoke in another letter to Thieriot of the liberty of England and the slavery of France, of the wise boldness of England and the foolish superstition of France, of the encouragement given arts in England and the shameful oppression under which they languished in Paris.² Voltaire would like to have seen the French imitate the English more. He pointed out that they had adopted the scientific method of the English, had imitated their system of finance and their method of constructing vessels, but, he said, "Quand les imitera-t-on dans la noble liberté de donner à l'esprit tout l'essor dont il est capable?"³

Since liberty was such an important issue to Voltaire, he formulated the following definition of it:⁴

J'appelle liberté le pouvoir de penser à une chose ou de n'y pas penser, de se mouvoir ou de ne se mouvoir pas, conformément au choix de son propre esprit.

It was with this conception of liberty in mind that Voltaire wrote many of his works which met with the disapproval of the French government.

After the appearance, in 1732, of the Temple du Goût, which was a critical

¹ XXXIII, 466. A M. Thieriot, (no place given), 1734.

² XXXIII, 212. A M. Thieriot (no place given), Le premier mai, 1731.

³ XXXVII, 567. A Madame ..., Berlin, 1752.

⁴ XXXIV, 325. Sur la Liberté. This essay on liberty is included in Voltaire's correspondance.

satire on contemporary letters, he was no longer sure of his liberty in France. From about this time, it was necessary that most of his works be published in secrecy, and since publishers were running such a risk in printing them, Voltaire charged no royalty for his clandestine publications, which were not his, and there is no doubt that he was aware of the extent of the risk. Through his writings, Voltaire attacked the social and governmental system of his country. Although he enjoyed chatting with his friends to whom he displayed his great wit, Voltaire sometimes became despondent at the thought of the lack of freedom in his country. While in a melancholy mood, he would often write to his friends such statements as these: "Il est triste de souffrir, mais il est plus dur encore de ne pouvoir penser avec une honnête liberté,"⁵ and also, "La vie d'un homme de lettres est la liberté."⁶

Since Voltaire's works could not always withstand the severe censorship in France, he decided that he would either publish them secretly or have them published in another country. Consequently, after about 1734, most of his writings were printed by secret publishers in France, or by publishers in Holland and England. Even though Voltaire was compelled to live an unhappy life in France, he loved his country and often wrote to his friends such remarks as, "Je ne hais point mon pays; je respecte et j'aime le gouvernement sous lequel je suis né,"⁷

⁵ XXXIII, 381. A M. de Cideville, (no place given), 14 15
septembre, 1733.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ XXXV, 192. A Frédéric, prince royal de Prusse, Strasbourg, le 24
février, 1739.

and again, "je suis Français, et Français persécuté. Je veux vivre
et mourir dans ma patrie avec mes amis." But, as time passed,

Voltaire felt that he could not continue his writing in France where his
works were being seized and burned, where he was accused of writing
as English, Holland, Switzerland, and Prussia.

works which were not his, and where he was being persecuted to the extent
that he could not leave his home without being arrested or exiled. These
are only a few of the tribulations which the French liberal experienced
especially during the period from 1725 to 1750.

Voltaire realized that France could not produce great statesmen
since freedom of expression was so lacking there. As examples of men
honored by other countries, Voltaire cites Horace, Juvenal and Cicero,
all of whom Rome would not have had without freedom; and Milton, Dryden,
Pope and Locke whose greatness Voltaire asserts was a result of English
liberty. Should any of these men have lived in France, they would never
have been known to the world to-day, said Voltaire.⁸ As he grew older,

Voltaire's desire to leave France became more and more intense. He
realized the suppression under which he must live if he were to remain
in France, for, he wrote: "Mais que puis-je faire en France, malade,
persécuté, et toujours distrait par la crainte qu'à la fin l'envie et
persécution ne m'accablent!"¹⁰ In another letter, Voltaire said:¹¹

⁸ XXXV, 179. A M. Helvétius. (no place given), le 12 février, 1732.

⁹ XXXIII, 353. A un premier commis. (no place given), le 20 juin, 1733.

¹⁰ XXXV, 175. A Frédéric, prince royal de Prusse, Gisors, le 15 février, 1732.

¹¹ XXXIV, 234. A M. le comte d'Arzental, Gisors, mars 1732.

Un homme de lettres doit vivre dans un pays libre, ou se résoudre à mener la vie d'un esclave craintif, que d'autres esclaves jaloux accusent sans cesse auprès du maître. Je n'ai à attendre en France que des persécutions; ce sera là toute ma récompense.

With such thoughts as these, Voltaire sought refuge in other countries as England, Holland, Switzerland, and Prussia.

Since Paris was the political and social center of France, Voltaire directed most of his attacks on the French capital. He wrote in a letter in English: "I fancy myself in hell when I am in the accursed city of Paris."¹² In other letters, he often referred to it as ce misérable Paris or ce terrible Paris. His greatest complaint was that the suppression of writers in Paris was too great. In the first place, he regretted that he was born there of a middle-class family, saying, "La nature s'est bien trompée en me faisant maître bourgeois de Paris."¹³ He felt that if one wishes to find pleasure, he should live in Paris; however, he who wanted to write freely and live for posterity, should go to London or Holland.¹⁴ Paris to him was a city of tracasseries, de cabales, d'injustices et de méchancetés.¹⁵ While in Prussia, Voltaire wrote that he preferred the liberty of writing one's thoughts, as he could there, to the slavery of Paris.¹⁶ He knew that if he were to

¹² John Morley, Voltaire (London: The Macmillan Co., 1888), p. 51. Quoted from Oeuvres, LVII, pp. 86 and 89.

¹³ XXXV, 252. A Frédéric, prince royal de Prusse, Girev, le 15 avril, 1739.

¹⁴ XXXIV, 3. A M. Thieriot, Girev, 1736.

¹⁵ XXXVII, 209. A Mme la comtesse d'Argental, Potsdam, le 8 décembre, 1750.

¹⁶ XXXVI, 229. A M. le marquis d'Argenson, la Haye, le 8 août, 1743.

return to Paris, he would have to give up his writing. "Car, tant que je me mèlerai d'imprimer, j'aurai les sots, les dévots, les auteurs à craindre.

17 When he was at Cirey, Voltaire said that he would never again return to Paris to expose himself again to the furors of superstition and of envy.

After the death of Madame du Châtelet, Voltaire went in 1750 to the court of Frederick II of Prussia who had extended to him an invita-

tion to visit him as early as 1736. At first, Voltaire found there all the peace and happiness which he had sought so long. He felt free to write his thoughts in that country where his works were published with no difficulty. He enjoyed his relations with Frederick with whom he spent some time each day discussing the arts. However, during the time that he spent in the German court, certain persons in France accused Voltaire of being a traitor for having left his native country to go to Prussia. These accusations came from such prominent people as Madame de Pompadour.¹⁹ Voltaire defended himself in letters which he wrote

to his friends. He gave persecution and lack of freedom as his foremost reasons for leaving. In one of his letters Voltaire wrote:²⁰

17 XXXVII, 445. A M. le comte d'Argental, Potsdam, le 11 juillet, 1752.

18 XXXIV, 235. A M. le comte d'Argental, Cirey, mars 1737.

19 XXXVII, 167. A M. le maréchal duc de Richelieu, Potsdam, août 1750.

20 Ibid., 163-64.

...j'ai souffert des persécutions de toute espèce. Je fus poursuivi jusque dans la retraite de Cirey, et le théatin Boyer m'obligea, en 1736, de me réfugier en Hollande...je ne suis trouvé à Paris un objet de jalousie pour tout ceux qui se mêlent d'écrire et un objet de persécution pour les dévots...Je restai en butte à des ennemis toujours acharnés.

In another letter,²¹ Voltaire wrote: "J'étais en France harcelé, ballotté, persécuté depuis trente ans par des gens de lettres et par des bigots."

With a great determination to bring about freedom, Voltaire struggled continuously throughout his long life of malady, persecution and exile. Although a deist himself, he felt that the liberty for which he was fighting was due to any writer because "je crois que l'Être suprême nous a donné une petite portion de sa liberté, comme il nous a donné un faible écoulement de sa puissance de penser."²² In his desire for more freedom, Voltaire realized that one is not the absolute master of his ideas, but that everyone should be allowed to enjoy a moderate amount of liberty.

²¹ XXXVII, 318. A M. le maréchal duc de Richelieu, Berlin, le 31 août, 1751.

²² XIXIII, 184. A monsieur..., (no place given), 1728.

CHAPTER III

VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD PROBLEMS OF PUBLICATION

Censorship of publications in France was so great in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that Voltaire usually found it impossible to have his works published in Paris. The Chambre syndicale des Imprimeurs et Libraires possessed the monopoly for printing, the importation of foreign works, and the sale of books in France. Before any book could appear, it was necessary that the title page bear the imprint avec permission et privilège du Roi. A book or pamphlet which did not comply with this regulation was branded as a livre ou libelle prohibé. There was no central censorship authority, but the power was invested in the king, the parlement and the church.² Since these powers were in a state of constant conflict, the writers took advantage of the instability of the censorship board by perfecting ways of avoiding the laws. The duty of searching bookstores for forbidden materials was turned over to the police. However, it was not long until police officers were involved in the business of dealing with unapproved books. They could easily be persuaded, for a nominal sum, to overlook certain works.

It was not only the writers who combatted censorship but also the printers, especially those of the provinces, who indulged in

¹ Albert Bachman, Censorship in France from 1715 to 1750: Voltaire's Opposition. (New York: Institute of French Studies, 1934), p.34.

² Ibid., p. 35.

publishing all sorts of forbidden works secretly. These clandestine printers published some of Voltaire's writings which were not granted a privilege. He also had many of his writings printed in foreign countries such as Holland and England, two countries which accepted and published his works. The fact that Voltaire's writings were forbidden also in countries other than France is shown by the fact that in 1736, he learned that Pitteri, a publisher in Venice, could not obtain permission to publish La Henriade because Voltaire was listed among the forbidden authors.³ It was difficult to send forbidden books from one country to another because of the severe examination given them at the customs. However, the customs officers were often outwitted by smugglers who sometimes placed forbidden copies in the middle of a bale of books. They also frequently inserted unapproved pages between the pages of approved books.⁴

As soon as a book was printed in Paris avec privilege, the first publisher to print it in another country was the one who had the exclusive rights to the work in that country. In a letter of November 4, 1738, Voltaire explained how he arranged for his favorite publisher to obtain his works: "Or quand je veux favoriser un libraire de Hollande, je l'avertis de l'ouvrage que je fais imprimer en France, et je tâche qu'il en ait le premier exemplaire, afin qu'il prenne les

³ XXXIV, 47. A. M. Thieriot, Cirey, le 10 mars, 1736.

⁴ Bachman, op. cit., 59.

devants sur ses confrères."⁵ Some of Voltaire's success may be attributed to the fact that he was among those who seldom were successful in having a work published in Paris with privilege. This, of course, made him much more popular since the people delighted in reading an unapproved book. The printers greatly increased their own incomes by publishing secretly works which could not pass the rigid censorship of the period.

When Voltaire's works were prohibited from publication in Paris, he turned to Jore, a printer in Rouen, who published some of his writings secretly. Rouen headed the list of those cities that printed disapproved works. It was there that the Lettres philosophiques were first published. Both the publisher and Voltaire were running a great risk in indulging in such practices since the penalty for publishing a work without its being approved was a term in the Bastille.⁶ In 1737, Voltaire wanted to publish his Henriade in secrecy, ". . .for," he wrote to Thieriot in English, "methinks the bookish inquisition is so rigorous that it has frightened all the booksellers in these parts."⁷ When the Histoire de Charles XII appeared, only one out of two thousand six hundred copies remained in Paris. All others were seized.⁸ It is interesting to note how Voltaire managed to have this work published. When the censor at

⁵ XXXV, 34. A M. l'abbé Moussinet, (no place given), le 4 novembre, 1738.

⁶ XXXIII, 414. A M. de Cideville, Monieu, le 24 avril, 1734.

⁷ XXXIII, 173. A M. Thieriot, Wandsworth, le 14 juin, 1727.

⁸ XXXIII, 205. A M. de Cideville, Paris, le 30 janvier, 1731.

Paris refused to approve the second volume, Voltaire, by making his usual detour, took the manuscript to Rouen where he secured a permission tacite which gave an author permission to have a work published without being persecuted. Voltaire expressed his attitude on this incident in a letter of January 30, 1731, in which he said: "Il y a deux manières de s'y prendre pour faire imprimer cette histoire; la première, c'est d'en montrer un exemplaire à monsieur le premier président, qui donnerait une permission tacite; la seconde, d'avoir un de ces imprimeurs qui font tout sans permission."⁹

It was a practice during Voltaire's day for publishers to obtain through trickery manuscripts which were not yet ready for publication and to publish and sell them in book form. There was no baseness that they would not do to obtain certain works especially when they felt that there was a fortune involved. In order that they might be the first to publish a work, some printers went as far as to steal the manuscripts. It was in this manner that Voltaire lost Sémiramis (1748), a tragedy; Nanine (1748), a comedy; and L'Histoire de la dernière guerre (1749). Since they were filled with errors and needed reshaping, Voltaire tried to stop their appearance.¹⁰ In many cases when publishers were successful in obtaining Voltaire's material for publication without his consent, the

⁹ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰ XXXVII, 76. A Madame la Duchesse du Maine, Fontainebleau, le 2 novembre, 1749.

French philosophe was forced to pay large sums of money to have a work suppressed or to keep his name from appearing on it. For example, Voltaire paid Jore, the publisher at Rouen, fifteen hundred livres for suppressing La Pucelle (1734). However, after Jore had learned that another publisher in Paris had printed an edition of the work, he sold his in spite of his promise to Voltaire.¹¹ When Voltaire sent his Lettres philosophiques to England to be published, he sent a copy of them to Jore in Rouen. Voltaire wanted the English edition to appear first so that he could hear the public sentiment before the work was released in France. However, Jore, who feared that the English edition would prevail over his, released his edition too soon, resulting in a short exile for Voltaire from France.¹²

Continuing their practice of using forbidden writers as a means of making money, some printers issued pamphlets and even entire volumes of dangerous literature under the name of well-known writers. Voltaire's name was the one most frequently used. About 1730, he was being condemned for a group of letters and pamphlets that were in circulation under his name. Voltaire disclaimed any knowledge of the authors of these works.¹³ Many men wrote untrue criticisms of his works. In 1748, an edition of twelve volumes of Voltaire's works appeared filled with

¹¹ XXXIV, 71-72. A M. le comte d'Argental, Paris, mai 1736.

¹² Bachman, op. cit., 101.

¹³ XXXIII, 215-16. Aux auteurs du Nouvelliste du Parnasse, Paris, juin 1731.

scandals and libels against various people. He denied authorship of the work and attempted to have the volumes seized.¹⁴ On the other hand, Voltaire took advantage of these forgeries and used them to cover clandestine publications of his works which he knew could not be approved. When he was accused of writing one of them, he would simply deny authorship and claim that a printer had taken advantage of him. When accused of writing poetry against Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Voltaire said, ". . . et quand je fais un ouvrage, je l'avoue hautement. Si donc je désavoue celui-ci, c'est une preuve que je ne l'ai pas fait."¹⁵ Again in 1742, while trying to prove his innocence, he wrote:¹⁶

. . . on a mis sous mon nom des pièces qu'assurément personne ne mettra jamais sous le sien; une apothéose infâme de la demoiselle Lecouvreur; un fragment de roman qu'on dit impudemment avoir trouvé écrit de ma main dans mes papiers; je ne sais quelles chansons faites pour la canaille, et plusieurs ouvrages dans ce goût. Attribuer ainsi à un auteur ce qui n'est point de lui, c'est tout à la fois outrager un citoyen et abuser le public; c'est en quelque façon un acte de fausserie. . . .

If a publisher did not like a work which he was printing, he would sometimes change passages without consulting the author as was done in the case of Alzira (1736).¹⁷ In some instances, Voltaire's enemies would insert passages in order to do Voltaire harm by creating friction

¹⁴ XXXVI, 514. Au lieutenant général de police, (no place given), Le 11 juin, 1748.

¹⁵ XXXIV, 116. A Mlle Guinault, Cirey, le 7 septembre, 1736.

¹⁶ XXXVI, 119. A M. de La Roque, (no place given), Paris, 1742.

¹⁷ XXXIV, 38. A M. Le comte d'Argental, Cirey, le 26 février, 1736.

between him and the governmental authorities. One of Voltaire's greatest enemies, the Abbé Desfontaines, obtained a copy of La Mort de César (1735), which had been changed by the publishers, and wrote a satire against it. This aroused Voltaire's indignation.¹⁸ When L'Enfant prodigue appeared in 1736, Voltaire found that it was not as he had written it. In the original of this work, one of the characters was a président. This character was changed into that of a général because the authorities would not allow a président to be shown on the stage. Voltaire points out that the restrictions are not so severe in England: "En Angleterre, j'ai vu sur la scène un cardinal qui meurt en athée."¹⁹ When the Eléments de Newton appeared in Holland in 1738, Voltaire found that the title had been changed by the publishers to the Eléments de la Philosophie de Newton, mis à la portée de tout le monde. The author objected to this change for he knew that not everyone could understand Newton.²⁰ In reference to this same work, it was later discovered that the publishers in Holland had someone else complete chapters twenty-four and twenty-five without consulting Voltaire.²¹

Another fault of the publishers about which Voltaire had a good

¹⁸ XXXIII, 536. A. M. Berger. (no place given), septembre, 1735.

¹⁹ XXXVI, 57. A. M. de la Noue. Bruxelles, mai 1741.

²⁰ XXXIV, 475. A. M. Berger. Cirey, le 14 mai, 1738.

²¹ XXXV, 12. A. M. de Mauvertuis. (no place given), 1738.

deal to say was their inaccuracy. For example, the printers in Holland published the Eléments de Newton in 1738 with the last four chapters lacking. Voltaire did not understand how they could sell the book, but he knew that "le public, curieux et ignorant, l'achète comme on va en foule à une pièce nouvelle."²² This same edition also contained many careless errors made by the publishers. In criticism of the printers for such carelessness, the French philosopher said, "Je vois avec chagrin l'extrême négligence avec laquelle beaucoup de livres nouveaux sont imprimés. Il y a, par exemple, peu de pièces de théâtres où il n'y ait des vers entiers oubliés."²³ Voltaire believed that all these errors could be avoided and a work would be worth more if the printers would send the first copy to the author before putting the book on sale. In this way, the necessary changes which were not noticeable on the manuscript could then be made.²⁴ Perhaps most of this carelessness was due to the haste with which publishers printed materials that they obtained. "Ils s'empressent de servir des fruits qui ne sont pas mûrs," Voltaire wrote.²⁵ The following quotation of the French philosopher sums

²² XXXIV, 475. A M. Bergen, Cirey, le 14 mai, 1738.

²³ XXXIV, 521. A M. l'abbé Prévost, (no place given) juillet, 1738.

²⁴ XXXIV, 563-64. Au rédacteur de la Bibliothèque française, Cirey, le 30 août, 1738.

²⁵ XXXV, 255. Au prince Antiochus Cantemir, Cirey, le 12 avril, 1739.

up rather well his opinion of the printing trade as well as of the works published during his day:²⁶

C'est un malheur inséparable du bien qu'a produit l'imprimerie, que cette foule de pièces scandaleuses, publiées à la honte de l'esprit et des mœurs. Partout où il y a une foule d'écrivains, il y a une foule de libelles; ces misérables ouvrages, nés souvent en France, passent dans le Nord, ainsi que nos mauvais vins y sont vendus pour du Bourgogne et du Champagne. On boit les uns, et on lit les autres, souvent avec aussi peu de goût; mais les hommes qui ont une vraie connaissance savent rejeter ce que la France rebute.

Voltaire regretted that many of the worthless books written in France were so widely read in other countries.

Since Voltaire was fearless in his writings, he regarded as cowards the other French men of letters who wrote rimes for publishers within a compass of royal censorship.²⁷ To him, the profession of writing had become a trade of intrigue and servitude. In reference to this Voltaire wrote:²⁸

La profession des lettres, si brillante, et même si libre sous Louis XIV, le plus despotique de nos rois, est devenue un métier d'intrigues et de servitude. Il n'y point de bassesse qu'on ne fasse pour obtenir je ne sais quelles places ou au sceau, ou dans des académies; et l'esprit de petitesse et de minutie est venu au point que l'on ne peut plus imprimer que des livres insipides.

Instead of concentrating on great works of literature, writers overflowed the literary field with pamphlets.²⁹

²⁶ XXXVI, 293. A. M. Nordberg, (no place given), 1744.

²⁷ XXXV, 187. A. M. Helvétius, Cirey, le 25 février, 1739.

²⁸ XXXIII, 439. A. M. de Forment, (no place given). ca 27...1734.

²⁹ XXXIII, 530. A. M. de Cideville, Cirey, le 20 septembre, 1735.

CHAPTER IV

Undoubtedly, Voltaire was not blameless of all the things of which he was accused. The French philosophe was quick to deny ownership of many of his writings and to shift the blame of them to other men who were frequently innocent. The fact that Voltaire was in constant conflict with the censorship authorities caused a great demand for his works. It is true that he had difficulty in publishing his writings in Paris avec privilege. However, by taking advantage of the disorganization of the censorship system in Paris, by using the opportunity of having forbidden books printed abroad, and by utilizing the clandestine press in France, Voltaire succeeded in placing his works before the public.

Voltaire also made six hundred thousand livres. Another part, he made in the India trade, and some in vessels trading with America. For the most part, his ships were fortunate enough not to be met by enemies. Voltaire also won a large amount of money in the lottery. In one of his letters of 1740, he mentioned the fact that he had won six tickets in the lottery in 1738. Voltaire's works usually brought him good financial returns because of the fact that many of his writings were published avec privilege. Voltaire brought him four hundred thousand livres in 1740.

¹ André Maurois, *Voltaire* (Paris, 1924), p. 100.

² XXIV, 346. *A. S. Voltaire* (Paris, 1924), p. 100.

³ John Morley, *Voltaire* (London, 1907), p. 100.

CHAPTER IV

VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD FINANCE

While still young, Voltaire became very fond of money, believing that a fortune allowed one more independence and gave greater opportunity for association with the nobles with whom he liked to mingle. He had many relations with great financiers, notably the Paris brothers who advised him in investing the four thousand two hundred fifty livres de rente which he had inherited from his father. Voltaire invested part of his fortune in the provision of army supplies from which he is said to have made six hundred thousand livres. Another part, he invested in the Cadiz trade, and some in vessels trading with America.¹ For the most part, his ships were fortunate enough not to be met by corsairs. Voltaire also won a large amount of money in the lottery. In one of his letters of 1740, he mentioned the fact that he had seventy tickets in la loterie de l'Hôtel de Ville.² By such clever speculation, Voltaire greatly increased his inherited fortune. Because of their great public appeal, Voltaire's works usually brought him good financial returns in spite of the fact that many of his writings were published secretly. He made two thousand pounds from the English subscriptions to the Henriade.³ OEdipe brought him four thousand francs. Even though the

¹ André Maurois, Voltaire (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1933), pp. 35-36.

² XXXV, 366. A. M. l'abbé Mousinot, (no place given), le 12 janvier, (1740).

³ John Morley, Voltaire (London: The Macmillan Co., 1888), p. 107.

time which Voltaire spent in the court was short, he increased his fortune while there as a result of royal pensions. The Duc d'Orléans gave him a pension of one thousand two hundred fifty francs in 1718. Later, in 1722, Louis XV pensioned him with two thousand francs a year. Marie Leczinska, wife of Louis XV, gave the French writer one thousand five hundred francs as a pension.⁴ While in the court of Frederick II, he received a pension from the Prussian monarch.⁵ Thus, as a result of inherited money, financial speculations, pensions, and income from his writing, Voltaire soon amassed a very large fortune.

It was not at all unusual that a man of such great wealth as Voltaire came in contact with the financial system of John Law, the Scotch financier. Like most people of the eighteenth century, Voltaire found it difficult to understand Law's principles, saying, in 1719, in a letter to Monsieur de Génomville, "Lass est-il un dieu, un fripon, ou un charlatan...C'est un chaos que je ne puis débrouiller, et auquel je m' imagine que vous n'entendez rien."⁶ Law advised the Duc d'Orléans, the regent who ruled for the young Louis XV. Voltaire criticized their handling of the finances saying that the duke was constantly spending the people's money carelessly and that he himself was accumulating a large fortune.⁷ Although everyone in Europe believed that the system of

⁴ Gustave Lanson, Voltaire (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1906), p. 21.

⁵ XXXVII, 230. A. M. Dargot, Berlin, Le 18 janvier, 1751.

⁶ XXXIII, 53. A. M. de Génomville, (no place given), 1719. Lass was the name used for Law by Voltaire in this letter.

⁷ XXXIII, 154. A. M. Thieriot, (no place given), 1725.

of Law made the regent wealthy, Voltaire said that he knew that the great financier died a poor man, and that when the duke died, he left a debt of seven million livres which his son had difficulty in paying.⁸ This seeming contradiction concerning the wealth of the regent may be due to the lapse in time between the two letters although contradictory statements are not unknown in Voltaire's correspondance.

During his stay at Cirey, Voltaire was very kind to his friends and also to poor people whom he hardly knew and who were badly in need of money. He was a generous helper of those who had and of those who had not. In reference to making payments, Voltaire advised the Abbé Moussinot who handled most of his financial transactions not to pay en dupe but always généreusement.⁹ Occasionally, he gave books to printers. For example, in 1736, Voltaire made a bargain with Frault, a publisher, in which he allowed him to print La Henriade in exchange for seventy-two copies which were magnificently bound and with gilded edges.¹⁰ Voltaire nearly always sent copies of his books to friends. When the Eléments de Newton appeared in 1738, he sent one hundred fifty copies to the Abbé Moussinot, which he was to distribute to Voltaire's friends.¹¹

⁸ XXXIV, 547. A Fréleris, Cirey, le 5 août, 1738.

⁹ XXXVI, 7. A M. l'abbé Moussinot, Bruxelles, le 16 janvier, (1741).

¹⁰ XXXIV, 124. A M. Berger, Cirey, le 18 septembre, 1736.

¹¹ XXXIV, 510. A M. l'abbé Moussinot, (no place given), le 28 juin, (1738).

For the most part, Voltaire managed to have a large sum of money on hand or to be in a position to obtain it within a short time. However, there were times when he found himself badly in need of money, as for example, during his stay in England when Medina, a Jewish financier, became bankrupt leaving Voltaire penniless. In 1736, it was necessary that Voltaire sell some of his furniture in order to have enough money on hand to make a payment of one hundred livres to Monsieur Berger.¹² In a similar situation, he sold a share of stock for twelve hundred livres in order to help pay for a purchase made by Mme du Châtelet.¹³

Voltaire increased his fortune by lending money at large interest to such people as le Marquis de Lezeau, Monsieur de Goesbriant, le prince de Guise, and Monsieur de Richelieu. The Abbé Moussinot, his financial agent, took charge of the money lending but, through a continuous correspondence, Voltaire advised him with regard to whom he should give money and from whom he should collect interest. Often, he had difficulty in collecting the money which he lent; sometimes he waited from three to five years for it. Voltaire suggested the following statement to the Abbé Moussinot as a form to be used in collecting from his debtors:¹⁴

M. de Voltaire, voyageant dans les pays étrangers, a un besoin extrême de la rente que vous lui devez. Il espère de votre

¹² XXXIV, 68. A M. l'abbé Moussinot, (no place given) le 7 (avril), 1736.

¹³ XXXIV, 274. A M. l'abbé Moussinot (no place given), le 5 juin, 1737.

¹⁴ XXXIV, 228. A M. l'abbé Moussinot, (no place given), le 18 mars, 1737.

générosité et de vostra amitié que vous voudrez bien le payer.

Voltaire was always careful in his collecting because he did not wish to make enemies of his friends who owed him money. When some of the farmers were behind in their rents, he realized their situations and hesitated in rushing the payments. While in England, Voltaire lent large sums of money to bankers and to business men. However, when he was ill in France, they took advantage of him and refused to pay the money which they owed.¹⁵ On his arrival in England in 1726, he was unable to collect a draft on a Jewish banker, Acosta, who had gone bankrupt.

Even though the French philosophe was often successful in his business transactions, he sometimes lost large sums of money in his investments. In 1740, M. Michel, receveur général, with whom Voltaire had invested money and from whom he was receiving a life annuity, became bankrupt, causing Voltaire to lose a rather large sum.¹⁶ In 1748, in a letter to the Comte d'Argental, he mentioned the fact that the English had just captured one of the boats at Cadiz in which he had money invested, saying, "Les Français me persécutent sur terre, les Anglais me pillent sur mer."¹⁷ In spite of such financial reverses, Voltaire's fortune continued to increase.

¹⁵ XXXIII, 166. A M. Thieriot, (no place given), le 2 février, 1727.

¹⁶ XXXV, 494. A M. l'abbé Moussinot, (no place given), le 14 août, 1740.

¹⁷ XXXVI, 512. A M. le comte d'Argental, (no place given), le 10 juin, 1748.

Voltaire often sent money to his friends through the mail. There was a heavy charge on such a practice, so in order to conceal the fact that money was being sent, Voltaire placed it in a box and registered it as meubles précieux, in this way avoiding the mailing expense of sending money.¹⁸

Thus, through his writings and as a result of his many financial dealings, Voltaire became immensely wealthy. Because of his good sense of business, he was able to make successful investments in numerous projects. Although some of his losses were heavy, Voltaire suffered these misfortunes calmly and usually recovered his deficit by new speculation. He is to be admired for his generosity in reference to his wealth, since it is evident from his correspondence that a good deal of the fortune which he amassed was used to aid those who were in need.

¹⁸

XXIV, 65. A M. L'abbé Mousinot, (no place given), le 11 décembre, 1738.

CHAPTER V

VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD CERTAIN SOCIAL CUSTOMS

It seems, from his correspondence, that the social system of France, especially that of the capital, greatly displeased Voltaire. He saw the need for reform and hoped to use his writings for furthering this end. During his stay in other countries, he continued his fight to bring about social reform through letters to his friends in France. Although many of the things for which Voltaire fought were never accomplished, it would be hard to find any one man who has done more to bring about a change in any social system. For Voltaire was by no means limited in his outlook. He had varied interests which included such subjects as industry, finance, literature, the theatre, architecture, medicine, court customs, philosophy, social customs, education, etc.

Voltaire felt that the French as a whole were lacking in industry and that they could do a good deal more to embellish their kingdom. Instead of spending money on repairing canals, Voltaire suggested that the French build new ones since good canals greatly facilitated commerce within a state.¹ To help beautify Paris, he suggested the destruction of les monuments de la barbarie gothique and particularly of the ridicules fontaines de village qui défigurent notre ville.² He objected

¹ XXXVI, 70. A M. Pitot de Launai, Bruxelles, le 12 juin, 1741.

² XXXV, 108. A M. le comte de Caylus, (no place given), 1739.

to the placing of fountains against a wall, in the street, or half-way behind a house. He believed that they should be raised in public squares, and that all beautiful monuments should be situated so that they could be seen from all sides as was true of those in Rome.³ In 1740, while people were having many celebrations in which there were great displays of fireworks, Voltaire described these celebrations as "fêtes passagères, du bruit, de la foule, beaucoup de bourgeois, quelques diamants et rien de plus."⁴ During those fêtes, canons were usually discharged from the Hôtel de Ville. Voltaire suggested that the canons be used to destroy the building from which they were being fired and that the money spent on fusées volantes be used to build a new Hôtel de Ville.⁵

The abbé d'Olivet wrote Voltaire a letter in which he mentioned the luxu outré of France. Voltaire admired luxury which he felt was very much neglected in his native country. In an answer to the abbé's letter, he wrote:⁶

...nos princes sent à peine logés, et qu'il n'y a une maison dans Paris comparable à celle de Gènes. Personne n'a de pages; il n'y a pas à Paris ce qui s'appelle un beau carrosse. Un homme qui marcherait avec trois laquais se ferait siffler. Le mode des grandes livrées est presque abolie. On vit très-commodément, mais sans faste.

³ Ibid.

⁴ XXXV, 315. A Frédéric, prince royal de Prusse, Bruxelles, le 12 août, 1739.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ XXXVI, 293. A M. l'abbé d'Olivet, Cirey, le 2 mai, 1744.

Voltaire felt that the luxury of Paris did not compare with that of other countries. In Le Mondain (1736), an essay on worldly morals, Voltaire attempted to prove that luxury, magnificence, the arts, and all that which formed the splendor of a state, made the richness of it. In this work, he upheld the "theory of luxury" in contrast to that of the "simple life."

In 1738, Voltaire attended the wedding of his second niece who married M. de Fontaine. There, he made the following interesting observation:⁷

Assemblées de parents, quolibets de noces, plates plaisanteries, contes lubriques, qui font rougir la mariée et pincer les lèvres aux bégueules, grand bruit, propos interrompus, grande et mauvaise chère, ricanements sans avoir envie de rire, lourds baisers donnés lourdement, petites filles regardant du coin de l'œil.

Undoubtedly Voltaire was rather bored at this affair which in his estimation was greatly overdone.

A situation which drew a good deal of criticism from Voltaire was the neglect of the beaux-arts in Paris, where people, he wrote in 1741, spoke only about banque-routes. In his letters from Prussia, he asked his friends to encourage writing, often reminding them that a great decadence in all the arts was taking place in Paris. Everything tended toward the extinction of bon goût which was being replaced by la mauvaise plaisanterie. In a letter to the actress, Mlle Quinault, he

⁷ XXXIV, 490. A M. Thieriot, Cirey, le 5 juin, 1738.

wrote: "Je plains la Comédie de Paris. Il me semble que les arts n'y sont pas favorablement traités... Tout tend en France à l'extinction totale du bon goût..."⁸

Having written tragedies which were played with some success, Voltaire was naturally interested in the theatre of France. In 1738, he condemned the theatrical buildings of Paris saying that many excellent works were being played in de très-vilains théâtres.⁹ He wrote in

1733:¹⁰ "...nous n'avons pas su depuis un siècle bâtir seulement une salle passable pour y faire représenter les chefs-d'oeuvre de l'esprit humain. Le centième de l'argent des cartes suffirait pour avoir des salles de spectacle plus belles que le théâtre de Pompée; mais quel homme dans Paris est animé de l'amour du bien public? On joue, on soupe, on médit, on fait de mauvaises chansons, et on s'endort dans la stupidité, pour recommencer le lendemain son cercle de légèreté et d'indifférence.

Voltaire often suggested ways of producing stage effects for his plays. In one instance, a pool of water was represented by des toiles blanches.¹¹ In another he advised that the theatre at Fontainebleau be lighted only by candles and by reflectors in the wings.¹² In reference to the crowds

⁸ XXXVI, 37. A Mlle Quinsult, Bruxelles, le 1 avril, 1741.

⁹ XXXV, 315. A Frédéric, prince royal de Prusse, Bruxelles, le 12 août, 1739.

¹⁰ XXXIII, 354-55. A un premier commis, (no place given), le 20 juin, 1733.

¹¹ XXXVI, 305. A M. de duc de Richelieu, Siray, le 8 juin, 1744.

¹² XXXVI, 529. A M. le comte d'Arcontal, Valenciennes (near Nancy), le 4 octobre, 1748.

which attended the theatres, Voltaire said in a letter to Frederick II: "Le parterre et les loges ne sont point du tout philosophes, pas même gens de lettres. Il sont gens à sentiment, et puis c'est tout."¹³

Voltaire also made a very interesting observation on the first presentation of a play in Paris:¹⁴

C'est un grand jour pour le beau monde oisif de Paris qu'une première représentation; les cabales battent le tambour. On se dispute les loges; les valets de chambre vont à midi remplir le théâtre. La pièce est jugée avant qu'on l'ait vue. Femmes contre femmes; petits-maîtres contre petits-maîtres; sociétés contre sociétés; les cafés sont comblés de gens qui disputent; la foule est dans la rue, en attendant qu'elle soit au parterre. Il y a des paris; on joue le succès de la pièce aux trois dés. Les comédiens tremblent, l'auteur aussi.

Usually an ardent and boisterous crowd which indulged in heated discussions of the plays and actors attended the theatre. Voltaire said further in a letter to the Marquis d'Argenson, in 1740; "Je ne croirai les Français tout à fait revenus de l'ancienne barbarie que quand l'archevêque de Paris, le chancelier, et le premier président, auront chacun une loge à l'Opéra et à la Comédie."¹⁵ Voltaire thought it important that those in authority should attend the theatre in order to judge it favorably. Plays frequently included some matter of political or social interest. People were interested in the new philosophy, but since there was little chance for general discussion of it, they depended on the stage to fulfill the function of forming public opinion.

¹³ XXXVII, 81-82. A Frédéric II, roi de Prusse, Paris, le 17 novembre, 1740.

¹⁴ XXXVII, 381. A Madame Denis, Potsdam, le 2 mars, 1752.

¹⁵ XXXV, 406. A M. le marquis d'Argenson, Bruxelles, le 30 mars, 1740.

Voltaire used the question of the divine right of kings and the infallibility of the church as two subjects on which to focus the veiled attacks in his dramas.¹⁶

During the eighteenth century, the opera always drew a larger crowd than did a play. The greatest success of a good tragedy never approached the success of a mediocre opera. Voltaire said that the opera was a public rendez-vous where people assembled on certain days without knowing why.¹⁷

The fact that Mme du Châtelet often sang in private operas and played the lead in Voltaire's plays is worthy of note. After her performance of Zirphé, the French philosopher said: "Mille diamants faisaient son moindre ornement... Les beaux-arts sont honorés."¹⁸ Her charm as a singer was also praised by Voltaire.¹⁹

Voltaire focused a severe attack on the men of letters who were connected with the French universities, which to him had no special merit other than their antiquity. He felt that the professors of science were especially weak. Since France had no good principles of science to teach to the young people, they were obliged to go to

¹⁶ Cleveland B. Chase, The Young Voltaire (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), pp. 42-44.

¹⁷ XXXIII, 306. A M. de Gideville, Paris, le 15 novembre, 1732.

¹⁸ XXXVI, 501. A M. de Monerif, (no place given), 1747.

¹⁹ XXXVI, 150. A M. de Chambonin, Reims, 1742.

foreigners for aid.²⁰ Voltaire attacked the Sorbonne and its administration in such statements as, "la canaille des dévots, celle de la Sorbonne, font plus de bruit et sont plus dangereuses."²¹ He is here making a comparison of the doctors of the Sorbonne and the gens de lettres. Voltaire disliked the French Academy which he said was "infectée de brigues et de haines personnelles." He said that the French language was becoming weaker because of the authority of this group: "Si on laisse faire l'Académie, elle appauvrira notre langue."²² Voltaire suggested that all men who were cultivating letters should go to Rome, the séjour des beaux-arts,²³ because "la France a très-peu de philosophes; elle a encore moins d'hommes de goût."²⁴

Since France was a country where certain honors were hereditary, Voltaire questioned what might remain for one who had neither money nor noble birth and concluded that for such a person, "il leur reste d'être heureux, et de ne pas s'imaginer seulement que cent mille francs et un manteau ducal soient quelque chose."²⁵

It was only natural that Voltaire, who was an admirer of Louis XIV,

²⁰ XXXIV, 266. A Frédéric, prince royal de Prusse, Cirey, le 27 mai, 1737.

²¹ XXXVII, 476. A M. le comte d'Argental, Potsdam, le 1^{er} septembre, 1752.

²² XXXVII, 56. A Frédéric II, roi de Prusse, Lunéville, en Lorraine, le 31 août, 1749.

²³ XXXVI, 399. Au cardinal Passionei, Fontainebleau, le 12 octobre, 1745.

²⁴ XXXV, 392. A M. le président Nénault, Bruxelles, le 2 mars, 1740.

²⁵ XXXV, 246. A M. Lefranc, Cirey, le 14 avril, 1739.

would find some criticism of the court of Louis XV. His impression of the court as a whole can be summed up in the statement which he wrote to the Comte d'Argental: "La cour de France ressemble à une ruche d'abeilles, on y bourdonne autour du roi."²⁶ He intimated that in order to have a place as a man of letters it was necessary to have a good standing with the king.²⁷ No true politeness could be found in the French court, he said.²⁸ After the marriage of Louis XV to Marie Lecinska, Voltaire said that in order to buy lace and cloth for the queen the people would have to be taxed more heavily.²⁹ It was customary for the French monarch to go hunting every day, even in the worst rain, not caring if his courtiers were soaked, observed Voltaire.³⁰

No doubt Voltaire's reforms were for the betterment of France, but it seems that at a time of such inefficient administration, the government gave little heed to his suggested improvements. Some of the things with which Voltaire found fault were the monuments and buildings of Paris, the court, theatres, the French Academy, the University of Paris, and the men of letters in general. However, Voltaire's suggestions for improvement were little heeded until the time of the French Revolution.

²⁶ XXXVI, 345. A M. le comte d'Argental, Versailles, le 25 février, 1745.

²⁷ XXXV, 437. A M. le Marquis d'Argenson, Bruxelles, le 21 mai, 1740.

²⁸ XXXVI, 8. A M. de Maupeou, Bruxelles, le 19 de janvier, 1741.

²⁹ XXXIII, 147. A Madame la présidente de Bernières, Versailles, septembre, 1725.

³⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

One of Voltaire's most outstanding characteristics is versatility. It seems almost impossible that a man of letters working under such great opposition could accomplish so much that had a noticeable influence on society. Voltaire's life was one of longevity and of great activity. As he frequently mentioned in his letters, ill health and persecution often restricted his plans and retarded his progress. Still, he was usually successful in accomplishing his ends.

Voltaire was a popular habitué of many salons in which he entertained his friends by displaying his great wit while discussing literature. Unlike many men of letters, he did not shut himself up in a room to work alone. Instead, he liked to be in the presence of fellow workers with whom he could discuss his writing. Throughout his lengthy life, he knew well luxury, the importance of which he upheld; yet he felt a dread of poverty. Voltaire wished that some day all men could have good health, happiness and a long life. In his correspondence with his friends, he often suggested certain reforms which were needed. At times, whole works were devoted to this end.

Since Voltaire was involved in a struggle for more liberty, it was only natural that his letters should contain many comments on this subject. He frequently criticized the lack of freedom of expression in his country and attributed to this the fact that no really great

literature was produced there. However, censorship was often an advantage to Voltaire because of the increased publicity given prohibited works. On the other hand, his attempts to relieve suppression of writers only brought him constant persecution which resulted in exile, sometimes by necessity and sometimes voluntary. One joins him in his thought when he wrote in one of his letters: "Hélas! Monsieur, est-il possible que le prix de tant de travaux soit la persécution!"¹ However, his efforts were not in vain, for partly because of Voltaire, the world is experiencing to a certain extent today free speech, free writing, abolition of slavery, individual civil liberty, and milder legal punishments.

Because he was a clever business man who was not afraid to take a chance, Voltaire managed to have published nearly all that he wrote. When a work was not approved by the conseil des sceaux, he proceeded to seek someone whom he could trust to publish it secretly. Having had business relations with foreigners, he often succeeded in finding worthy persons in England or Holland who would print what he wrote. In reading the letters which Voltaire wrote day after day, one learns that he worked incessantly at rewriting his literary masterpieces. Often he sent parts of a manuscript to his friends in order to receive their comments before reworking it for the last time. Voltaire knew while he was writing a work that it would create much comment from the

¹ XXIV, 225. A M. le Marquis d'Argenson, (no place given), le 24 mars, 1739.

public. For example, in one of his letters, he mentioned the fact that he wanted to have the Lettres Philosophiques published first in English so that he could hear the public sentiment before publishing them in French.² He also hoped that those people who were greatly disturbed by the Temple du Goût would cease their criticism before the Lettres Philosophiques appeared. In spite of frequent difficulty with censorship, Voltaire's works were widely circulated in France.

It must be taken into consideration that Voltaire's wealth played a great part in making it possible for him to continue his evasions of persecution. When he was ready to move, he was in a position financially to go from one dwelling to another, or from one country to another, leaving an entire furnished home behind. It is not likely that a poor man could have sought refuge in the various châteaux such as that of Mme du Châtelet at Cirey and that of La Duchesse du Maine at Soeaux. His ability as a writer secured for him pensions from the French and Prussian courts. However, as has been pointed out before, Voltaire was not at all selfish with his wealth since he was willing to help many of those who were in need. His generosity is well exemplified in a letter of 1737 when Voltaire wrote to his financial agent telling him that there was a young lady in Aufreville whom he hardly knew and who was in extreme need: "Mon cher abbé," he wrote, "prenez un fiacre, allez la trouver; dites-lui que je prends la liberté de lui prêter dix pistoles, et que

² XXXIII, 363. A. M. Thieriot, Paris, le 24 juillet, 1733.

quand elle aura besoin de davantage, j'ai l'honneur d'être à son service."³ It is interesting to note that even though Voltaire was a great advocate of peace, he earned a good deal of money in his early life selling army supplies.

As a reformer, Voltaire is to be admired because his theories are practical. He did not attack a situation to destroy it without offering a solution, but seemed always to have some suggestion for improvement. In reference to the monuments of Paris, his idea was to conserve, to improve and to embellish them. Much attention was given to the theatre in which he had a special interest and which he felt was degenerating. In his attempt to abolish feudal rights, he did not advocate equality, but wanted a more equal distribution of wealth in order to better the conditions of the poor. Other reforms to which he contributed and which have been largely attained are separation of Church and State, fairer distribution of taxes, establishment of the jury system, and legislation more on the English basis. He also fostered an interest in the improvement of hygiene, agriculture and commerce. Of course one can not assert that Voltaire was fully responsible for the changes in the reforms which he advocated; however, his part in inaugurating them has had a lasting influence on civilization since his day.

³ XXXIV, 372. A M. l'abbé Mousinat, (no place given), le 28 décembre (1737).

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