The Life of Voltaire

By

John Fox

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- *Sean Lester: The Guardian of a Small Flickering Light.* New York: Hamilton Books, 2016.

Recent titles include:

- *Talleyrand.* London: Olympia Publishers, 2022.
- *Mme de Staël (In press)*

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Introduction

During the seventeenth century, there were civil wars in both Great Britain and France. Whereas, in England, the royalists were defeated and the king executed, in France quite the opposite happened. The victory of the parliamentarians in England, while short-lived, eventually led to the inception of a number of very important political reforms, for example: a limitation of the monarch's power; the separation of church and state; freedom of conscience; freedom of the press; and the acknowledgement of individual liberty. Amongst the most significant outcomes was, thanks to Isaac Newton's discoveries, the encouragement of scientific research. Meanwhile, in France the victory of the royalists led to the coronation of the young Louis XIV and the beginning of his long reign. In contrast to what happened in England, Louis XIV consolidated his power over the nobility, aligned his regime closely with the Catholic Church, instituted censorship of the press, denied individual freedom and ruled for seventy-two years without once calling on an elected parliament. The Catholic priests were allowed to express their approval or disapproval in many areas of public life that were none of their concern, including science and literature. It was into this regime that François-Marie Arouet was born in Paris in 1694—the future Voltaire.

At the age of 15, the adolescent François already knew what he wanted to be in life: a talented—and rich—poet. His father believed that he was far more likely to become a starving and poor poet, who would be a burden on his family and die in a garret. Despite his father's qualms, François would indeed achieve his aim of becoming a successful and extremely wealthy poet and playwright.

We know a lot about Voltaire. His tens of thousands of letters written to correspondents all over Europe are a mine of information about his projects and priorities. After leaving his service, the memoirs of his devoted secretaries Longchamp, Collini and Wagnière were published containing first-hand records of daily events. His house was often teeming with visitors who wrote down their personal accounts of meeting him, including

amusing anecdotes about his conversation, appearance, habits, idiosyncrasies, as well as descriptions of the members of his household.

Until this time, the foundation for the way societies functioned in a large part of Europe depended to a great extent on religion. During the Middle Ages, despite superstition and ignorance, as well as successive waves of wars, plagues, natural disasters, despotism and fanaticism, civilization had progressed under the aegis of Christianity. Society and the individual were subject to past traditions based on the gods, prophets, saints, ancestors and superstition. By the eighteenth century, education and literacy were spreading, which meant that the world was changing with science demonstrating how things actually functioned. Voltaire became the most representative figure of the Age of Enlightenment, bringing together a group of philosophers who called for a fundamental questioning of the religious 'certainties' that had guided people's lives up to this time. The new humanist ideas that they defended were: confidence in intelligence; freedom of thought; the recognition of each human being's fundamental freedoms; the rejection of arbitrary justice and intolerance; an in-depth examination of the most sacred institutions and beliefs; and, finally, the desire to change the world for the better. For the first time in history, human well-being became the aim of existence. Achieving these objectives would be tackled through advances in philosophy, politics, science, art and literature. In the eighteenth century, the group of philosophers declared relics of past practices to be totally unacceptable, such as the greed, brutality and pillaging carried out by invaders, slavery and the evil influence of missionaries. Voltaire went so far as to say that "all religion is inhuman and bloodthirsty". Furthermore, the philosophers posed questions concerning the judicial practices of the day: about the death sentence, torture to obtain a confession and harsh punishments, including the abominable conditions prevailing in prisons. There was a sense of participating in a combat that would challenge archaic institutional, political and religious ideas under the magnifying glass of intelligence, truth and liberty.

The Age of Enlightenment, beginning in the late seventeenth century and lasting until the early nineteenth century, could be described as a period of discussion more than of consensus. A simple definition would be the

promotion of personal choices over those imposed by social norms—in other words, the Age of Enlightenment equated to freedom and independence. The power to examine, to criticize, to question everything was encouraged—no institution, no dogma, no authority, however long-standing or revered, was immune from scrutiny. Henceforth, society would be guided by an understanding of science. Knowledge equated with liberty and the search for happiness replaced that of achieving salvation. Newton's discoveries in physics had been accompanied by equally spectacular progress in chemistry, biology and psychology. Even art turned away from grand Greek, Roman and Biblical mythological themes to portray human beings going about their daily activities in natural surroundings. Painters, musicians, actors and writers were no longer the servants of God, the king or their patrons, but artists who created their own works for their own satisfaction. Education would become fashionable, from primary schools to learned academies providing a wide readership for the new encyclopaedias.

The repercussions were even more far-reaching in the field of politics. During the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers began to suggest that the foundation of any national power was the will of the people and not kingship. It also followed that there should be a clear separation between the government and the religious authorities. This implied a further divide between the justice system and religion—the punishment of a crime against society should be clearly distinguished from a moral sin against traditional values. If all human beings have equal rights, it followed that men, women, children, the poor and the outcasts were all equal before the law. If withholding the liberty of an individual was against the law, slavery should be abolished. Next, the church's control of education was questioned since it equated with indoctrination, suggesting that schools should become free and compulsory, teaching knowledge arising from the Enlightenment and not from the Bible. The economy too would henceforth be based on the value of work and individual initiative rather than the privileges and hierarchies of yesteryear. This, in turn, led to the growth of towns where individuals would find work and learn to live their lives at liberty in a large community.

Voltaire rocked the foundations of eighteenth-century society by declaring that Roman Catholicism was so corrupt as to be unworthy of being the religion of France. The Catholic Church was accused of having imposed itself on the population through the employment of lies, violence and fear. In an almost single-handed struggle to overcome obscurantism, arbitrariness and intolerance, he was obliged to resort to cunning, falsehoods and hypocrisy to combat the all-powerful religious authorities' attempts to silence or isolate him. He wrote: "A lie is only a fault when it does wrong; it is a great asset when it does good." In fact, Voltaire was opposed not just to Catholicism but to all religions that employed absolutism to justify the desire to dominate. He noted that the more different religions were tolerated in a country, the more the population lived in peace, harmony and prosperity. When one religion occupied a dominant position, the greater was the danger of imposing its supremacy through bloodshed.

He was at the same time a poet, a philosopher, a writer, a playwright and a historian but, above all in the second half of his life, a fighter for justice. With his words conveying messages of unparalleled wisdom in a language available to everyone, he fought to overturn injustice in favour of religious tolerance and the respect of human dignity. His primary target was particularly religious bigotry. He was also opposed to atheism, which he considered equally undesirable. Instead, he promoted 'deism', the belief in an all-powerful and benevolent God—without attracting many followers or providing convincing evidence to support his thesis.

Voltaire worked with a passion and energy that would stagger his enemies, putting down on paper an endless stream of innovative ideas ensuring his universal fame. He often stated the very opposite of what people had up to that time believed and accepted as being right. He opposed the authorities who followed the dictates of custom and age-old principles by suggesting that, if one actually looked closely at hallowed beliefs and common practices, they could not conceivably be true or fair. He became the great philosopher with messages of justice, tolerance and liberty that would spread like wildfire throughout Europe. His thoughts and words exercised a profound influence on culture and literature throughout the continent

affecting monarchs, nobles, scientists, writers, as well as the common people.

He has been accused of lacking 'seriousness' and he took great care in his writing to appear frivolous. However, although talented French writers had existed before him—Corneille, La Fontaine, Molière, Montaigne, Rabelais, Racine—it was Voltaire who ensured the triumph of intelligence and humanism in the eighteenth century. The way we write and think nowadays owes a great deal to the power of his pen. His aggression could be directed at combatting tyranny and fanaticism in all their forms, sweeping aside stereotypes, superstition, ignorance and injustice. When the religious authorities objected to his writings, he poured scorn on them by pointing out that, apart from those priests who themselves did not believe in God, their preaching consisted of repeating unproven and meaningless dogma. He wrote several pamphlets pointing out that some of what was written in the Bible was blatantly incoherent. Inevitably, his attacks on religion generated severe resistance from the Catholic and Protestant priests.

A country could be religious without religion stifling personal liberty. It was the responsibility of the state to ensure freedom and tolerance. Voltaire drew attention to the moral behaviour of British Protestant priests, comparing it favourably with the dissolute behaviour of many French Catholic priests. In France, priests made vows of celibacy and then indulged brazenly in love affairs with pretty women. They believed that they were the true inheritors of Christianity, while ever ready to burn Protestants and Jews at the stake, resulting in the cruel execution of a number of perfectly innocent victims. The French church was also rife with nepotism. It was in 1759, at the age of 65, that Voltaire invented the catchphrase *Il faut écrasez l'infâme* [sometimes translated as 'Let's Kill the Beast'] expressing his resistance to superstition, intolerance and fanaticism employed by the Catholic church to combat 'heresy'.

The eighteenth century was a time when the religious authorities in France controlled (that is to say, censored) everything: art, astronomy, literature, medicine, politics, philosophy, science, theatre—labelled 'the totalitarianism of the church'. It was only in 1715, sixty-three years after

Galileo's death, that the Vatican finally admitted that he had been right after all about his observations of celestial bodies. Anybody who questioned tradition or the accepted dogma was likely to be tortured and then beheaded or burned to death by the civil judges with the fervent encouragement of the religious authorities. A very 'popular' form of execution was to tie the victims to a horizontal cartwheel and break their limbs with iron bars before incinerating their body—a relic of the Middle Ages. The priests also held a monopoly over burial with the result that the bodies of many renowned but unrepentant public figures who died of natural causes were thrown unceremoniously into communal pits on waste land and covered in quicklime. Even though a considerable number of the intelligentsia were sceptical about religion, the Roman Catholic authorities remained powerful, controlling the royal family and hence the law courts, the police and the military. It was also true that priests often held posts at the royal court for long periods of time, compared to the ephemeral positions of ministers. Voltaire had no faith in Christianity and contributed greatly to constraining the church's power by pouring scorn on its weakest flank—bigotry.

Freedom of the press was unknown in France for a large part of the eighteenth century. Publishing required approval by the royal censors (under the watchful eye of the religious authorities), who would then grant access to the paper required for printing. Many of Voltaire's most notorious works, written under a multitude of improbable names, were refused by the religious authorities, by the king or both. There were frequent calls for freedom of the press, one of the strongest arguments being that efforts by the legal/royal/religious authorities to prevent public access to a publication by burning or destroying it would have precisely the opposite effect, since clandestine printers would flock to obtain copies and reprint them in order to satisfy the demand. It took the censors many decades to reach the evident conclusion that their suppression of a publication, however mediocre, would attract the public's attention and guarantee its commercial success. The Vatican's 'Index' of forbidden publications had exactly the same effect. By pouring scorn on other writers' publications, even Voltaire himself would contribute to the popularity of his rivals. Another argument in favour of freedom of the press was that back-street printers and booksellers would pirate Voltaire's texts inserting obscene or

offensive passages bearing his signature. He would then be held responsible for these clandestine publications and subject to further penalties from the government.

However, if permission to print were refused, Voltaire found several ingenious ways around this difficulty. To avoid reprisals, he took great care not to sign his texts and then, if accused of being the author, heatedly denied any involvement, often accusing "whoever wrote them" of lacking talent. He frequently pretended that they were the work of some obscure author or that of a completely fictitious and hilariously implausible person, even a celebrity who had died years earlier. At times, the royal censors would find some pretext to prevent the publication of a masterpiece and he would be obliged to resort to underground printers in regional French towns making sure to conceal where the books came from when distributing them. He would also send his manuscripts for composition in foreign countries, with works printed, for instance, in Amsterdam bearing the imprint 'London' and vice-versa. As if this were not enough, to further confuse the issue, he learned to print identical books simultaneously in France and abroad without any indication of which was which. The police would be completely baffled as to what the original edition looked like, when it first began to appear, where it was printed and how it was distributed—and, finally, who was responsible. To add to the censor's difficulties, Voltaire's works would be stolen, pirated, copied, parodied, falsified and sold by a host of back-street printers, publishers, booksellers and hawkers.

His masterpieces included such famous works as *Candide* and the *Dictionnaire philosphique portatif*, as well as dozens of poems and tragedies, but he is most renowned nowadays for his tens of thousands of letters. His international reputation during his lifetime was largely based on epic poems, pamphlets and, most particularly, his interventions in miscarriages of justice. He also contributed many articles to the *Encyclopédie*, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. Voltaire was a disciple of Isaac Newton and, in the face of strong and inexplicable resistance by the French scientific and religious communities, promoted the English scientist's discoveries. He was also the first to introduce Shakespeare into France, with some of his plays inspired by this 'barbarian genius'.

From his 20s to the end of his life, Voltaire wrote dozens of plays. Between his first triumph with the tragedy *Œdipe* in 1718 and his last success with *Irène* a few weeks before his death, sixty years elapsed marked by a stream of outstanding tragedies and not a few flops. At this epoch, audiences flocked to the theatre for entertainment and he was just one of several successful Parisian playwrights. Following in the footsteps of Corneille and Racine in the seventeenth century, Voltaire respected the rigid structure of 'classic' French drama: the plot took place in the space of twenty-four hours; only 'noble' sentiments and characters were acceptable; tragedies were based on 'classic' themes drawn from Greek, Roman and Biblical mythology; they consisted of five acts written in verse; scenes involving violence or death occurred out of sight in the wings and were described in a narrative form. This respect of tradition resulted in the structure of plays becoming 'fossilized' with the risk of boring the audience whose taste had evolved. Another curious tradition was that affluent audience members could pay extra to sit on benches on the stage. Despite the popularity of his plays at the time, including receiving royal patronage, modern audiences have little taste for any of them, finding them artificial and archaic. We know nowadays that Voltaire's everlasting fame did not depend upon heavy five-act tragedies in verse, but on the little, light-hearted poems, letters and pamphlets conveying penetrating messages against the hypocrisy, fanaticism, bigotry, corruption and incompetence of those responsible for their fellow men, such as monarchs, ministers, judges, financiers, doctors, bishops, priests, etc. Expressed with a naïve simplicity, his condemnation of those in power made them look ridiculous.

Although he had many friends in high places, it was often alone that he defended the persecuted. In the second half of his life, he conducted a daily struggle to achieve well-being for all mankind, such that people were no longer subject to tyranny, injustice, ignorance and poverty. He believed that people had the right to be happy benefiting from liberty and living in dignity. This also meant that they should be protected from arbitrary justice, slavery and war. Happiness would follow from the triumph of civilization, which would be achieved by the application of intelligence through courage.

Every day, seated at his desk or in his bed, Voltaire would write or dictate letters, essays, novels, plays and pamphlets to his secretaries. There was almost no field of intellectual endeavour that he did not enrich. His creativity was boundless, often working on several different projects at once. In a few days, he could dash off a five-act tragedy in verse ready for rehearsals by the actors at the Comédie-Française. At other times, he would tinker with a philosophical work for ten or twenty years before making it available to the booksellers.

Voltaire sought the company of the rich, noble and powerful, and soon became so wealthy that he would be treated as their equal. While questioning the godlike right of the Bourbon family to rule France, at the same time he craved a position in the court of the French King Louis XV—he wanted to be the king's 'best friend'. He was also renowned for 'putting his foot in it'. The longer he stayed in the home of some noble, the greater the risk of him making some off-the-cuff witty remark or performing some foolish act that would be considered by his hosts as grossly impertinent. In the presence of the aristocracy, he ran the risk of social ostracism, not to mention arrest, banishment, imprisonment and worse.

Another typical characteristic of Voltaire was that he remained resolutely attached to his friends, even when he knew they had betrayed him. Voltaire could show faultless devotion, forgiving the most heinous, offensive disloyalty and thefts on the part of those people he liked. This tolerance appears almost inconceivable on the part of this same man who so often stooped to taking pitiless revenge on those who stood in his way, employing mockery to belittle both eminent personalities and career criminals. It would be a characteristic of his life that he employed the most spiteful vindictiveness for his enemies or rivals, to the point that it often reflected ill on his own image. There was an unpredictable patchiness in his behaviour that was sometimes magnificent in its bounty and generosity and at other times so callous as to make himself the primary victim. There were times when Voltaire could be the most polite, the most intelligent, the most considerate, the most charming human being whose company was cherished by his friends.

In the first half of his life Voltaire travelled constantly—sometimes because he had no choice. He stayed not only at the French king's palaces at Chantilly, Fontainebleau and Versailles, but in the splendid chateaux of dozens of his noble friends. At other times, he thought nothing of undertaking long journeys from Paris to various European towns and cities, such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Geneva, London, Rouen, Strasbourg and The Hague. He would often travel in a horse-drawn, enclosed, four-wheeled, two-seater post chaise, changing horses at regular intervals at coaching inns. The servants would travel on the outside, even in winter, with the valuables placed inside and the heavy luggage on the roof.

Eleven years after Voltaire's death, the French Revolution began. Would he have been pleased? Probably not. His criticism was aimed particularly at the Catholic lobby and not at kingship—the changes he called for were not destined to destroy the royal family. On the contrary, he wished to rejuvenate the monarchy and to reinforce it by removing the obstacles that prevented it from carrying out its true purpose—the fair government of the nation. Despite what a lot of people believed in the nineteenth century, he was not a passionate supporter of deposing the king and setting up a republic. His ideal was an enlightened monarchy similar to the one he had found in England during his stay there in the 1720s. Any hope of achieving this during the French Revolution was brought to a sudden halt in June 1791 by the abortive flight of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.

Nevertheless, he would have applauded the advances made during the first years of the French Revolution: the nationalization of the Catholic Church; the move towards a constitutional monarchy controlled by an elected assembly; the suppression of the nobles' privileges; freedom of religion; the declaration of equality for all citizens, principally on taxation; the abolition of feudalism. There is no doubt whatsoever that he would have been horrified by what took place in France after September 1792 marked by bloodthirsty mobs roaming the streets, the execution of the king and queen, the assumption of power by the Jacobins and the guillotining without fair trial of anyone whom Robespierre considered as an adversary.

* * *

The reader will surely appreciate a note about the French currency in the eighteenth century. The 'livre' was equivalent to the British 'pound'. Larger sums of money were the 'louis' (worth twenty livres) and the 'golden louis' (twenty-four livres). There are occasionally references to the 'ecu' (six livres). The decimal system of currency, weights and measures was not introduced until the 1790s, after Voltaire's death.

* * *

Some estimates suggest that Voltaire wrote more than 40,000 letters in his lifetime. The following pages draw heavily on this correspondence and the reader may feel challenged by the seemingly endless succession of unfamiliar names, many with similar spellings. To aid comprehension, the following glossary presents a few of his principal correspondents:

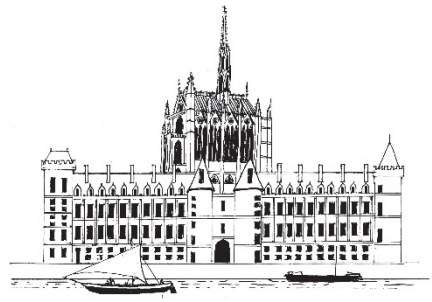
- Jean-Baptiste le Rond **d'Alembert** was a French mathematician, mechanic, physicist, philosopher and music theorist. He became one of the founders of the *Encyclopédie* and one of Voltaire's fervent philosophical correspondents and companions.
- After being a member of the king's bodyguard, Étienne Noël **d'Amilaville** was placed in charge of collecting the *Vingtième* tax. As a convinced philosopher, he undertook to distribute Voltaire's letters and pamphlets surreptitiously through his office, thereby avoiding censorship.
- René-Louis de Voyer de Paulmy, Marquis **d'Argenson**, was a school friend, the elder of two brothers, who became Minister of War and remained Voltaire's associate until the end of his life.
- Charles-Augustin Ferriol, Marquis and later Duke **d'Argental** was another of Voltaire's boyhood friends. In 1737, he married Jeanne Bosc du Bouchet. This couple became Voltaire's most devoted and unswerving allies at the royal court throughout his and their lives. Over 1,200 letters exist written by Voltaire to d'Argental.
- François-Joachim de Pierre, known as **Abbé de Bernis**, was a friend and adviser to Louis XV's mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour. After a period as a government minister and ambassador, he became a cardinal and Voltaire's contact at the Holy See in Rome.

- Towards the end of Voltaire's life, the Russian tsarina, **Catherine the Great,** entered into a regular correspondence with him.
- Étienne-François, the Duke de **Choiseul**, became the first minister of France between 1758 and 1770 and, with his wife, provided Voltaire with valuable protection at the royal court at the Palais de Versailles.
- Pierre Robert Le Cornier de **Cideville** was another school friend who became a councillor in the *Parlement de Normandie* and a long-term ally.
- Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de **Condorcet**, was a mathematician, philosopher, politician and publisher during the Age of Enlightenment. He ensured that Voltaire's collected works were published after his death.
- Voltaire kept a portrait of his lifelong friend Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, **Mme du Deffand,** in his bedroom at Ferney. Before becoming blind at the age of 56, she had established herself as one of the greatest writers of her time—intelligent, shrewd and cynical.
- As one of the leading intellectuals of the age, **Denis Diderot,** became the editor, with d'Alembert, of the *Encyclopédie*, to which Voltaire made numerous contributions.
- **Louise d'Épinay** invited to her Châteaux de La Chevrette and her Parisian townhouse the leading eighteenth-century French intellectuals.
- Frederick II of Prussia—**Frederick the Great**—supported the Age of Enlightenment. French was Frederick's preferred language for speaking and writing, in which he conducted a stormy but never entirely interrupted correspondence with Voltaire.
- Claude-Philippe **Fyot de La Marche** was another boyhood friend who became a French magistrate and First President of the *Parlement de Bourgogne*.
- Friedrich Melchior, Baron von **Grimm** was a German-born French-language philosopher and journalist, whose criticisms dealt with nearly every subject—political, literary, artistic, social and religious. He knew Voltaire through his association with Louise d'Épinay.
- Charles-Jean-François Hénault, usually referred to as **President Hénault** (not to be confused with Commissioner of Police René

Hérault), the lover of Mme du Deffand, became president of the *Parlement de Paris* and was associated with the entire Parisian intellectual elite.

- Anne-Louise-Bénédicte de Bourbon, the tiny, ambitious **Duchess du Maine**, was a French princess. It was at her Châteaux de Sceaux and Anet that Voltaire presented his first plays that would make both of them famous.
- Empress **Marie-Thérèse** of Austria was also one of Voltaire's correspondents towards the end of his life.
- Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, known as **Mme de Pompadour**, was the official mistress of Louis XV from 1745 to 1751 and remained influential at the French court until her death in 1764. She was always favourable to the philosophers and particularly to Voltaire.
- Rather than the untrustworthy Thiériot (see below), **Abbé Bonaventure Moussinot** was Voltaire's thoroughly reliable business manager.
- Louis-François-Armand de Vignerot du Plessis, the **Duke de Richelieu**, was Voltaire's long-term friend, who became a famous courtier, soldier, diplomat … and philanderer.
- At one stage as a young man Voltaire worked with **Nicolas-Claude Thiériot**, who subsequently became his friend, agent, nurse and correspondent, though not actually benefiting from the adjective 'reliable'.

Chapter I
L'Enfant terrible



Paris: Conciergerie and the Sainte Chapelle

François-Marie Arouet scorned his family, dismissed his ancestry and distanced himself from the name Arouet by calling himself 'Voltaire'. He considered his family name common, vulgar and ambiguous—the homonym of his family's name Arouet in French, *à rouer*, means 'to pummel'.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through intelligence, hard work, wisdom and a spotless dignity, each generation of the Arouet family had risen in the social hierarchy. Originally tanners from a small village in the Vendée region of western France, by the beginning of the seventeenth century some family members had gravitated to Paris as weavers, where they ran a draper's shop selling cloth and silk bearing the name of 'The Peacock'. Members of the family married well and, by assuming modest governmental responsibilities, soon counted among the minor nobility. Voltaire's father François was born in 1650 and, by the age of 25, had acquired the post of legal advisor to the royal family, which, alongside his own law practice, provided him with a comfortable income and a heraldic coat of arms. In 1692, he gave up this first position at court in order to purchase for the considerable sum of 240,000 livres the more lucrative post of the king's 'Overseer of Spices'—in other words tax-collector—while continuing to run his own legal practice and lending money to his clients. He possessed a couple of properties in Paris, as well as a country house at

Châtenay, some ten kilometres south of the city. The family of Voltaire's mother, Marie-Marguérite Daumart, also fulfilled minor political functions within the royal court. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the old King Louis XIV still ruled France, having ascended to the throne in 1642 at the age of 4. Towards the end of his life, he shared the government of the nation with his morganatic wife, the austere Mme de Maintenon.

Five children were born of Voltaire's parents' marriage, of whom three survived to adulthood: a daughter and two sons, the youngest of whom was François-Marie, supposedly born on 21 November 1694. In an era when nearly half of new-borns died before reaching their first birthday, the midwife did not expect the frail baby to survive and he was baptized the following day. Although François-Marie's health would remain extremely delicate throughout his life, as the notorious philosopher Voltaire he would live to the ripe old age of 84. Since his birth certificate was destroyed during the French Revolution, the mysteries and ambiguities about his life begin at once. In one of his declarations, he said he was born on 20 February 1694, nine months earlier. However, one of his distant cousins was present at his birth and describes the occasion in a letter dated to November. To further complicate the issue, the future Voltaire later claimed that his mother had lovers and that he was the illegitimate son of a poetic nobleman and army officer, Guérin de Rochebrune or Roquebrune, one of his father's clients. In one of his adolescent poems addressed to a friend, François would seem to suggest that his mother's love of life contrasted sharply with the austerity of his father. Fifty years later, in a little poem to his friend the Duke de Richelieu, he calls himself "Rochebrune's bastard". Over the years, he repeated this claim several times, thereby attributing to himself a potential noble lineage. No further evidence for this assertion has ever been forthcoming. Since his mother died when he was still a child, it is not known exactly what inspired this statement.

In 1701, the five members of the Arouet family moved into an official government residence on the island known as the Île de la Cité, forming the centre of Paris on the River Seine between Nôtre-Dame Cathedral and the Sainte-Chapelle. Mme Arouet had been friendly with one of her husband's clients, Ninon de L'Enclos, who was a well-known author, courtesan and patron of the arts. It was in this liberal world that the family

also became acquainted with a few non-conformist priests. Voltaire tells us that the canon of the nearby Sainte-Chapelle, Abbé Nicolas Gédoyn, "spent his time nowhere but in our house." It was through Gédoyn that the Arouet boys met François de Castagnère, Abbé de Châteauneuf, who took a particular interest in the younger brother. Gédoyn and Châteauneuf were both 'worldly' priests who disdained religion in favour of a more hedonistic lifestyle. It was Châteauneuf who taught François-Marie to read and introduced him to poetry—amongst other things. Unfortunately, one month after moving house the mother died. Although the 7-year-old François-Marie stayed with his father for another three years, it is probable that he was brought up by his elder sister, Cathérine, for whom he expressed profound affection throughout his life.

As was the family tradition, sister Cathérine made a good marriage to an accountant and member of the royal household, Pierre François Mignot. Very significantly, three children survived from her marriage—Voltaire's two nieces and a nephew. First, there was Marie-Louise, who became the notorious Mme Denis, with whose rather selfish personality we shall become extremely acquainted in the following pages. Her younger sister's married name was Mme Marie-Élisabeth de Dompierre d'Hornoy, through whom the descendants of the Arouet family have survived to this day. Upon her first husband's death, Élisabeth remarried and became Mme La Marquise de Florian. She had artistic talent and was altogether a much more dignified and sober person than the dizzy Mme Denis. Catherine's third child, a boy born in 1728, eventually became Abbé Alexandre Mignot and would to play an absolutely vital role at the end of Voltaire's life.

M. Arouet was a serious man of flawless respectability, whose noble clientele, such as the wife of Louis XIV, Mme de Maintenon, had such confidence in him that they became his friends. He was, nevertheless, irritated by his two sons, Armand and François-Marie, who were both a disappointment to him, although the elder one less than the younger one. Armand was educated at the Saint-Magloire school, which promoted the fashionable Jansenist form of Christianity. He would follow in his father's footsteps in the legal profession and become a convinced Jansenist. He grew up to be a strange, fanatical, tormented bachelor, obsessed with religion and attracted to rolling on the floor in a frenzy so as to attract

divine forgiveness. In a Papal Bull of 1713, entitled *Unigenitus dei filius* [Only-begotten Son of God], Pope Clement XI banned the Jansenists, a measure that met with considerable resistance in France. Armand detested his younger brother François-Marie, who would lead a life diametrically opposed to his own. It was one of the great fears of Armand's life that, since he had no issue, his inheritance might pass to his infamous and un-Christian younger brother.

The frail François grew up to be an intelligent, lively, bold child, often quarrelling with his brother Armand and upsetting his father by his antics. At the age of 10, he was enrolled in the prestigious Jesuit college of Louis-le-Grand, across the river on the left bank of the Seine. This was where many noble French families sent their sons. The Jesuits were a religious order founded by Ignacius de Loyola in 1540 to counter the Protestant Reformation and to introduce reforms into the Catholic Church. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, they were approaching the apogee of their power with over 100 schools throughout France. The education provided by the Jesuit fathers was both the foundation for university studies and an excellent training for assuming a function at the royal court. As will be explained later, this sect too would be banned by Louis XV in 1764.

At school, François shared a bedroom with four other boys under the supervision of the prefect, Pierre-Joseph Thoulier, who would become a member of the Académie-Française and a famous writer under the name of Abbé d'Olivet. It would be Olivet's job to get the boys out of bed at 5 o'clock in the morning, to eat with them, accompany them to lessons and to participate in religious services throughout the day. A lifelong esteem established itself between Olivet and the young Arouet, who both acknowledged that they had once been master and disciple and, later on, reversed their roles. Olivet would rise to perform important functions for the state and remained Voltaire's friend for the next sixty-four years.

The sons of the wealthiest families, dressed in velvet, leather, silk and lace, had individual rooms at Louis-le-Grand and were attended by their own servants. Even so, it was not unusual for the Jesuit fathers to punish their wayward pupils with the cane. Father Lejay suffered from the disrespect of

his pupils. One day, the 15-year-old Duke de Boufflers hit Father Lejay in the face with a pellet from a pea-shooter. Despite the grand dignity of the noble Boufflers family, the culprit was caned until blood was drawn. The Boufflers family felt that its dignity had been defied and withdrew its son from the school. A few months later young Boufflers died of smallpox, a disease that would continue to decimate the population, both rich and poor, throughout Voltaire's lifetime.

With his dark eyes, cheeky face and humorous repartee, François-Marie had no trouble being accepted by the sons of the high nobility. Who were his companions at school? There were the d'Argenson brothers, who would later become government ministers. He was friendly with other boys, such as Claude-Philippe Fyot de la Marche, who was the same age as Arouet, later becoming president of the *Parlement de Bourgogne* and with whom he exchanged fun-filled letters. A particular friend was Armand-Jean de Vignerot du Plessis, the son of one of his father's clients. This boy would become the third Duke de Richelieu upon the death of his father in 1715 and remain Voltaire's close friend throughout most of their lives. As a youth aged 15, Richelieu would be married to the unattractive but rich Mlle Anne-Cathérine de Noailles and begin his career as a 'Don Juan'. Two years later, he was jailed in the Bastille for having made brazen sexual propositions to the Duchess de Bourgogne, potentially the future Queen of France. Although they were not contemporaries at school, one of his particular friends was Charles-Augustin de Ferriol, who became the Count d'Argental and Voltaire's lifelong correspondent. In Voltaire's letters, d'Argental and his wife were always addressed as "My Divine Angels". Many of these boyhood friends would gravitate to positions of power as adults, becoming his faithful allies in future good and bad times.

To become a world-famous author, the young François Arouet had to be educated. His time at the College Louis-le-Grand was a period of great fulfilment—he liked to study and he liked to please. Already, at the age of 12, he was an outstanding pupil. The Jesuit fathers concentrated on a Christian and humanist education based on classical Latin literature and theatre, where every subject was tainted with religion, while neglecting scientific studies, mathematics, geography, history and even Greek. As an adult, Arouet would only be able to read classical Greek authors through

French and Latin translations. Throughout the day, there would be prayers, masses and confessions. With an appreciation of literature, François shared a common interest with his teachers—they read the same authors for the same reasons, with the result that he was awarded excellent marks. Among his favourite teachers were Father René-Joseph de Tournemine. From 1701 to 1734, Tournemine was the editor of the Jesuit's newsletter entitled *Mémoires de Trévoux* [Trévoux Reports]. The adult Voltaire would eventually place before his former teacher an ethical conundrum posed by the British philosopher John Locke, which would lead to a rupture in their relationship. From studying literary masterpieces and with the guidance of the Jesuit fathers, he achieved a level of perfection, elegance and facility in the French language that could be understood as in the very best style. His teachers recognized and encouraged his talent since it would reflect positively on their school. He paid tribute to his teachers: "For seven years, I was brought up by men who went to endless and untiring pains to cultivate young people's intelligence and conduct […] Never had man made study and virtue more agreeable […] The time spent on lessons were for us hours of delight." Even though, in later life, he would sometimes oppose the Society of Jesus itself, he would always refer to his teachers with enthusiastic expressions of admiration and respect. Never would his father benefit from such recognition. He never wrote to his father, which, given the tens of thousands of letters he penned, is rather odd.

What distinguished him particularly at the college was his facility to make rhyming verses, a skill he would retain throughout his life. The family friend, Abbé de Châteauneuf, had already introduced the child to La Fontaine's fables and even—at the age of 9!—to some licentious works by the poet Jean-Baptiste Rousseau. By the age of 12, François had begun to draft tragedies in verse.

There were numerous occasions when he earned the praise of his teachers by composing witty epigrams, improvisations, as well as short poems in French and Latin. Already, he had written a poem in defence of a military invalid, who intended asking for a pension from the heir to the throne—the Dauphin—in whose army he had been wounded. This poem eventually reached the court in Versailles with the former soldier being rewarded with a cash payment. François-Marie was congratulated by his mother's former

friend, the famous courtesan Ninon de L'Enclos, whose salon was one of the most celebrated in the relaxed morals of eighteenth-century Paris. Intelligent, beautiful and cultivated, Mme de Lenclos had been infamous for enjoying the company of a very long list of noble lovers. She was one of his father's clients and a close friend of Abbé de Châteauneuf. Towards the end of 1704, Mme de L'Enclos asked to meet the 10-year-old schoolboy, who sat on the knee of the former splendid beauty, close enough to notice only the great lady's wrinkled face and infirmity. In her will, she left him a sum of money to buy books.

The most celebrated French poet in the early eighteenth century, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, was asked to present the end-of-year prizes at the college in 1710. Thirty years later, by which time the two poets had fallen out with each other, Rousseau described his recollections: "A young schoolboy of sixteen or seventeen years, with a bad complexion, but with a lively and alert mind, very graciously gave me a hug." Rousseau too had a bad complexion; he was red-headed, pale with eyes of different colours and a twisted mouth. Years later, after Rousseau had criticized the epic poem *La Henriade*, Voltaire found his revenge by writing: "Such was his [Rousseau's] reputation that, when a pupil made a particularly bad mistake, he was told: 'You are a true Rousseau'." It would later come to light that, for twenty years, Rousseau's cobbler father had made shoes for the Arouet family.

Chapter II
The Young Man about Town

Portrait of Voltaire as a young man by Largillière

At Louis-le-Grand, François-Marie Arouet acquired a solid grounding in literature, intellectual tools and a taste for the theatre, which in future would be combined with an outstanding imagination and great energy. Among his other potential assets were his noble schoolfriends, who would in the future gravitate to high office in the government. A large part of the day at the College Louis-le-Grand had been devoted to Christian worship and listening to sermons provided by the Jesuit fathers, but at the weekend François was free for other pursuits. He began to reject the discipline of the school, which reproduced mechanically the rituals and gestures of Christianity. Given his evident lack of faith in the Christian religion, it was no surprise that, when he defended a thesis at the end of his studies, he was awarded no prize.

Abbé de Châteauneuf had already introduced the teenager to the Société du Temple, where, on the site of a former monastery, a libertine but influential clique of aristocratic men assembled. To the disapproval of Louis XIV and his inflexible consort, Mme de Maintenon, these free-thinking nobles treated laws and socially acceptable behaviour in a very disdainful manner. They vaunted their love of life, women, wine, good food and poetry, while ignoring religious fasting days by holding splendid

feasts and lavish parties. François was dazzled by their behaviour and decided to take his place among them. He was drawn to the theatre, both as a spectator and an actor, soon to be accompanied by his talent as a playwright. Even as a boy and chaperoned by his mentor Châteauneuf, he participated in dinners and suppers alongside the members of the Société du Temple, where the topics of conversation were likely to ruffle the feathers of ordinary citizens. He adopted the tone of these intellectuals who, with elegance, dismissed religion's "most sacred beliefs", saying that "human intelligence requires clearer proof than a priest's platitudes".

Many members of the Société du Temple were middle-aged, well-educated members of the nobility or highly placed clergymen. When they were not involved in eating, drinking and revelry, its members discussed literature, philosophy, art, politics and religion, particularly irreligion since many of them rejected Christian dogma in favour of atheism or deism, even the bishops among them. It was here that began the young Arouet's belief in an almighty God, who represented reason and natural law, as well as not being opposed to pleasure and well-being. The chairman of this society, the Grand Prior for France of the Order of Malta, was Philippe de Bourbon-Vendôme, a courageous lieutenant-general, a grandson of King Henri IV. The chronicler of the times, Saint-Simon, gave an account of Philippe de Bourbon-Vendôme, who apparently had a very solid constitution: "For forty years he only went to bed drunk, publicly declared his affairs with various mistresses and continuously expressed immoral and irreligious sentiments." He was the archetypal Don Juan, much given to debauchery, obsessed with female conquests who were quickly abandoned. He denied the existence of God and was quite at ease with hypocrisy. The young Arouet did not meet Philippe until 1715, because the latter had been banished to Rome by Louis XIV and Mme de Maintenon, who considered him to be Satan's representative on Earth—the evidence strongly favouring this conclusion. During his absence, the Temple's depravity had been conducted by his able acolytes, the poets Charles-Auguste de La Fare and Abbé de Chaulieu, and the elder dukes Fronsac and de Sully. The Temple would have a considerable influence on Arouet although, due to his already fragile health, he did not participate in the bacchanalian revelry to the same extent as the other guests. It was here that he completed his