

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# VOLTAIRE

*Edited by Nicholas Cronk*



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COMPANION TO  
VOLTAIRE

EDITED BY  
NICHOLAS CRONK

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## THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO VOLTAIRE

A leading thinker of the European Enlightenment, Voltaire is also a central figure in France's collective cultural memory. The popularity of *Candide* has made him perhaps best known as a writer of tales. Yet these represent only a fraction of his entire œuvre. Voltaire created a style of authorship that made him the most famous writer in Europe and turned his name into a brand for a certain style of writing and thinking. This Companion covers his plays, fiction, pamphlets, correspondence and biblical criticism, as well as his historical, political and philosophical thought, to give a wide-ranging view of his writings. The most comprehensive book on Voltaire available in English, it makes accessible the most recent research in France as well as the English-speaking world, in a series of original essays and a guide to sources for further study. The essays demonstrate why Voltaire remains an essential point of reference in defining the modern intellectual today.

NICHOLAS CRONK is Professor of French Literature and Director of the Voltaire Foundation in the University of Oxford.

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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1694: Birth of François-Marie Arouet, in or near Paris.
- 1704–11: Attends Jesuit college of Louis-le-Grand.
- 1711–15: Studies the law, and writes poetry.
- 1713: First journey abroad, to The Hague.
- 1715: Death of Louis XIV. France governed by the regency of the Duc d'Orléans until 1723.
- 1716: Exiled to Sully-sur-Loire; accused of writing a satire about the Regent.
- 1717: Imprisoned in the Bastille on account of another satire.
- 1718: Begins using the name Voltaire, an anagram of 'Arouet l[e] j[eu]ne' – Arouet the younger – where 'i' and 'j', 'u' and 'v' are interchangeable. His tragedy, *Œdipe*, staged successfully at the Comédie-Française.
- 1721: Composition of poem best known under the title *Épître à Uranie*, expressing views hostile to Christianity.
- 1723: Epic poem *La Ligue* published (later revised as *La Henriade*).
- 1725: Louis XV marries, and Voltaire briefly enjoys favour at court.
- 1726: After a quarrel with the Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot, he is beaten by the nobleman's servants. His fury causes him to be put in the Bastille. Released after a month, on condition that he leave Paris; he departs for England, arriving in London in May.
- 1727: English press reports that the 'famous French poet' has been presented to George I. He meets politicians as well as



writers, and is in London at the time of Sir Isaac Newton's state funeral. Spends winter months lodging in Maiden Lane, just north of the Strand. In December, publishes a small book in English, *An Essay upon the Civil Wars of France, and also upon the Epick Poetry of the European Nations*.

- 1728: *March* Publication in London of *La Henriade*, dedicated to Queen Caroline. Leaves England hurriedly in November, and spends winter in Dieppe.
- 1729: Arrives in Paris, where he will stay until 1733.
- 1731: Publication of first history, *Histoire de Charles XII*.
- 1732: His tragedy *Zaïre* enjoys triumphant success.
- 1733: *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (a translation of an early version of the *Lettres philosophiques*, without the twenty-fifth letter on Pascal) published in London. *Le Temple du goût* appears in France.
- 1734: *Lettres philosophiques* published in France with a false imprint. The work is condemned by the Parlement de Paris, and Voltaire goes into hiding. He settles at Cirey, home of his mistress and companion Émilie Du Châtelet, a philosopher and scientist in her own right, with whom he will share an intense period of literary and scientific activity.
- 1735: Allowed to return to Paris, but continues to live mainly at Cirey.
- 1736: Begins correspondence with Frederick of Prussia (later Frederick II); it will continue until 1778. His poem *Le Mondain* provokes a scandal, and he flees to Holland.
- 1738: Publication of *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*; and of the *Discours en vers sur l'homme* (1738–39).
- 1741: First performance of *Mahomet*, a play about religious fanaticism.
- 1743: Elected a fellow of the Royal Society in London.
- 1745: Beginning of love affair with his niece, Marie-Louise Denis, recently widowed. Appointed Royal Historiographer by Louis XV, enjoys another brief period of favour at court.

In celebration of a royal victory, he writes a poem, *La Bataille de Fontenoy*, and an opera libretto, *La Princesse de Navarre*, set to music by Jean-Philippe Rameau.

- 1746: Elected to the Académie Française (after a failed attempt in 1743, when he lost against Marivaux). Appointed *gentilhomme ordinaire de la chambre*.
- 1747: *Zadig* (under its first title, *Memnon*) appears, the first publication of a philosophical fiction. Voltaire and Mme Du Châtelet obliged to flee Paris.
- 1748: Flees to court of Stanislas (Louis XV's father-in-law) in Lunéville, near Nancy.
- 1749: Death of Mme Du Châtelet. Voltaire returns to Paris.
- 1750: Shares his home with his widowed niece, Mme Denis, who will remain his mistress and companion for the rest of his life. Accepts Frederick's invitation to join him in Berlin.
- 1751: Publication of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*.
- 1752: Quarrels with Maupertuis, president of the Academy of Berlin, and writes a bitter satire against him, the *Diatribes du docteur Akakia*.
- 1753: *March* Rift with Frederick deepens, and Voltaire leaves Berlin.  
*June* He and Mme Denis are forcibly detained at Frankfurt, on Frederick's orders. Voltaire settles in Colmar.
- 1754: Unwelcome at the courts of Paris and Berlin, he looks for a home in the area of Geneva or Lausanne.
- 1755: Purchases Les Délices at Geneva, his principal home for the next three years (and now the Institut et musée Voltaire). *La Pucelle* appears in a pirated edition.
- 1756: Publishes *Essai sur les mœurs*, a universal history, and *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, a philosophical treatment of evil, inspired by the Lisbon earthquake of the previous autumn. D'Alembert visits Les Délices.
- 1757: Acts as unofficial diplomatic intermediary between France and Prussia after the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756.

- 1758: Visits the Elector Palatine at Schwetzingen, near Mannheim.
- 1759: *January/February Candide* is published.  
*February* He purchases Ferney, in France, but near Geneva and the border: this will be his home for the rest of his life.
- 1761: He constructs a church close to his chateau, with the inscription 'Deo erexit Voltaire' ('Voltaire erected this to God').
- 1762: Begins campaign to rehabilitate Jean Calas, a Protestant merchant from Toulouse executed on doubtful evidence for the murder of his son.
- 1763: Publication of *Traité sur la tolérance*.
- 1764: *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* is published.
- 1765: Calas is rehabilitated.
- 1766: The young Chevalier de La Barre is executed in Amiens, for mutilating a crucifix. *Le Philosophe ignorant* is published.
- 1767: *L'Ingénu* is published.
- 1768: Mme Denis separates from Voltaire for a period of twenty months, returning in 1769. Voltaire takes Easter communion (and again in 1769).
- 1770: *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, published in nine volumes, until 1772.
- 1774: Louis XV dies, and is succeeded by Louis XVI. Publication of *Le Taureau blanc*.
- 1778: Returns to Paris in February, for the first time since 1750. His friends visit; he sits for the sculptor Houdon; he attends a meeting of the Académie Française; and is present at the Comédie-Française for a triumphal performance of his tragedy *Irène*. Taken ill, he dies on 30 May. He cannot be buried in consecrated ground, and his body is smuggled out of Paris by night, and interred at Scellières, in Champagne. His library is bought by Catherine II, and is shipped from Ferney to St Petersburg, where it remains today, in the National Library of Russia.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1784-9: A complete edition of Voltaire's writings published in seventy volumes (the so-called Kehl edition), under the direction of the playwright Pierre de Beaumarchais.
- 1791: In July, in a great Revolutionary ceremony, Voltaire's remains are brought back to Paris and placed in the Panthéon. Inscribed on the catafalque are the words: 'He taught us to be free.'

## ABBREVIATIONS

D	<i>Correspondence and Related Documents</i> , OCV, vols 85–135 [D followed by a number refers to the number of the letter in this edition; these references are incorporated in the text]
EM	<i>Essai sur les mœurs</i> , 2 vols, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Garnier, 1963)
Letters	<i>Letters Concerning the English Nation</i> , ed. N. Cronk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
LP	<i>Lettres philosophiques</i> , ed. G. Lanson, revised A.-M. Rousseau (Paris: Didier, 1964)
Mél.	<i>Mélanges</i> , Pléiade, ed. J. Van den Heuvel (Paris: Gallimard, 1961)
Moland	<i>Œuvres complètes de Voltaire</i> , ed. L. Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–85)
OCV	<i>Œuvres complètes de Voltaire</i> (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968– )
OH	<i>Œuvres historiques</i> , Pléiade, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Gallimard, 1957)
RC	<i>Romans et contes</i> , Pléiade, ed. F. Deloffre et J. Van den Heuvel (Paris: Gallimard, 1979)
SVEC	<i>Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century</i>
VST	<i>Voltaire en son temps</i> , R. Pomeau and others, new edn, 2 vols (Paris: Fayard; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995)

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NICHOLAS CRONK

## Introduction

The French seventeenth century is commonly referred to as ‘the age of Louis XIV’ – indeed it was Voltaire who popularised the expression. But the eighteenth century is rarely described as the age of Louis XV: it is, by common consent, ‘the age of Voltaire’. Commenting on this anomaly, in a speech to mark the centenary of Voltaire’s death in 1878, Victor Hugo declared that until Voltaire’s time, centuries always bore the names of heads of state; but, he went on, ‘Voltaire is more than a head of state, he is a head of ideas’ (*‘Voltaire est plus qu’un chef d’états, c’est un chef d’idées’*).<sup>1</sup> The essays in this volume will explore how one writer came to occupy such a dominant position in his century, and to exercise such continuing influence.

No eighteenth-century writer was depicted more often than Voltaire; and no image of him has greater iconic status than the bust sculpted by Jean-Antoine Houdon (fig. 1). In fact, there is not one bust but a whole assortment of them, in various materials and presentations; the number of surviving portrait busts makes clear that Voltaire was Houdon’s best-selling subject.<sup>2</sup> Mme Denis, Voltaire’s niece and mistress, even commissioned a full-length version, the large seated statue in marble which now dominates the first-floor foyer of the Comédie-Française. Voltaire’s head, wearing no wig, is turned to the right, his eyes in a piercing glance, his lips drawn tightly in a smile. So potent and so omnipresent was this image that writers in the nineteenth century not only debated Voltaire’s ideas, they argued about his smile. The Romantic poet Alfred de Musset famously described Voltaire’s ‘hideous smile’.<sup>3</sup> Joseph de Maistre evidently had the phrase in mind when he spoke of Voltaire’s ‘ghastly grin’ (*‘rictus épouvantable’*), a phrase which Gustave Flaubert quotes when he mocks the received bourgeois wisdom concerning the writer whom he admired: ‘Voltaire: Superficial knowledge. Famous for his ghastly grin’ (*‘Science superficielle. Célèbre par son rictus épouvantable’*).<sup>4</sup> Victor Hugo tried to set the record straight: ‘This smile is wisdom. This smile, I repeat, is Voltaire’ (*‘Ce sourire, c’est la sagesse. Ce sourire, je le répète, c’est Voltaire’*).<sup>5</sup> Despite the ambiguity of its smile, or perhaps because of



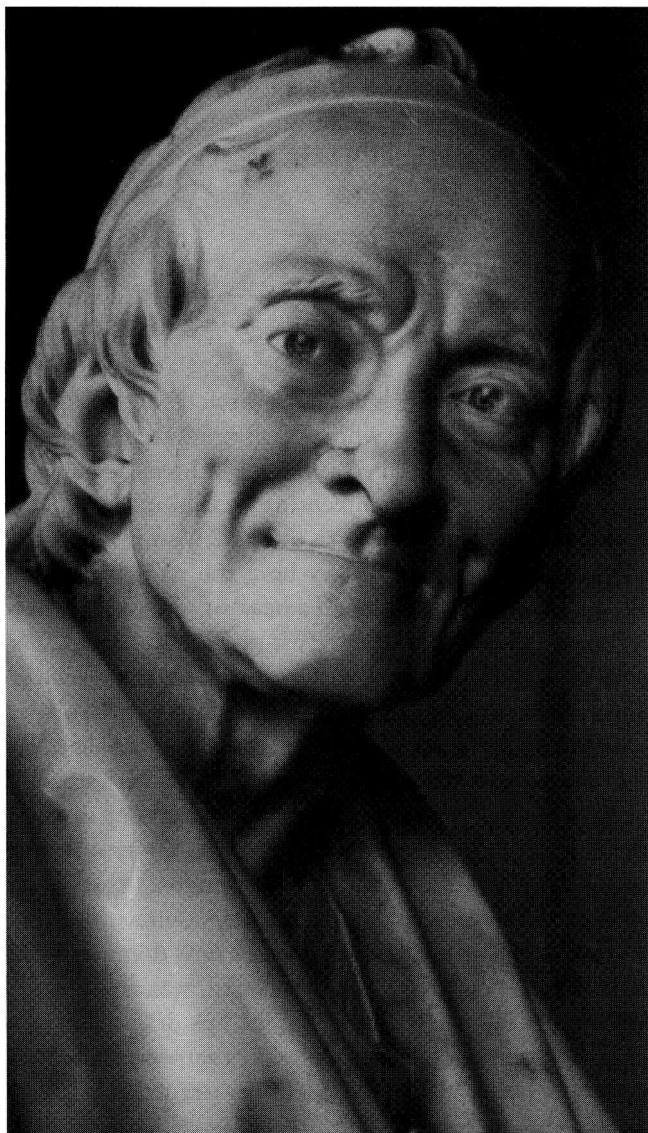


Fig. 1 Jean-Antoine Houdon, bust of Voltaire (private collection)

it, Houdon's bust has come to symbolise Voltaire, and indeed 'the age of Voltaire'.

The most immediate reason for Voltaire's dominance of his century is simply that he wrote far more than anyone else. There has been no comprehensive edition of his writings since the 1880s, and the project to publish