

Voltaire, author of the 18th century French satire "Candide"

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Image 1. A portrait of Voltaire by Nicolas de Largillière, painted in 1724. Painting from Palace of Versailles, France, via Wikimedia Commons

Born in 1694, in Paris, France, Voltaire established himself as one of the leading writers of the Enlightenment. His famed works include the tragic play "Zaïre," the historical study "The Age of Louis XIV" and the satirical novella "Candide." Often at odds with French authorities over his politically and religiously charged works, he was twice imprisoned and spent many years in exile. He died shortly after returning to Paris in 1778.

Early Life

Voltaire, whose real name was François-Marie Arouet, was born to a well-off family on November 21, 1694, in Paris, France. He was the youngest of five children born to François Arouet and Marie Marguerite d'Aumart. When Voltaire was just 7 years old, his mother passed away. Following her death, he grew closer to his free-thinking godfather.

In 1704, Voltaire was enrolled at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, a Jesuit secondary school in Paris. While there, he began showing promise as a writer.

Voltaire's Beliefs And Philosophy

Voltaire was attracted to the thinking of Enlightenment philosophers such as Isaac Newton, John Locke and Francis Bacon. He found inspiration in their quest for an ideal society: one that allowed political freedom, economic freedom and freedom of religion.

Like other Enlightenment thinkers of the era, Voltaire was a deist. Deists believe God created the universe but is no longer directly involved in running it. Instead, the universe runs itself according to natural laws. Voltaire claimed to have arrived at this position not by faith, but by reason.

Despite his deist views, Voltaire favored religious tolerance. However, he could be severely critical toward Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Of all the religions, he had the highest regard for Hinduism. As a vegetarian and a supporter of animal rights, Voltaire praised Hinduism's respect for animals.

Major Works

Voltaire wrote poetry and plays, as well as historical and philosophical works. His most well-known poetry includes "The Henriade" (1723) and "The Maid of Orleans," which he started writing in 1730 but never fully completed.

Among the earliest of Voltaire's best-known plays is his adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy "Oedipus," which was first performed in 1718. Voltaire followed this with a string of dramatic tragedies, including "Mariamne" (1724). His "Zaïre" (1732), written in verse, was something of a departure from previous works, as Voltaire's tragedies before it had centered on a fatal flaw in the main character's personality. However, the tragedy in "Zaïre" was the result of circumstance. Following "Zaïre," Voltaire continued to write tragic plays, including "Mahomet" (1736) and "Nanine" (1749).

Voltaire's output also includes the notable historical works "The Age of Louis XIV" (1751) and "Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations" (1756). In the latter, Voltaire took a unique approach to tracing the development of world civilization. Instead of dwelling on wars and rulers, he focused on social history and the arts.

"Candide"

Voltaire's most popular philosophical works took the form of fiction. They include the short stories "Micromégas" (1752) and "Plato's Dream" (1756), as well as the famed satirical novella "Candide" (1759), which is considered Voltaire's greatest work. "Candide" is filled with parodies of philosophical and religious positions and personalities. Its characters end up rejecting optimism. There is great debate over what Voltaire's intentions were. Some scholars believe he really was trying to suggest that the world will never get much better than it is now. Others say the exact opposite is true. They believe he was instead trying to encourage people to become actively involved in improving society.



In 1764, Voltaire published another of his celebrated philosophical works, "Dictionnaire philosophique." This was an encyclopedic dictionary that embraced Enlightenment concepts and rejected the ideas of the Roman Catholic Church.

Arrests And Exiles

In 1716, Voltaire was exiled to Tulle for mocking the duc d'Orleans. In 1717, he returned to Paris, only to be arrested for satirical writing that attacked politics and religion. He was sent to the Bastille prison for a year. Voltaire was sent to the Bastille again in 1726, for arguing with a nobleman, the Chevalier de Rohan. This time he was only detained briefly before being exiled to England, where he remained for nearly three years.

Voltaire's "Letters on the English" (1733) angered the French church and government, forcing the writer to flee again. He spent the next 15 years with his mistress, Émilie du Châtelet, at her husband's home in Cirey-sur-Blaise.

Voltaire moved to Prussia in 1750, as a member of Frederick the Great's court, and spent later years in Geneva and Ferney, France. By 1778, he was recognized as an icon of the Enlightenment's progressive ideals, and he was given a hero's welcome upon his return to Paris. He died there shortly afterward, on May 30, 1778.

Legacy

In 1952, researcher and writer Theodore Besterman established a museum devoted to Voltaire in Geneva, Switzerland. He later set about writing a biography of Voltaire. Following Besterman's death in 1976, the Voltaire Foundation was established at the University of Oxford.

The foundation continues to work toward making Voltaire's work available to the public. It expects to publish a new 220-volume collection of his complete writings in 2020.