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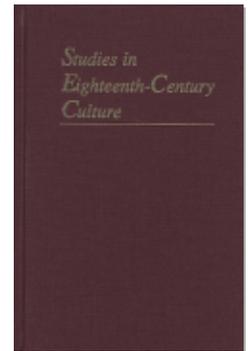
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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Volume 47, 2018, pp. 251-255 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2018.0023>



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The *Mahomet* Paradox: The Necessity of an Impossible Text

JEFFREY M. LEICHMAN

I want to begin with a provocation: Voltaire's 1741 tragedy *Mahomet* is the most important text by this author to teach right now.¹ Unapproachable, racist, offensive, outdated, the depiction of Islam's prophet as a conniving hypocrite leading a fearsome army of deluded zealots in *Mahomet* forces us as scholars and teachers to confront the contradictions of Enlightenment idealism and its inherent intolerance more than any of Voltaire's other texts. In *Mahomet*, one must address the messy interface of religious extremism, violence, *laïcité* [secularism], entertainment, free speech, and prejudice that is at the heart of what can properly be called a civil war, currently being fought in francophone Europe.

A successful and influential tragedy, *Mahomet* is emblematic of the esthetic and political ferment of the eighteenth-century French stage, an innovative and daring play replete with burning passions and provocative ideas.² Yet modern readers cannot help but be put off by the play's radical incompatibility with contemporary sensibilities, both from the formal perspective of dramatic art, and perhaps more troublingly from the ideological standpoint of its depiction of Mohammed, the founder of the Islamic faith, as a murderous and lascivious impostor who cynically invented a false religion for the sole purpose of advancing his designs for geopolitical conquest. I

contend that the seemingly unbridgeable gulf that separates the distaste that the play provokes today from the enthusiasm it elicited in the eighteenth century is a red flag, calling our attention to difficult and potentially critical questions. If the conflict that threatens to tear apart modern Europe hinges in some way on the hostility of Muslim citizens toward a secular state whose Enlightenment ideals are encapsulated in the name “Voltaire,” there could hardly be a better place to start probing this wound, amongst fellow scholars and with students, than in this troubling, compelling work.

The full title of this play is *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète*, in which the conjunction serves to signal an alternative rather than an equivalency. Mahomet, in the play, is nothing less than a fanatic: Voltaire paints him as a detached manipulator, aware of the power he exercises by means of his fraudulent self-proclamation as prophet. The assassin is the fanatic, blinded by a misguided faith into obeying even the most odious commands. He is the moral center of the play and the target of Voltaire’s reformist urge. Voltaire names him “Séide,” taken from Zeid, the Prophet’s second convert who would later give his wife to Mohammed.³ As Voltaire puts it, *Mahomet* concerns “un jeune home né avec de la vertu, qui séduit par son fanatisme, assassine un vieillard qui l’aime, et qui dans l’idée de servir Dieu, se rend coupable, sans le savoir, d’un parricide.”⁴ Adding an incestuous love interest to the murder plot guaranteed the theatrical appeal of the play, and the name Séide soon entered dictionaries as a common noun, enshrining Voltaire’s fictional portrait of Muslim fanaticism as a feature of the French language. The latter-day avatars of Voltaire’s angry young man hover over Laurent Joffrin’s denunciation, in *Libération* of 22 March 2016, of the Brussels “fanatiques” whose desire for a “califat fondé sur un islam défiguré” he opposes to the post-Enlightenment “califat des droits de l’Homme.”⁵ By framing this conflict as a confrontation of rival theocracies, Joffrin (perhaps inadvertently) demands that we look at the hypocrisies and falsehoods that underpin the modern secular state and extremist fundamentalism—both Voltaire and *Mahomet*.

Voltaire’s real target was Christian fanaticism, a point he makes abundantly clear in the *Essai sur les mœurs*: “Le législateur des musulmans, homme puissant et terrible, établit ses dogmes par son courage et par ses armes; cependant, sa religion devint indulgente et tolérante. L’instituteur divin du christianisme vivant dans l’humilité et la paix, prêcha le pardon des outrages, et sa sainte et douce religion est devenue par nos fureurs la plus intolérante de toutes, et la plus barbare.”⁶ As the play’s villain, the character Mahomet is a screen, a convenient example from a neighboring empire whose religion could be harmlessly distorted for dramatic effect while still serving as a thinly veiled metaphor for Christianity. Yet just as with Voltaire’s anti-

Semitism, often rationalized as part of his ongoing combat against Catholic extremism, the callously offensive depiction of Islam's founder and faith in *Mahomet* can no longer be excused as a tactical subterfuge in the project to rid Europe of *l'infâme*. In light of the elevation of Voltaire as a symbol of the Enlightenment in France following the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, *Mahomet* obliges scholars to give greater consideration to the critique that modern European secularism might be synonymous with the denigration of Islam.

Ironically, considering that Voltaire's literary reputation in the eighteenth century was based largely on his dramatic oeuvre, esthetic distance may present the greatest challenge to teaching *Mahomet* in twenty-first-century American colleges. The formal strangeness of French neo-classical tragedy solicits pedagogical boldness, namely sacrificing certain pleasures of surprise, the *peripeteia* and recognition that Aristotelian theory holds as essential elements of successful tragedy. Instead—spoiler alert!—it may help to explain the action, and the relations between the characters, *before* assigning the play to be read. Understanding the narrative stakes clears the way for approaching the characters'—and thus the spectators'—passion, the one feature of ancien régime theater, and Voltairean tragedy in particular, that is almost impossible to recover. In this context, students can begin to appreciate the appeal of *Mahomet* as an effective entertainment product, which also carries an explicit moral and ideological message.

This “message,” which is the obstacle that initially appears most insurmountable, is perhaps what most recommends this work as an appropriate, even urgent text for our moment. A classic pairing puts *Mahomet* in conversation with Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance*, exploring a cognitive dissonance that Diderot acknowledged when he wrote, “C'est un sublime ouvrage que *Mahomet*; j'aimerais mieux avoir réhabilité la mémoire des Calas.”⁷ *Tartuffe* is another obvious choice, inviting a broader discussion of the moral prophylaxis of theater, a bedrock principle of the *philosophes'* ideology of the elevating force of humanistic culture as embodied by Molière.⁸ Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert* famously punctured this logic of counter-example, singling out *Mahomet* as an instance where the seductions of style drown out the clarion call to confront fanaticism. In a passage that acknowledges the power of art while disparaging the weakness of “la philosophie”—the equivalent of today's pluralism or multiculturalism—Rousseau adumbrates the most reactionary currents of contemporary opinion in his advocacy of state-sponsored violence as the only plausible response to religious terror.⁹

The queasy alliance of Voltairean moral outrage and an offhand yet thorough disrespect for Islam's holiest figure, of the cultural genuflection before an Enlightenment tradition that trades in stereotypes of oriental

passion and bloodlust while sanctimoniously proclaiming its official colorblindness—these enduring contradictions make the case for *Mahomet* as both an impossible and utterly essential play for our time. So rather than restate my initial proposition, I will conclude by upping the ante: infuriating, provocative, antiquated, and shockingly contemporary, for our present moment, *Mahomet* is the most important work of the entire eighteenth century.

NOTES

1. Already controversial in its day, the play had a convoluted performance and publication history; for a detailed chronology, see the Christopher Todd's introduction in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 20b (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002).

2. *Mahomet* was praised for introducing English influences into French tragedy, with echoes of *Hamlet* and Lillo's *London Merchant*.

3. Voltaire's references were the *Vie de Mahomed* (London, 1730) by Henri, comte de Boulainvilliers and Jean Gagnier's considerably more hostile *La Vie de Mahomet traduite et compilée de l'Alcoran* (London, 1732). The more balanced account of Islam in the *Essai sur les mœurs* draws heavily on the lengthy and appreciative preface on Islam and its founder that precedes George Sale's translation of the Qur'an into English.

4. "Lettre à Sa Majesté le Roi de Prusse," *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 20b:150. "A virtuous-born youth who, seduced by his fanaticism, assassinates an old man who loves him, and who in the idea of serving God, makes himself guilty, without realizing it, of parricide." All translations are my own.

5. Laurent Joffrin, "Le chagrin des Belges," *Libération*, 22 March 2016, accessed 3/25/16, http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2016/03/22/le-chagrin-des-belges_1441298. "Caliphate founded on a disfigured Islam," "caliphate of human rights."

6. *Essai sur les mœurs* in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 22:159–60. "The legislator of the Muslims, a powerful and terrifying man, established his dogmas through courage and arms; nonetheless, his religion became indulgent and tolerant. The divine instructor of Christianity, living in humility and peace, preached pardon for offenses, and his sacred and sweet religion has become through our fury the most intolerant of them all, and the most barbaric."

7. Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, ed. M. Delon (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 85. "*Mahomet* is a sublime work; I would rather have rehabilitated the memory of the Calas family."

8. See Marie Fontaine, “Etudier *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète* en seconde (2012–2013),” *Cahiers Voltaire* 14 (2015): 178–184, which pairs the play with Lucian’s *Alexander or the false prophet* and *Tartuffe*. In 2010, I taught *Mahomet* alongside the *Traité*, *Tartuffe*, Rotrou’s *Le véritable Saint Genest*, Claudel’s *L’Annonce faite à Marie*, and Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*.

9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, 5 vols., ed. B. Gagnebin (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 5:28–29.