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Voltaire and Women

FROM NINON DE LENCLOS, who encouraged the young boy, to Marie-Louise Denis, who cheered the old man, women were vital to the happy existence of Voltaire. As a young man, he traveled in the aristocratic and intellectual circles dominated by the women of eighteenth-century Parisian society. Charmed by his wit, elegance, brilliant conversation, and verve, they invited him to adorn their gatherings of the politically and intellectually powerful.

Disappointed in his first youthful love affair, Voltaire slipped easily from one romantic involvement to the next until finally he met the "divine Emilie," Mme du Châtelet. Mutually fascinated by their intellectual pursuits, the self-taught scientist and the well-known philosophe formed a liaison that endured until her death, a period of over sixteen years. In the company of his unflaggingly stimulating intellectual companion, Voltaire's literary production was prodigious; plays, poems, intensive work on the histories, short stories, philosophical and scientific treatises, as well as the semisecret work on La Pucelle, all flowed from his pen while at Cirey.

The next woman in his life, his niece Marie-Louise Denis, offered him much less in the way of mental stimulation, but she did reawaken his sexual appetite. Long before Mme du Châtelet's death, uncle and niece had become lovers. Voltaire spent the remaining twenty years of his life with "mia carissima" at Ferney. Stimulated by her flesh but not her mind, he continually sought to educate her and to encourage her to write plays. The contrast between his two mistresses of such long duration, revealed in his and his acquaintances' correspondence, is striking.

His interest in women who are both intellectually and sexually stimulating, with heavy emphasis on the former, is equally evident in his literature. In this brief essay, we shall examine his theater and short stories in order to demonstrate his predilection for strong, almost virile women, but especially those women in whom this quality is tempered or offset by a sensual, loving nature. We shall also consider the women who figure in La Pucelle, the single work that allows us to glimpse our author and, hence, his viewpoints directly without the barriers of literary convention.
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Voltaire's dramatic outpouring includes some twenty tragedies, as well as several comedies and operas. The tragedies, being of superior quality, merit our attention. These works give clear evidence of Voltaire's often stated preference for and adherence to the classical structure of a play: verse rather than prose, observance of the bienséances, respect of the aristotelian rules of time, place, and action. In imitation of his acknowledged model, Racine, Voltaire's heroes, male or female, pursue with vigor la gloire, relegate all other considerations to an inferior level of desire and intensity of need. Hence, many of these characters exhibit a drive or relentlessness that brooks no obstacle and that may thus earn them a qualification as cruel, egomaniacal, faithless. However, these descriptions apply equally or more aptly to the male figures in the tragedies. Although frequently torn between love and duty—the classic dilemma—the women demonstrate a gentler nature, one in which their grandeur, a natural correlative of la gloire, is tempered by their love, whether maternal or passionate.

The vocabulary of Voltaire's tragic heroines is heavy with references to la gloire, l'honneur, le devoir, la vertu. Jocaste (Oedipe, 1718), even in the face of the horror of her personal situation, is able to state: "I have lived virtuously" (5.6). Mariamne (Mariamne, 1725) declares to her husband that she possesses a heart "which will preserve its virtue to the tomb" (4.4). Even Eriphyle (Eriphyle, 1732), whose murder of her husband would seem to exclude her from those who can claim pure lives, purifies herself to the point where her subjects proclaim "our grateful hearts bear witness to her virtue" (5.4).

Le devoir is another leitmotif of these heroines, one that begins with Voltaire's earliest tragedies and persists throughout the entire series. Artemire, heroine of the play bearing her name (1720), which exists only in fragments, remains faithful to a hated husband, thus preserving la gloire and enabling her to state with equanimity "My duty is enough for me" (1). Eriphyle, in the presence of her long-absent son and touched by a reawakening maternal love, calls upon her innate sense of la gloire to reestablish her values: "... love of my duty, resume your absolute power over my soul" (2.4). Zulime (Zulime, 1739) also speaks frequently of la gloire in association with le devoir in trying to explain or justify her forbidden love of Ramire. At the moment of her death she too can state: "... I have fulfilled my duty" (5.3). Alzire (Alzire, 1734) is always pushed to act by le devoir, although she seems more susceptible to love than the other heroines.

Another facet of la gloire is l'honneur, a mobile that directs the actions of such heroines as Zaïre (Zaïre, 1733), Adélaïde (Adélaïde du Guesclin, 1734), Alzire, Zulime, Palmire (Mahomet, 1741), and Mérope (Mérope, 1743). Accused by Orosmane, the sultan and master of the harem, of
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loving another, Zaïre insists upon her innocence by replying "honor . . . is engraved in my heart" (4.6). Guided by her unfailing sense of l'honneur, Adélaïde agrees to marry one brother in order to save the life of the other, whom she deeply loves. Alzire seeks to free her lover from imprisonment by her husband after a war battle, and Zulime ceases to persecute two lovers on the basis of each character's sense of l'honneur. The same is true of Palmire and Mérope. L'honneur saves Palmire from the extremes of anguish when she discovers the ugly side of her idolized Mahomet's fanaticism. Mérope also speaks the language of la gloire and l'honneur while, at the same time, exhibiting maternal love and protection toward her rediscovered son.

And how many of these tragic heroines die, in the classic tradition, to preserve their gloire? To mention only a few, Jocaste, Tullie (Brutus, 1730), Zulime, and Palmire all commit suicide as a purificatory act that assures them of the restoration or retention of la gloire, whether this be in the guise of l'honneur, la vertu, or le devoir. Sémirams (Sémiramis, 1732) and Eriphyle, both guilty of their husband's deaths, die by accident at the hands of their sons, thus purified and once again fully clothed in la gloire.

And so the procession of grandiose heroines winds its way across the tapestry of Voltaire's tragedies. The common thread of la gloire, variously disguised as l'honneur, le devoir, la vertu, weaves them all together with an occasional thread of an entirely different hue, maternal love, a heart that responds on the basis of love alone. Strong-willed, single-minded, indomitably dedicated to the pursuit of a given goal, Jocaste and the many other women who follow her parade before us creating the image of a strong, almost inflexible female, yet one whose heart responds readily to the voice of the beloved but never at the expense of la gloire. In the tragedies, the women do not so much inspire love as respect. If they are loved—and they are—there are no great outpourings of passionate desire from their men. Their sensuality is not so much hidden as simply ignored. The opposite holds true in the short stories. The women who people these tales exude an aura of desirability, of personal attraction, that bears no relation to their other traits of characters. Vicious or meek, intelligent or foolish, conniving or forthright, these women inspire a passion capable of driving their lovers to any lengths.

Astarté (Zadig, 1748), strong, honorable, virtuous, moves Zadig so strongly that he "left her presence bewildered and wild with joy, his heart weighted by a burden he could no longer bear" (p. 20). The strength of this love impels an eager but certainly not faithful Zadig through the rest of the tale in search of his beloved from whom he is suddenly separated. His infidelities during his quest as well as his previous amorous attachments to Sémire and Azora, his wife, bear
witness not only to his weakness but also to the sensuous nature of each of these women.

In the same story, Zadig is not alone in his enchantment. Moabdar, Astarté’s jealous husband, falls under the spell of Missouf, a woman who attracts men without effort and who delights in their attentions. Preoccupied with her and her pleasure, Moabdar “seemed to have drowned his sense of virtue in his prodigious love for the beautiful wench” (p. 45). Consumed by their passion, Moabdar loses his kingdom and his sanity. Missouf certainly will have little difficulty in finding a new lover.

_Le Monde comme il va_ (1748) presents women with the same sensuality, the same ability to inflame men. Early in the story, the women of Persepolis are found in the temple pretending to stare directly ahead, but they are in reality watching the men out of the corner of their eyes (p. 69). Immediately on the heels of this scene follows another one in which two women give ample evidence of their desire and desirability. The first is a young widow whose sensuality leaps from the page. She luxuriates in contact with not one but two men: “[she] had one hand around the magistrate’s neck while holding out the other to a handsome and modest young citizen of the city.” Meanwhile, this same magistrate’s wife slips away with her “advisor” and returns from their rendezvous with “her eyes moist, her cheeks flaming, her step ill-assured, her voice trembling” (p. 70).

One woman stands out in contrast to the female cast of characters in _Le Monde comme il va_: Téone. She, indeed, has a lover, totally devoted to her, whose actions are dictated by the desire to merit Téone’s “esteem.” She herself wins Voltaire’s highest recognition; he awards her the worth of an “honnête homme” (gentleman). Thus, this heroine resembles more closely those of Voltaire’s tragedies than her sister characters in _Le Monde comme il va_.

_Cosi-Sancta_ (Cosi-Sancta, written in 1746-1747, published in 1784) combines qualities from both Astarté (Zadig) and Téone (_Le Monde comme il va_). Cosi-Sancta attracts men with the same ease as her two predecessors, inspires them with passionate devotion, and saves them from death. However, unlike the other two, Cosi-Sancta is forced to surrender herself physically in order to prevent her husband’s execution. Unwilling at first, she concedes at her husband’s direction: “Impelled by charity, she saved his life; this was the first of three times” (p. 612). She saves her brother and son in the same manner and is canonized after her death “for having done so much good for her family by humbling herself . . .” (p. 613).

Woman’s seductive nature is again vigorously underscored in _Memnon ou la sagesse humaine_ (1749). Memnon, who has vowed never to love a woman, immediately falls under the spell of a young woman
seen from his window: "young, pretty... she was sighing and weeping which only added to her charm." Completely taken in both by her beauty and her false story of persecution, Memnon becomes more and more captivated until "they no longer knew where they were" (p. 82). The young Ninivien succeeds not only in captivating the wise Memnon but also in relieving him of a considerable sum of money.

In Les Deux Consolés (1756), an historic parade of women passes before the reader's eyes: Henriette-Marie de France, Marie Stuart et Elisabeth I d'Angleterre, Jeanne de Naples, Hécube, Niobé. The historic trials and tribulations of these women are not the topic but rather their love affairs and their suffering at the loss of the beloved, thus underscoring their sensuality as being of fundamental importance.

This desire for pleasure is transformed into the principal mobile of the existence of Cunégonde (Candide, 1759). This one-dimensional character sets out on the road of bodily pleasure at the age of seventeen and follows it vigorously to the story's final line. In the opening pages, the naïve girl watches the lovemaking of Pangloss, her philosophy teacher, and Paquette, her maid; she returns home "yearning for knowledge and dreaming that she might be the sufficient reason of young Candide—who might also be hers" (p. 2). The leitmotif is set, and Cunégonde begins her weary journey from rapist to lover after lover (on two continents and in countless countries) to finally end her days with Candide. Throughout her odyssey, Cunégonde seems to delight in physical sensation and accepts as a matter of course her ability to attract men. That she delights in physical pleasure becomes amply evident in her descriptions of her lovers' bodies: "I won't deny that he [the Bulgarian captain] was a handsome fellow, with a smooth white skin" (p. 15). Her description of Candide is equally sensual: "I saw you stripped for the lash... I may tell you, by the way, that your skin is even whiter and more delicate than that of my Bulgarian captain. Seeing you, then redoubled the torments which were already overwhelming me" (p. 16).

Her desire for Candide remains steadfast throughout the entire tale. Unaware at the end that her ravishing beauty has vanished, "she reminded Candide of his promises in so firm a tone that the good Candide did not dare to refuse her" (p. 73). Once married, however, Cunégonde "growing every day more ugly, became sour-tempered and insupportable" (p. 74). Clearly her bad temper and ugliness are linked; her physical unattractiveness has become a barrier to her sensual pleasure. Candide married her but offers little satisfaction to Cunégonde's sensual nature.

Mlle de St. Yves (L'Ingénue, 1767) presents a sharp contrast to Cunégonde. This young woman is the warmest, most touching heroine of Voltaire's short stories. Like Cunégonde, her sensuality
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awakens early in the story but is always surrounded by an aura of simplicity, charm, and naïveté far removed from the sometimes lascivious interest of the characters in other short stories. Without innuendo, she asks “how people made love in the land of the Hurons” (p. 109). To the Ingénu’s reply, “They do fine deeds so as to give pleasure to people who look like you” (p. 109), la St. Yves blushes with delight. The combination of blushing and taking pleasure in his appreciation of her person underscores both native modesty and her already nascent desire. The latter is made clearer still by her observation through the keyhole of l’Ingénu under the pretext of wanting to know “how a Huron slept;” she finds him sleeping, to her evident pleasure, “in the most graceful attitude in the world” (p. 111). There is no doubt of the pleasure she derives, several scenes later, from watching him “in midstream a tall pale figure.” Her first instinct is to turn away but her senses triumph and draw her back to hide in the bushes in order to see “what it was all about” (p. 119). When, finally, l’Ingénu bursts into her room intending to “marry” her, la St. Yves’ sense of probity forces her to refuse him and to force him to leave. Significantly, however, his departure leaves her deeply troubled.

Unlike Cunégonde, or even Cosi-Sancta, she is unable to reconcile her love of l’Ingénu and any infidelity to him. Faced with the choice of either leaving her beloved in prison or freeing him “at the price of her most precious possession, which should belong only to the unfortunate lover” (p. 169), she prefers death. Dissuaded by her companion, who explains that most men owe their positions and fortunes to their wives (“it is a sacred duty which you are bound to carry out,” p. 170), la belle St. Yves finally allows herself to be led to the rendezvous with l’Ingénu’s liberator and pays the price of his freedom.

In a moving and almost lyrical passage, Voltaire describes her flight to the prison, armed with the order to free l’Ingénu:

It is difficult to describe what she felt during the journey. Imagine a noble and virtuous woman, humiliated by her disgrace, yet intoxicated with tenderness, torn with remorse at having betrayed her lover, yet radiant with pleasure at the prospect of rescuing the man she adored. Her bitter experiences, her struggles, her success, all these were mingled in her reflections. She was no longer the simple girl with her ideas restricted by her provincial upbringing. Love and misfortune had formed her character (p. 173).

Her contradictory emotions, her pain and confusion, all render her eminently human and believable. No longer simple and naïve but still clinging to her innate nobility and sense of la gloire, la belle St. Yves, at once “elated and heartbroken” (p. 175), falls ill from shame and distress, “her soul . . . destroying her body” (p. 184). Her death follows quickly upon her recital of her painful adventure, her memory purified by the nobility and depth of her love of l’Ingénu.
Mlle de St. Yves perhaps comes closest to approximating a flesh-and-blood creature in both the tragedies and the short stories of Voltaire. She incarnates strength and weakness, wisdom and folly, self-control and sensuality on a human scale. She is a sympathetic character who lives and dies, figuratively and literally, for her beloved. The reader senses a certain affection for her from Voltaire that is lacking in the other female characters created by his prolific pen in the two genres thus far examined.

Affection for a character, or group of characters, women all, is, however, apparent in one of his lesser read works, La Pucelle (1730-1761). This burlesque mock epic, originally intended only for private consumption and not publication, was written and rewritten over a lengthy period that corresponds to a very fertile era in Voltaire’s production of the tragedies and short stories. Voltaire lavishes great attention upon four female characters, Jeanne (La Pucelle), Judith, Agnès, and Dorothéé. These women form two distinct couples, Judith and Dorothéé serving as the alter egos of their counterparts, Jeanne and Agnès; each one exhibits characteristics common to the female cast of characters of the tragedies and short stories.

In order to situate this tale, based very loosely on the story of Jeanne d’Arc, suffice it to say that the preservation of France depends entirely on the preservation of Jeanne’s virginity:

The greatest of her rare exploits
was to preserve her virginity for a year

(1.17-18)

... she bore beneath her short skirt
the entire destiny of England and France

(2.93-94)

War with England is only secondary and symbolic. The main story line involves the sexual adventures of all the characters, the four women obviously in the forefront.

Their sensuality is, therefore, heavily underscored. Examples abound throughout the epic, especially in reference to Agnès. The two lovers, Agnès and Charles VII, mutually share the fire of their passion:

Our two lovers filled with trouble and joy,
drunk with love, exchanged bewitching glances,
the fiery forerunners of their pleasure

(1.68-71)

A single verse most fully captures the full extent of her inebriation from and dedication to the pursuit of physical pleasure: “I am Agnès; long live France and love” (3.327).

For her, love and sensual gratification are the mobiles of existence; little else matters, even fidelity to Charles. Thrown from her mount,
while seeking Charles, she is helped by the young English page Monrose:

The beautiful Agnès blushing without anger did not find his hand too daring and looked at him invitingly without knowing precisely why, swearing meanwhile to be faithful to the king.

(6.230-233)

Needless to say, her fidelity is extremely short-lived. She continues her search but now in the company of her young lover. Dorotheé, her mirror-image, possesses an equally sensuous nature. She describes the "delectable moment" of her first encounter with La Trémouille:

Ah! overcome I could neither speak nor see. My blood burned with an unknown fire; I was unaware of the dangers of tender love and from sheer pleasure I could not eat.

(7.69-72)

Unlike Agnès, however, she does remain faithful to her lover and almost pays with her life for this fidelity.

Her brush with death does not strengthen Dorotheé; she remains weak and frightened even in the company of the extraordinary Judith de Rosamore. The boastings of Judith's lover give ample proof of her sensual nature, but she is more notable for her spirit and unflinching sense of la gloire. Forced to protect not only herself but also the hapless Dorotheé from the unveiled demands of their captor, she states unequivocably:

I intend to give him something quite other . . . . we shall see what I dare to do. I know how to avenge my honor and my charms. I am faithful to the knight I love.

(9.100-103)

And, like her biblical namesake, she beheads her captor and saves herself and her companion. "Speaking little, but beautiful and shapely, tender by night, insolent by day, capricious at table and in bed," Judith de Rosamore is, indeed, the opposite in everything to Dorotheé (8.229-232).

Yet, Dorotheé does find the strength to save La Trémouille's life in a duel by placing herself between the combatants. The unhappy result of this attempt to be more than passive is her own death at the hand of her beloved, who then kills himself in grief (19.150-241). Judith, on the other hand, fights side-by-side on the battlefield with her lover. At the
sight of his body transpierced with a spear—"Not a single sigh, she shouted revenge" (16.305)—she grievously wounds one attacker before she is killed by another. Judith dies in full possession of la gloire, clothed as a warrior, at the side of her lover:

One would think to see the superb Pallas
abandoning her needle in order to plunge
into battle, or Bradamant, or even Jeanne herself.

(16.383-385)

The characteristics that Jeanne and Judith share include a combination of sensuality and strength of character—as well as physical strength—unknown to the other two women in La Pucelle. These two aspects of Jeanne's personality are well-reflected in her reaction to the impending deaths of herself and Dunois, her lover, by impalement:

Jeanne, impervious as always to danger, languidly
gazed upon the handsome bastard, and for him alone
her heart groaned. Their nakedness, their
beauty, their youth, in spite of them awakened
their tenderness.

(4.468-472)

Even in the midst of the most extreme danger, she, unafraid, derives pleasure from the sight of Dunois' naked body.

Voltaire, himself, best summarizes these dual qualities in the opening lines of the first poem:

Jeanne demonstrated the vigorous courage
of a true Roland hidden behind a woman's
face, behind a corset and a petticoat.
I should prefer for my own use in the evening
a beauty gentle as a sheep; but Jeanne d'Arc
had a lion's heart; you will see this if
you read this work.

(1.9-15)

It would seem, then, that the author prefers Agnès or Dorothée, who, during the course of the epic, are referred to as a "lamb" or "sheep." Yet he describes Judith de Rosamore with such obvious affection and in such glowing terms that it hardly seems possible.

The key, of course, lies in his allusion to Judith as "tender by night" (8.230) and in the closing lines of the final poem.

The king, ranked among the conquerors, dined
with Agnès in Orléans. That same night
the proud and tender Jeanne . . . kept
her word to her friend Dunois.

(21.455-460)
Judith’s counterpart and the burlesque epic’s principal character, Jeanne, also possesses the same traits. She is “proud” and “tender” but forced by her own naïveté and the necessity of preserving her virginity not to develop the latter to its full potential. Judith is the promise of Jeanne’s continuing metamorphosis into a woman capable of balancing both aspects of her personality. Significantly, Agnès is dismissed by the author without a backward glance, but Jeanne is led into the future of shared passion, shared pursuit of la gloire with her beloved.

Thus, within the context of the twenty-one poems of La Pucelle, Voltaire does not radically change his portrait or preference of his ideal woman. He simply adds to his choice of “a beauty as gentle as a sheep” a desire for an intelligent, sympathetic companion conscious of her personal gloire. Humorously epitomized in Judith and Jeanne, particularly the wiser Jeanne of the future, are the qualities of the heroines of Voltaire’s tragedies: la gloire, l’honneur, la vertu, le devoir. They also reflect the characteristics of the sensually alive and aware women who people the short stories. They most closely resemble Mlle de St. Yves, or perhaps it would be more exact to say that she resembles them, since L’Ingénue followed publication of La Pucelle. Agnès and Dorothée certainly show no similarity to the women of the tragedies but a great affinity to those of the short stories.

There can be no doubt that in La Pucelle Voltaire presents the composite of his perception of the ideal female, aspects of which appear in the two other genres examined. Realization of the importance of the role this mock epic plays in the free expression of Voltaire’s thought erases the confusion concerning his position on women. He is not ambivalent in his other works; he simply presents one aspect only in each, either constrained by literary conventions, or, possibly, length or philosophical intent.

It is equally clear that the “divine Emilie” and the “mia carissima” of Voltaire’s personal life appear in various guises in both his plays and short stories. In La Pucelle, his cherished mock epic written for the most part at Cirey and completed at Ferney, these two women who dominated his life reappear. Mercilessly but ever so lovingly burlesqued, the force and energy of Mme du Châtelet echo in the virile but vulnerable Jeanne (Voltaire refers to each of them as “a man”); hapless Agnès and Dorothée, the objects of every man’s sexual desire, strongly resemble Mme Denis, who knew how to awaken passion but showed little other aptitude. In Judith de Rosamore, Jeanne’s exciting counterpart, the characteristics of the two women merge, and Voltaire’s ideal woman is revealed: she equals her lover on all planes—intellectual, moral, physical, sexual—and her strength and intelligence are enhanced by a sensual, loving nature. She is the woman who was Mme du Châtelet during the happiest period of their liaison and the one he continually tried to make of Mme Denis.
NOTES


3. The terms la gloire, l’honneur, le devoir, and la vertu are used throughout the text. They all approximate the English “duty” but with varying nuances. La gloire is an innate sense of one’s self-worth or renown. L’honneur is esteem based on self-worth. Le devoir is obligation based on self-knowledge as well as public responsibility. La vertu is an unfailing inclination toward virtue.