

VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDE TO WAR,

1713-1755

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by

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: This study examines the attitude to war expressed by Voltaire in his published works and correspondence up to 1755. Voltaire's statements on war are considered under three headings: war and religion, the question of aggression, and war in dramatic literature. In each case an attempt is made to discern an evolution in his attitude over the period of study.

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## INTRODUCTION

The government of Louis XIV of France is one of the world's best-known examples of royal absolutism. Ernest Lavissee has described it in the following terms:

Chez Louis XIV comme chez Richelieu, qui avait dit que 'l'état monarchique ne peut souffrir qu'on mette la main au sceptre du souverain, et qu'on partage son autorité', c'est une conviction absolue que la souveraineté réside tout entière dans le roi, sans que la moindre parcelle puisse lui être dérobée.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not he actually uttered the famous dictum that he was the State, the Sun-King believed in this principle as basic to the nature of the monarchy; his Mémoires, written for the instruction of his heir, express in different terms the same conviction:

Les rois sont seigneurs absolus et ont naturellement la disposition de tous les biens, tant des séculiers que des ecclésiastiques.<sup>2</sup>

Among these biens he counted his subjects, which he said were the "véritables richesses"<sup>3</sup> of the monarch. As he represents the person of God on earth, the absolute monarch is within his rights in disposing of the lives of his subjects as he pleases, without in any way becoming criminal with respect to them, or giving just cause to a rebellion on

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest Lavissee, Histoire générale du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours (12 Vols. Paris: Colin, 1893-1901), VI, 147.

<sup>2</sup>Louis XIV, Mémoires, établie et annotée par Jean Lognon (Paris: Livre du Club du Libraire, 1960), p. 170.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

their part:

Il faut demeurer d'accord que, pour mauvais que puisse être un prince, la révolte de ses sujets est toujours infiniment criminelle.<sup>4</sup>

A particularly abusive corollary of this theory of royal absolutism concerns the pursuit of war. Louis XIV, believing that he owned his country and its inhabitants outright (and doctors of the Sorbonne assured him that he did), undertook wars for personal motives only. When he was considering wars against Spain and England in 1666, he explained his motives in his Mémoires in this fashion:

J'envisageais avec plaisir le dessein de ces deux guerres comme un vaste champ où pouvaient naître à toute heure de grandes occasions de me signaler.<sup>5</sup>

The object of these wars was therefore the increasing of the king's personal glory through the enlarging of his domains. It is this attitude that led Nef to remark:

As conducted during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Europe, war has frequently been described as 'the sport of kings'.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the reign of Louis XIV is a succession of wars, at first successful, but later a series of defeats. G. R. Havens has described the situation in France in the latter part

<sup>4</sup>Louis XIV, Mémoires, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>6</sup>John U. Nef, Western Civilisation Since the Renaissance. Peace, War, Industry and the Arts. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 258.

of this reign:

The last thirty years of Louis' reign are years of military reverses and increasing misery among the people.<sup>7</sup>

.....

From these years of almost constant wars or preparations for wars France had gained nothing and lost much. Financial and economic ruin, exhaustion, poverty, wounds and death were the dire results of the King's insistent pursuit of military 'glory'.<sup>8</sup>

Louis' military policy was not without its critics, even during his lifetime and from his own administrators. One such man was Fénelon, the tutor to Louis' grandson, the Duc de Bourgogne. In his very frank Lettre à Louis XIV (1694), Fénelon accuses the king of undertaking wars for personal motives, using the invasion of Holland in 1672 as an example. He says of this war: "Elle n'a eu pour fondement qu'un motif de gloire et de vengeance, ce qui ne peut jamais rendre une guerre juste".<sup>9</sup> In the same letter he describes the miserable state of the country and of the people, saying that "La France entière n'est plus qu'un grand hôpital désolé et sans provision".<sup>10</sup> Other writers and statesmen, such as La Bruyère, Vauban, and Boisguillebert, described the misery and poverty of the realm, or drafted programs of reform.

This reaction to Louis' aggressive absolutism is part of the general current of European thought toward the end of the seventeenth century which was to produce the "philosophy of the Enlightenment", as

<sup>7</sup>G. R. Havens, The Age of Ideas (New York: Holt, 1955), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>Francois de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, Oeuvres complètes de Fénelon, edited by M.\*\*\* [J. E. A. Gosselin] (10 Vols. Paris: Leroux et Jouby, 1848-52), VII, 510.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 511.

Cassirer expressed it. To the divine law which authorizes and excuses the military whims of despotic rulers is opposed a new principle, that of Natural law. Hazard's description of this new law shows its origin, and its social consequences:

Le droit naturel naît d'une philosophie: celle qui nie le surnaturel, le divin, et substitue l'ordre immanent de la nature à l'action et à la volonté personnelles de Dieu. Il procède encore d'une tendance rationnelle qui s'affirme dans l'ordre social: à chaque être humain sont attachées certaines facultés inhérentes à sa définition, et avec elles, le devoir de les exercer suivant leur essence. Il vient enfin d'un sentiment: l'autorité qui, à l'intérieur, règle arbitrairement les rapports des sujets et du prince, et qui, à l'extérieur, n'aboutit qu'aux guerres, doit être rejetée, et remplacée par un droit nouveau, d'où sortira peut-être le bonheur: un droit politique qui règle les rapports des peuples, avec l'idée qu'eux-mêmes dirigent leurs propres destins.<sup>11</sup>

Shocked by the dramatic example of the suffering and losses which the wars of Louis XIV caused, the exponents of this natural law stressed the idea that a society founded on the principle of human happiness would not engage in war. "After the peace of Utrecht [1713], condemnation of war is common in France",<sup>12</sup> says Brumfitt. Further military setbacks under Louis XIV and Louis XVI were to illustrate even more graphically the senselessness of war, and contribute to the increasing unrest in France which eventually led to the revolution in 1789.

It was therefore common practice among writers to condemn war by the time Voltaire wrote his first important works. In 1721, just three years after Voltaire's first dramatic success with his tragedy Oedipe,

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Hazard, La Crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715 (Paris: Fayard, 1961), pp. 251-2.

<sup>12</sup> John Henry Brumfitt, Voltaire, historian. (London: Oxford, 1958), p. 15.

appeared the Lettres persanes of Montesquieu. These are letters of two Persian travellers in France, whose description of French customs is in reality a criticism of political, economic, and social conditions prevailing in France during the last few years of the reign of Louis XIV and during the Regency. Usbek, one of the Persians, condemns the practice of war as a violation of what he calls the "droit public":

Dans le droit public, l'acte de justice le plus sévère, c'est la guerre; puisqu'elle peut avoir l'effet de détruire la société.<sup>13</sup>

He further condemns all types of war, except those fought in repelling attackers:

Il n'y a que deux sortes de guerres justes: les unes qui se font pour repousser un ennemi qui attaque; les autres, pour secourir un allié qui est attaqué.<sup>14</sup>

Here again Montesquieu echoes the spirit of the time in criticizing war as destructive of human happiness. He describes in the Lettres persanes an ideal race, called the Troglodytes, who through peace and harmonious coexistence are able to attain a state of prosperity and happiness.<sup>15</sup>

Voltaire's condemnations of war do not represent original thought, as this survey indicates; his opinions reflect the spirit of liberal thought in his time. Most of his ideas can be traced directly to the writings of thinkers who preceded him.

The importance of studying Voltaire's contributions to the ideas of the Enlightenment does not depend on his originality or lack of it, however. His ideas merit examination because he was one of the most

<sup>13</sup> Charles de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu, Lettres persanes, édité par P. Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 196.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Letters XI to XIV.

influential writers of his time. By his unusual and unpredictable ways of behaving, which kept all Europe wondering what he would do next, by his widely circulated and enormous volume of correspondence, in an age when letters were the substitute for today's newspapers, and finally by the militant and prolific campaign of philosophic propaganda in the many pamphlets he published during the latter years of his life, Voltaire was able to keep himself constantly in the public eye, and to impose his ideas on the whole of Europe with remarkable effectiveness. A well-known example of this influence is his achievement in reversing the decision of the court which had caused Jean Calas to be executed for allegedly murdering one of his sons. This Voltaire accomplished through a personal campaign of pamphlets and letters which caused the Calas case to be reopened, and changed public opinion on the issue.

Voltaire's particular ideas on war were therefore undoubtedly given wide circulation both in France and in the rest of Europe. During the first part of his writing career, however, his principal occupation was more artistic than philosophic. "Jusqu'à son établissement aux Délices, Voltaire est un poète qui a des sentiments de philosophe",<sup>16</sup> says Lanson. Until 1755, when he first acquired a more permanent home, Voltaire was known chiefly as France's greatest living dramatist. The effect of these artistic concerns in his earlier works is to obscure the ideas expressed in them, making his true attitude in this period difficult to assess with certainty.

Moreover, the expression of liberal ideas in France at this time was fraught with grave personal danger for the writer. Censorship and the repression of liberal thought was very strict, as Voltaire well knew,

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<sup>16</sup> Gustave Lanson, Histoire de la littérature française (Édition refondue; Paris: Hachette, 1951), p. 698.

having been twice imprisoned in the Bastille, and once exiled from Paris under Louis XV, for offending the authorities with tongue or pen. Condemnations of war implied a criticism of the policies of Louis XV, as well as of those of the glorious conqueror Louis XIV; when they occur in Voltaire's earlier writings, therefore, they are cloaked in subtleties which, while they were no doubt understood by Voltaire's intended readers, are often mysteries to the modern student. It is only through a careful study of the contexts in which these statements are made that Voltaire's true opinions can be determined with any measure of certainty.

There is, however, another indication of the directions taken by Voltaire's ideas on war in the 'artistic' period of his writing career. This is found in his Notebooks, which have been published by Theodore Besterman. Taken together, these Notebooks cover a period dating approximately from 1726 to 1755. They present a collection of disorganized and uncoordinated ideas and quotations that Voltaire appears to have jotted down whenever he encountered them, with an eye to using them in future works. As they were private notes of Voltaire to himself, in which he had no reason not to speak his mind, they are a valuable aid in the interpreting of ideas in his published works, "bringing before us", as Besterman says, "the living Voltaire, showing himself on every page in his true self."<sup>17</sup>

Notebook entries include condemnations of war: "L'art de la guerre est comme celui de la médecine, meurtrier et conjectural."<sup>18</sup> he says in one entry. In another place he comments on the question of war

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<sup>17</sup>Voltaire, Voltaire's Notebooks, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1952), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

and religion, saying: "Le dogme a causé des guerres civiles".<sup>19</sup> Further entries include records of the costs of wars, both in materials and in men.<sup>20</sup>

The indication of the Notebooks is therefore that Voltaire's ideas on war in the period up to 1755 are probably similar to the criticisms he would express after that date. Lanson finds these ideas also in his published works of the earlier period: "Les traits caractéristiques de sa philosophie, qui correspondent aux instincts les plus déterminés de son tempérament, apparaissent déjà épars dans la riche variété de son oeuvre littéraire."<sup>21</sup>

The purpose of this study is to examine Voltaire's published works and his correspondence written between the years 1713 and 1755, in an attempt to discover what was his attitude to war in this period. Three particular aspects of the problem of war have been chosen for consideration. In the first chapter, Voltaire's statements on the question of the involvement of religion in war are discussed, and an attempt is made to decide whether or not his opinions on this question were subject to any changes during the period.

The second chapter deals with Voltaire's ideas on the question of aggression, a particular case of war which Montesquieu had explicitly condemned as unjust in the Lettres persanes. It is more difficult in this

<sup>19</sup>Voltaire, Voltaire's Notebooks, p. 381.

<sup>20</sup>ibid., pp. 344, 339, 349.

<sup>21</sup>Lanson, Histoire, p. 698.

case to determine what is Voltaire's true attitude, because evidence can be found in his works of both criticism and praise of aggressive war.

The subject of the third chapter, war in dramatic literature, is the most difficult to treat of the three, because it involves the problem of philosophical ideas expressed through an artistic medium. Artistic and philosophical considerations are sometimes at cross-purposes in Voltaire's poetic writings, making his real opinions hard to determine.

The basic text used in this study is the 52-volume edition of Voltaire's Oeuvres complètes published by Garnier (1877-1885), and edited by Louis Moland. This is generally considered the best edition published to date, and quotations from Voltaire's works have for the most part been referenced to it, using the conventional abbreviation "M.", meaning "Moland edition". Voltaire's letters have been cited from the 107-volume edition of Voltaire's Correspondence published by the Institut et musée Voltaire under the editorship of Theodore Besterman, which is by far the most complete and best annotated edition available. Quotations from the Besterman edition of the correspondence are designated by the abbreviation "Best.", followed by the number of the letter as it is found in this edition.

The orthography of the Moland edition of the Oeuvres complètes has been modernized, whereas the Besterman edition of the correspondence reproduces the orthography of the manuscript sources. Quotations used in this study have been copied exactly as they appear in each edition.

## CHAPTER I

### WAR AND RELIGION

Voltaire's first literary success, his tragedy Oedipe (1718), contains some ideas relating to religion, but the question of religion and war is not discussed in it. The cause of religion in this play is championed not by human beings, but by the gods themselves, the classical Greek deities whose cruelty towards helpless mortals is illustrated in the fate of Oedipe and Jocaste, who are punished for innocently committing murder and incest. This is Pomeau's interpretation of the play: "le Dieu cruel est le protagoniste invisible",<sup>1</sup> he says. The sacrifice of Laïus' murderer is necessary to appease the gods, whose displeasure is the direct cause of the misfortunes which have beset Thebes since the king's death.

Man's helplessness against the gods is made more intolerable by the deceit of their spokesmen, the priests. In this play they are not the war-mongers which Voltaire's later works will often make them, but simply clever charlatans who profit from the superstition of the people:

Les prêtres ne sont pas ce qu'un vain peuple pense:  
Notre crédulité fait toute leur science.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>René Pomeau, La Religion de Voltaire (Paris: Nizet, 1956), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>M. II, 93.

In his next important work, however, Voltaire faces directly the question of war and religion. This is his epic poem La Henriade, first published clandestinely in 1723 under the title La Ligue, but subsequently renamed in 1728 for its protagonist, Henri IV of France. In the Idée de la Henriade, written for the 1730 edition of the poem, Voltaire says of it: "le point le plus important est la religion"<sup>3</sup>, and then proceeds to quote some passages from the poem which were obviously composed to be solidly Roman Catholic in appearance. It is not difficult, therefore, to see the intentionally equivocal sense of this statement; Voltaire's main concern in the Henriade was undoubtedly religion, but he intended to show not the triumph of Roman Catholicism, but the terrible **consequences** of religious fanaticism.

Voltaire's purpose in writing the Henriade can be seen in his treatment of the historical sources from which the poem is drawn. In the Idée de la Henriade he excuses himself for having changed the historical facts on which the poem is based, and for having introduced into the narrative some supernatural elements, giving as his reasons the technical requirements of an epic poem. What he does not say is that, in order to make the philosophical ideas expressed in the epic stand out more clearly, he has greatly simplified the explanation of the wars involving the League, which were fought over a fairly complex combination of political and religious issues.

These wars, which lasted from 1560 to 1593, originally arose as a result of the persecution of Protestants during the first half of the sixteenth century. But, as Guérard says, "these wars soon became political,

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<sup>3</sup>M. VIII, 42.

or rather factional, like the Wars of the Roses. Their true name should be War of the Guises and Bourbons, not Wars of Religion."<sup>4</sup> The real issue was the right to rule France, and three parties fought for it: the house of Guise, supported by the Roman Catholics; the house of Bourbon, or rather Henri of Navarre, whose backing came not only from the Huguenots but also later on from moderate Catholics as well; and the legitimate sovereigns Charles IX and then Henri III, who were practically helpless, caught between the struggles of the two other powerful groups. When in 1589 Henri III was assassinated, Henri of Navarre became the legitimate heir to the throne, through his previous marriage with Henri III's sister. The new king, a Protestant, was forced to fight for his throne, however, and it was only by becoming a Roman Catholic that he was able to enter Paris and take up his rule as Henri IV.

Voltaire does not concern himself with the politico-religious complexities of these wars, in writing the Henriade. Forgetting the political side of the struggles, he has the future Henri IV explain the wars as purely religious ones:

C'est la religion dont le zèle inhumain  
Met à tous les Français les armes à la main.<sup>5</sup>

Right and wrong are too clearly delineated for this to be a true picture of the events of the League wars. This is the opinion of Gay, who says:

Voltaire's analysis of the Religious Wars is far too mechanical and tendentious to do justice to the complexities of French politics in the

<sup>4</sup>Albert Guérard, France. A Modern History (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 150.

<sup>5</sup>M. VIII, 66.

sixteenth century, but Voltaire was less interested in political complexities than in presenting a spotless hero, an idealized Henri of Navarre, at war with melodramatic villains, a priest-ridden League.<sup>6</sup>

The presentation of this "spotless hero" requires further manipulation of history because Henri of Navarre is a Protestant, until the last fifty lines of the poem. In order to maintain the orthodox Roman Catholic appearance of the Henriade, Voltaire had to underplay the Protestantism of his hero; Henri appears rather as the exponent of a religious toleration which is above any one sect. Constance Rowe says that Henri IV is glorified "not as a king or as a Frenchman, but as the leader who won for his compatriots the world-wide principle of freedom of worship."<sup>7</sup>

Henri is also portrayed as an advocate of pacifism. Here is one of his comments on the wars of the League:

Je ne décide point entre Genève et Rome:  
De quelque nom divin que leur parti les nomme,  
J'ai vu des deux côtés la fourbe et la fureur;  
Et si la perfidie est fille de l'erreur,  
Si, dans les différends où l'Europe se plonge,  
La trahison, le meurtre est le sceau du mensonge,  
L'un et l'autre parti, cruel également,  
Ainsi que dans le crime est dans l'aveuglement.<sup>8</sup>

He goes on to proclaim that he has never been guilty of undertaking to fight the battles of God, and condemns in blunt terms religious intolerance:

<sup>6</sup>Peter Gay, Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist (Princeton: University Press, 1959), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup>Constance Rowe, Voltaire and the State (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup>M. VIII, 66.

Et périsse à jamais l'affreuse politique,  
 Qui prétend sur les coeurs un pouvoir despotique,  
 Qui veut, le fer en main, convertir les mortels,  
 Qui du sang hérétique arrose les autels,  
 Et, suivant un faux zèle ou l'intérêt pour guides,  
 Ne sert un dieu de paix que par des homicides.<sup>9</sup>

This non-sectarian pacifist is nevertheless a valiant fighter. The war he fights is, however, "cette juste guerre";<sup>10</sup> it contributes to his glory because it is undertaken "pour donner la paix".<sup>11</sup>

Henri, in fact, can do no wrong. Even his final conversion is described as an act of God. Saint Louis, addressing the "Roi de rois"<sup>12</sup> in heaven, in the closing lines of the poem, reproaches Him for leaving Henri in the clutches of Protestantism:

Vois ce roi triomphant, ce foudre de la guerre,  
 L'exemple, la terreur, l'amour de la terre;  
 Avec tant de vertus, n'as-tu formé son coeur  
 Que pour l'abandonner aux pièges de l'erreur?<sup>13</sup>

That he has gone astray is not really Henri's fault: this is the implication of this speech. Here even his warlike valour is used as an argument for calling him into the fold of the true believers. God accordingly allows the scales to fall from his eyes; he becomes a Roman Catholic, and immediately peace is restored to France.

If Henri and his followers are totally good, his enemies are

<sup>9</sup>M. VIII, 67.

<sup>10</sup>M. VIII, 56.

<sup>11</sup>M. VIII, 201.

<sup>12</sup>M. VIII, 255.

<sup>13</sup>M. VIII, 257.

portrayed as completely bad. These are the members of the League, a faction which derives its impetus chiefly from the inspiration of fanatical priests. Several acts of fanaticism are described in the poem, the most important being the Saint-Barthélemy massacre of 1572, which Voltaire recounts with real horror. Guérard says that the motive behind this massacre was at least partly political, as it was an attempt on the part of the Queen Mother, Catherine de Médicis, to curb the rising political power of the Huguenots.<sup>14</sup> In the Henriade, however, the priests are made the real villains of the event. Speaking of the men who carried out the slaughter, Voltaire says:

Ces monstres furieux, de carnage altérés,  
Excités par la voix des prêtres sanguinaires,  
Invoquaient le Seigneur en égorgeant leurs frères;  
Et le bras tout souillé du sang des innocents,  
Osaient offrir à Dieu cet exécration.<sup>15</sup>

Even the pope is involved in exciting the Christians to violence, he says:

Celui qui des chrétiens se dit encore le père,  
Met aux mains de ses fils un glaive sanguinaire.<sup>16</sup>

Several other examples of this priest-inspired fanaticism can be found in the poem. In the fourth canto, the monks of Paris even take up arms themselves, to give the example to the people:

Prêtres audacieux, imbéciles soldats,  
Du sabre et de l'épée ils ont chargé leurs bras;  
Une lourde cuirasse a couvert leur cilice.

<sup>14</sup>Guérard, France, p. 152-3.

<sup>15</sup>M. VIII, 81.

<sup>16</sup>M. VIII, 101.

Dans les murs de Paris cette infâme milice  
 Suit, au milieu des flots d'un peuple impétueux,  
 Le Dieu, ce Dieu de paix qu'on porte devant eux.<sup>17</sup>

This is an example of what Pomeau calls Voltaire's "obsession du prêtre cruel".<sup>18</sup> Pomeau also says of this epic: "la Henriade n'illustre pas une thèse de théologie; le poème n'a pas d'autre ambition que de peindre, en terribles images, le 'fanatisme'".<sup>19</sup> Voltaire has interpreted the historical events of these wars of the sixteenth century in such a way as to lay the greater part of the blame on the priests and on priest-inspired fanatics, thus making the Henriade not a historical narrative, but a criticism of religious fanaticism as a cause of war.

The next work of importance in which the theme of war is treated in a religious context is Zaïre (1732). The plot of Zaïre offers considerable potential for comments on the question of war and religion. Set on the background of the Crusades in the thirteenth century, it has as its main theme the conflict of religious difference and love. The heroine, Zaïre, raised as an orphan in the palace of the Sultan Orosmane at Jerusalem, is about to marry the Sultan when she discovers that two of his French prisoners are in fact her father and brother, and that she is therefore by birth a Christian. Persuaded by these two over-zealous crusaders to renounce the Sultan and be baptized as a Christian, Zaïre arouses the suspicions of Orosmane who, not knowing of her French parentage or of her religious crisis, and thinking he is being made the victim of a lovers' plot, kills her in a fit of jealousy.

<sup>17</sup> M. VIII, 121.

<sup>18</sup> Pomeau, Religion, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

Here would have been an ideal opportunity for Voltaire to condemn wars of religion and the misfortunes caused by religious zeal. It would be difficult, however, to find in this play any tendency which could be positively classified as either pro- or anti-religious. In the Avertissement of the 1738 and 1742 editions, Voltaire says of the play: "On l'appelle à Paris tragédie chrétienne, et on l'a jouée fort souvent à la place de Polyeucte",<sup>20</sup> but this impersonal statement only leaves the interpretation of the play in doubt. The two plays do bear a superficial resemblance to each other, as both Zaïre and Polyeucte succeed in conquering their passions for the sake of their religious faith, but whereas Polyeucte ends a note of religious exaltation, with the martyr's death considered as a triumph for Christianity, the end of Zaïre does not appear to have any definite religious implications. Grosmane's jealousy is caused by the suspicion that Zaïre loves another man, and not by any hostility toward Christianity on his part. He did not know of her conversion.

Voltaire's real purpose in writing this play appears to be of a very different nature. In a letter to Formont, he explains his intentions:

Tout le monde me reproche ici que je ne mets pas d'amour dans mes pièces. Ils en auront, cette fois-ci, je vous le jure, et ce ne sera pas de la galanterie. Je veux qu'il n'y ait rien de si turc, de si chrétien, de si amoureux, de si tendre, de si furieux que ce que je versifie pour leur plaisir.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>M. II, 536.

<sup>21</sup>Best. 478 - 29/5/32.

At the suggestion of his friends, Voltaire was writing a play to show extremes of passion, to please his spectators by moving them. "Après l'échec d'Ériphyle, Voltaire veut réussir",<sup>22</sup> says Pomeau. Another critic comments: "Il semble bien que Voltaire ait voulu se servir du christianisme comme d'un moyen dramatique, le plus fort, le plus grand - le seul - qui pût s'opposer à l'amour et triompher de lui."<sup>23</sup>

Pomeau accepts this notion, and goes on to conclude: "Pas plus qu'Oedipe, Zaïre n'est un sermon".<sup>24</sup> Because religion is used here as a device, to arouse strong emotions in the spectator, the few statements in the play relating to war and religion cannot be considered necessarily as philosophical utterances on the part of Voltaire. Some of these are the opposite of what was probably Voltaire's view at the time: for example, the Crusades are pictured as the sacred duty of all Frenchmen; Saint Louis is called "l'exemple de la terre",<sup>25</sup> because he undertakes to "délivrer Dieu"<sup>26</sup> from the Musulman. At the same time, one can find lines which express Voltaire's habitual condemnation of fanaticism: on line 183, for instance, Orosmane speaks of "ces fiers chrétiens, de rapine altérés".<sup>27</sup> The Christians, however, are not the only characters in the play who are subject to fureur; Orosmane's killing of Zaïre is a crime of passion.

The relative silence of Voltaire in Zaïre on the subject of war

<sup>22</sup>Pomeau, Religion, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup>Julien Guntzberger, in François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Zaïre, tragédie, ed. Julien Guntzberger (Paris: Larousse, 1934), p. 15.

<sup>24</sup>Pomeau, Religion, p. 144.

<sup>25</sup>M. II, 586.

<sup>26</sup>M. II, 586.

<sup>27</sup>M. II, 562.

and religion is especially surprising because the play dates from the period of the Lettres philosophiques. These letters were first published in English in 1733; the first French edition appeared in 1734. Voltaire seems to have been particularly interested in the problem of religion in England, and in the struggles which had produced the measure of religious toleration which he found there. In the first four letters, which are all about the Quakers, he mentions several times the pacifist nature of this sect, especially in the first letter, where he puts into the mouth of the Quaker a long tirade against war:

Nous n'allons jamais à la guerre: ce n'est pas que nous craignons la mort, au contraire nous bénissons le moment qui nous unit à l'Être des êtres; mais c'est que nous ne sommes ni loups, ni tigres, ni dogues, mais hommes, mais chrétiens. Notre Dieu, qui nous a ordonné d'aimer nos ennemis et de souffrir sans murmure, ne veut pas sans doute que nous passions la mer pour aller égorger nos frères, parce que des meurtriers vêtus de rouge avec un bonnet haut de deux pieds, enrôlent des citoyens en faisant du bruit avec deux petits bâtons sur une peau d'âne bien tendue. Et lorsqu'après des batailles gagnées, tout Londres brille d'illuminations, que le ciel est enflammé de fusées, que l'air retentit du bruit des actions de grâces, des cloches, des orgues, des canons, nous gémissons en silence sur ces meurtres qui causent la publique allégresse.<sup>28</sup>

This view is essentially that of Voltaire; the words and the style are really his own. "Voltaire is at one with the Quaker in his condemnation of war", says Havens. "He reduces war to what it is, the organized murder of one man by another."<sup>29</sup> The picture of religious celebration after a battle is used several times by Voltaire in his writings, to

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<sup>28</sup>M. XXII, 86.

<sup>29</sup>Havens, The Age of Ideas, p. 181.

illustrate the conflict between the religious principle of peace and the warlike actions in which the deity is invoked. It appears in Candide (1759): after the battle between the Bulgares and the Abares in the third chapter, Voltaire reports that "les deux rois faisaient chanter des Te Deum, chacun dans son camp."<sup>30</sup>

Another example of a criticism of wars of religion which Voltaire repeats in many of his works is found in the third letter of the Lettres philosophiques, where he ironically underlines the inherent absurdity of a war carried on in the name of the man who said "Love your enemies".<sup>31</sup> Here Voltaire is speaking of the rise of George Fox: "Ce fut dans le temps que trois ou quatre sectes déchiraient la Grande-Bretagne par des guerres civiles entreprises au nom de Dieu".<sup>32</sup> Similar passages have been found in the Henriade; they will occur also in later writings.

It should be noted that in the Lettres Voltaire does not confine his criticism of religions exclusively to the church of Rome. He criticizes all religions which try to extend their power outside of the realm of ecclesiastical affairs, and which exhibit political ambitions. Voltaire notes the participation of the English churches in quarrels of the State: "Quand les whigs et les tories déchirèrent leur pays, comme autrefois les guelfes et les gibelins désolèrent l'Italie, il fallut bien que la religion entrât dans les partis."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Romans et Contes, texte établi sur l'édition de 1775, avec une présentation et des notes par Henri Bénac. (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Matt. 5, 44.

<sup>32</sup> M. XXII, 88.

<sup>33</sup> M. XXII, 96.

The eighth letter is called "Sur le parlement", but in fact it deals with the civil wars in England, and their religious origins; Voltaire compares the English to the Romans, in passages like this one:

On n'a jamais connu chez les Romains la folie horrible des guerres de religion; cette abomination était réservée à des dévots prêcheurs d'humilité et de patience. Marius et Sylla, Pompée et César, Antoine et Auguste ne se battaient point pour décider si le flamen devait porter sa chemise par-dessus sa robe ou sa robe par-dessus sa chemise, et si les poulets sacrés devaient manger et boire, ou bien manger seulement, pour qu'on prît des augures. Les Anglais se sont fait pendre autrefois réciproquement à leurs assises et se sont détruits en bataille rangée pour des querelles de pareille espèce; la secte des épiscopaux et le presbytéranisme ont tourné pour un temps ces têtes mélancholiques. Je m'imagine que pareille sottise ne leur arrivera plus; ils me paraissent devenir sages à leurs dépens, et je ne leur vois nulle envie de s'égorger dorénavant pour des syllogismes.<sup>34</sup>

All this is over now, however, he says, "car la rage des sectes a fini en Angleterre avec les guerres civiles, et ce n'était plus, sous la reine Anne, que les bruits sourds d'une mer encore agitée longtemps après la tempête."<sup>35</sup> Now the Anglican Church is "établie par la loi";<sup>36</sup> toleration is practised to some extent, and the many sects "vivent en paix et heureuses."<sup>37</sup>

Voltaire comments further on the question of war and religion in a play, Mahomet, which first appeared in 1742. According to Pomeau, Voltaire's reason for writing Mahomet was to show again the disastrous effects of religious fanaticism, whether Christian or Mohammedan. "Ici,

<sup>34</sup> M. XXII, 102-3.

<sup>35</sup> M. XXII, 96.

<sup>36</sup> M. XXII, 97.

<sup>37</sup> M. XXII, 100.

comme dans la Henriade, il est inspiré par son horreur de la passion religieuse".<sup>38</sup> Ridgway is of the same opinion:

La même horreur presque pathologique des grands crimes commis au nom de la religion [qu'on trouve dans la Henriade] domine la pièce d'un bout à l'autre.<sup>39</sup>

He sees the play as "l'oeuvre d'un fanatique de l'anti-fanatisme, la première grand attaque dans la campagne féroce contre l'infâme",<sup>40</sup> the campaign which Voltaire would wage during his Ferney period.

The plot of the play is admirably constructed to illustrate this thesis. It concerns a young disciple of Mahomet named Séide. Mahomet uses Séide's religious devotion to incite him to assassinate Zopire, the sheriff of Mecca, by persuading Séide that he is doing the will of God in committing the murder.<sup>41</sup> Mahomet also promises him the hand of his lover, Palmire, as a further reward for the act. The tragedy is completed when Séide, after killing Zopire, discovers that he has murdered his own father, and that Palmire is in fact his own sister.

Séide is the main character in the plot, but the interest of the play centres around Mahomet himself. One might expect the founder of a religion to be a pacific advocate of moral ideals, but this Mahomet is a warrior, and his goal is most practical. He wants to conquer the world, through military might, for himself and for his religion. Here is one of his statements of policy:

<sup>38</sup> Pomeau, Religion, p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald S. Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique dans les tragédies de Voltaire", Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century. (Geneva: Institut et musée Voltaire, 1961), p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> The parallel with Jacques Clément in the Henriade is unmistakable.

Je porte l'encensoir, et le sceptre, et les armes:  
Ma vie est un combat...<sup>42</sup>

These are strange words for a prophet. The force of arms, not the force of truth, is his method; Zopire accuses him not so much of teaching another religion in Mecca as of causing discord and of stirring up the people.

In their interview in the fifth scene of Act II, Zopire says:

...toi de qui la main sème ici les forfaits,  
Et fait naître la guerre au milieu de la paix.  
Ton nom seul parmi nous divise les familles.<sup>43</sup>

Mahomet's answer to this accusation is to unfold before Zopire a vast plan of a world dominated by Arabia and by himself:

Chaque peuple à son tour a brillé sur la terre  
Par les lois, par les arts, et surtout par la guerre:  
Le temps de l'Arabie est à la fin venu  
.....  
Il faut un nouveau culte, il faut de nouveaux fers,  
Il faut un nouveau dieu pour l'aveugle univers.<sup>44</sup>

Religion is thus a political tool in the hands of this Arabian tyrant, an unscrupulous impostor who wants to use it to animate his followers to undertake a huge program of wars of conquest. In the same way Mahomet uses religion as a tool to animate Séide, so that this young disciple will remove Zopire from the prophet's path to power, thinking by this act to gain favour in the sight of God. Here is the moral of the story, as summed up by Ridgway:

Faute d'écouter la raison, les hommes deviennent  
la proie de tous les charlatans qui se servent de la  
crédulité pour leurs propres fins. La foi aveugle  
et intolérante ne peut aboutir qu'à la guerre, à la

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<sup>42</sup>M. IV, 122-3.

<sup>43</sup>M. IV, 124.

<sup>44</sup>M. IV, 124-5.

misère et au crime.<sup>45</sup>

This is one of the strongest statements against religious fanaticism which Voltaire has made up to 1742.

In Zadig (1747), Voltaire returns to the question of Church participation in State affairs, particularly in defense. The question of the exemption from taxes of the wealthy French Church (in lieu of which it gave a small sum to the king's treasury every few years) is treated in an episode in Chapter XV, concerning the kingdom of Serendib. Faced with a revolt from the north in the midst of internal financial difficulties, the king of this fictitious country turns to the priests for money, but receives nothing but prayers. At Zadig's suggestion, the king then refuses to defend the Church's land, after which the priests soon open their coffers, and the revolt is put down.

This parable illustrates a view which Voltaire will later state explicitly, in the article "Lois civiles et ecclésiastiques" of the Dictionnaire philosophique (1764), when he recommends "Que les magistrats, les laboureurs et les prêtres payent également les charges de l'État, parce que tous appartiennent également à l'État."<sup>46</sup>

The Siècle de Louis XIV was actually started in about 1732, although it was not published as a whole until 1751. Unlike the earlier Histoire de Charles XII (1731), which in spite of its fundamental historical accuracy reads more like a novel than a history, the Siècle represents a

<sup>45</sup> Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 129.

<sup>46</sup> François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 290.

more scholarly approach to the writing of history. It nevertheless contains several examples of the usual sarcastic comments about wars of religion which have been found in previous works. Speaking of the Fronde, Voltaire deplores the fact that one of its main leaders, the Cardinal de Retz, was an Archbishop. Retz's reasons for participating in the Fronde were not religious, however: "Cet homme singulier est le premier évêque de France qui ait fait une guerre civile sans avoir la religion pour prétexte."<sup>47</sup> The Fronde was not as violent as the wars of the League:

Malgré l'aigreur et la manie de tant de partis et de tant de haines, on ne commit pas autant de grands crimes, les chefs de partis furent moins cruels, et les peuples moins furieux que du temps de la Ligue: car ce n'était pas une guerre de religion.<sup>48</sup>

The more scholarly approach to the question of war and religion is evident in Voltaire's treatment of the various religious movements in the seventeenth century. The last five chapters of the Siècle are devoted to the discussion of these movements, and in the chapter on Calvinism Voltaire gives his analysis of the reasons why the Christian Church has so often gone to war.

"L'esprit dogmatique apporta chez les hommes la fureur des guerres de religion",<sup>49</sup> he says. Christianity is the only religion, however, in which this dogmatic attitude is found. Dogmatism in Christianity is the result of "l'esprit républicain, qui anima les premières Églises",<sup>50</sup> and

<sup>47</sup>M. XIV, 186.

<sup>48</sup>M. XIV, 198.

<sup>49</sup>M. XV, 15.

<sup>50</sup>M. XV, 15.

which was always opposed to established authority, whether ecclesiastical or secular. When Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome, the quarrels moved inside the Church itself; a priest or deacon might dispute the opinions of a superior cleric, for example. Quarrels of this kind among men are to be expected, according to Voltaire. He explains them as a result of human nature:

Toute autorité blesse en secret les hommes, d'autant plus que toute autorité veut toujours s'accroître. Lorsqu'on trouve pour lui résister quelque principe qu'on croit sacré, on se fait bientôt un devoir de la révolte. Ainsi les uns deviennent persécuteurs, les autres rebelles, en attestant Dieu des deux côtés.<sup>51</sup>

It is for this reason that Voltaire says, in the chapter on Jansenism, that "le calvinisme devait nécessairement enfanter des guerres civiles, et ébranler les fondements des États."<sup>52</sup>

The Siècle does not mention another cause of wars of religion which is given in the Idées de la Mothe Le Vayer, which Voltaire also published in 1751. The second idée says:

Quelle est la religion dangereuse? N'est-ce pas évidemment celle qui, établissant des dogmes incompréhensibles, donne nécessairement aux hommes l'envie d'expliquer ces dogmes chacun à sa manière, excite nécessairement les disputes, les haines et les guerres civiles?<sup>53</sup>

Voltaire's analysis of the causes of religious wars in Chapter XXXVI of the Siècle is followed by a long description of the history of Protestantism in Europe, particularly in France. He disapproves strongly of the persecution of the Huguenots in France by Louis XIV, as these

<sup>51</sup>M. XV, 15.

<sup>52</sup>M. XV, 39.

<sup>53</sup>M. XXIII, 489.

Protestants had long before ceased to trouble the country, and were now peacefully devoting themselves to the pursuit of their professions. The only motive for their persecution was to increase the King's status: "Il envisageait...cet éclat de gloire dont il était idolâtre en toutes choses".<sup>54</sup> The effect of the oppression was to drive out of France many valuable tradesmen and to gain many enemies for Louis XIV.

Brumfitt speaks of the "moderate and balanced tone" of the chapters on the French religious movements in the Siècle, which is "far removed from that of the later deistic pamphlets".<sup>55</sup> The discussion of wars and religion in these chapters shows an impartiality which contrasts with the tone of the usual sarcastic statements found in many of the works treated previously in this section.

While Voltaire's approach to the question of war and religion is not the same in the Siècle as it had been in previous writings, his interest in this problem continues. Indeed, condemnation of fanaticism and of wars caused by religious leaders, or as a result of religious disputes, seems to have been one of Voltaire's favourite criticisms of the Church. He tends to slip in a satirical remark on the subject at almost any point in his writings where the opportunity presents itself.

Satire is not the only medium he uses for his criticisms, however. Voltaire wrote in many genres and used many techniques; indeed, through his use of the various literary genres, and through his approach to the question of war and religion in them, one can see the evolution of his

<sup>54</sup>M. XV, 26.

<sup>55</sup>Brumfitt, Voltaire, p. 49.

literary and personal experience. The Henriade is obviously the work of a young author: in it religious fanaticism is condemned explicitly and forcefully, without the use of any spécial literary devices to cover up the criticism. The first edition was clandestine, therefore, and enjoyed a "succès de scandale".

Already in the Lettres philosophiques, however, there is evidence of a greater subtlety. Voltaire is careful to put the criticism of war into the mouth of a Quaker, and not to express it as his own; or else he cloaks it in sarcastic expressions which would make it much harder for a censor to find fault with his attitude. Zadig also uses sarcasm and satire instead of emphatic condemnation, with the added refinement that the medium of the criticism is an apparently light and fanciful story; this kind of "gilding of the pill" was a favourite method used by Voltaire.

The Siècle de Louis XIV marks a new step in the evolution of Voltaire's writing career, because it is more learned in tone than any of his previous works. Sarcastic and satirical remarks can still be found in it, but there is also an attempt at impartial and logical discussion of the problem of Church quarrels.

All the different types of criticism which have been seen in this period are in fact to be found in his later works as well. The approach used depends upon Voltaire's particular intention, and on the context in which each work is written.

## CHAPTER II

### THE QUESTION OF AGGRESSION

Voltaire gave special attention, in his later writings on war, to the particular problem of military aggression, that is, of unprovoked wars and wars of conquest. This special emphasis is noted by Brumfitt: "One of the main themes of Voltaire's 'philosophic' propaganda in later years is his opposition to war, and especially aggressive war".<sup>1</sup>

During the earlier period of Voltaire's writings, on which this study is based, similar condemnations of aggression can be found. However, when one considers the force with which this type of war is attacked in the Ferney period (for example in the article "Guerre" of the Dictionnaire philosophique), the condemnations of aggression by Voltaire in this earlier period are relatively few, and these often occur only as statements of secondary importance in works the main purpose of which is of a different nature. Sometimes Voltaire will even express a completely contrary sentiment, which is the admiration of conquerors and of successful military campaigns. In this analysis these two opposing tendencies will be traced separately, so that the evolution of each may be followed.

#### 1. "La folie des conquêtes"

The first work in which aggressive warfare is condemned is the Histoire de Charles XII, which is also Voltaire's "first historical work of real significance".<sup>2</sup> The book recounts the rise and fall of this

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<sup>1</sup>Brumfitt, Voltaire, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. [5].

young Swedish king, who is presented as if obsessed with the idea of military conquests. At first brilliantly successful in his campaigns, Charles later suffers a series of crushing defeats, and finally, "à l'âge de trente-six ans et demi",<sup>3</sup> when his military fortunes seem about to rise again, he is killed by a cannon-ball at the siege of Frederickshall, in Norway, while carelessly inspecting the trenches.

These historical facts provide all the necessary material for a moral story, as they illustrate the dire consequences of the prolonged practice of military aggression. Lanson points this out:

S'il [Voltaire] a tiré de la vie de Charles XII un enseignement philosophique, pour condamner dans un roi l'amour de la guerre, des conquêtes et de la gloire, c'était la leçon qui sortait naturellement des faits: il n'avait pas besoin de les fausser pour l'y trouver.<sup>4</sup>

Voltaire makes the moral of the Histoire even more clear, however, in his Discours sur l'Histoire de Charles XII, published with the first edition of the Histoire in 1731, in which he explains his reasons for writing it, and clarifies its meaning. Speaking of the reasons for which a ruler deserves to have his deeds preserved for posterity, he says: "Les princes qui ont le plus de droit à l'immortalité sont ceux qui ont fait quelque bien aux hommes".<sup>5</sup> Surely Charles XII, whose life history is one of nothing but conquests and defeats, does not rank among these! The actions of conquerors, however, are often recorded for later

<sup>3</sup>M. XVI, 350.

<sup>4</sup>Gustave Lanson, Voltaire (Paris: Hachette, 1960), p. 111.

<sup>5</sup>M. XVI, 130.

generations:

Telle est la misérable faiblesse des hommes qu'ils regardent avec admiration ceux qui ont fait du mal d'une manière brillante, et qu'ils parleront souvent plus volontiers du destructeur d'un empire que de celui qui l'a fondé.<sup>6</sup>

The only reason why Charles XII deserves to be remembered is that he and Peter the Great of Russia were, "du consentement de toute la terre, les personnages les plus singuliers qui eussent paru depuis plus de vingt siècles".<sup>7</sup> But Voltaire also hastens to point out the moral implicit in the Histoire:

...on n'a pas été déterminé seulement à donner cette vie par la petite satisfaction d'écrire des faits extraordinaires; on a pensé que cette lecture pourrait être utile à quelques princes, si ce livre leur tombe par hasard entre les mains. Certainement il n'y a point de souverain qui, en lisant la vie de Charles XII, ne doive être guéri de la folie des conquêtes.<sup>8</sup>

Conquests are foolish, says Voltaire, because it is impossible for a ruler to engage in a prolonged campaign of military aggression without eventually suffering defeat, no matter how well prepared he may be. The case of Charles XII illustrates this impossibility:

Car, où est le souverain qui pût dire: j'ai plus de courage et de vertus, une âme plus forte, un corps plus robuste; j'entends mieux la guerre, j'ai de meilleures troupes que Charles XII? Que si, avec tous ces avantages, et après tant de victoires, ce roi a été si malheureux, que devraient espérer les autres princes qui auraient la même ambition, avec moins de talents et de ressources?<sup>9</sup>

To this picture of the endless wars of Charles XII, who did nothing to advance his own country, Voltaire opposes that of the Czar of

<sup>6</sup>M. XVI, 130.

<sup>7</sup>M. XVI, 132.

<sup>8</sup>M. XVI, 132

<sup>9</sup>M. XVI, 132.

Russia, Peter the Great. Compared with Charles, Peter, "beaucoup plus grand homme que lui",<sup>10</sup> is praised because he used his conquests to improve his own country, by introducing the arts and skills of conquered nations into his own: "Ses États s'enrichissaient par ses victoires, ce qui de tous les conquérants le rendait le plus excusable".<sup>11</sup> In Voltaire's opinion, therefore, social utility is more important than military success, and should be a guiding principle for kings.

This same principle of social utility is stressed again by Voltaire three years later, in his Lettres philosophiques (1734). The twelfth letter, entitled "Sur le chancelier Bacon", opens with a discussion of the qualities necessary for a man to be considered 'great'. According to Voltaire, those men who should be called great are not the world's conquerors, but its men of science and of letters, who seek after truth, and thus contribute to human progress and understanding:

C'est à celui qui domine sur les esprits par la force de la vérité, non à ceux qui font des esclaves par la violence, c'est à celui qui connaît l'univers, non à ceux qui le défigurent, que nous devons nos respects.<sup>12</sup>

F. A. Taylor, in the notes to his edition of the Lettres, calls this statement "Voltaire's profession of faith".<sup>13</sup>

In the same year that the Lettres appeared, Voltaire also presented a play, Alzire ou les Américains, which voices his opinions on the subject

<sup>10</sup>M. XVI, 132.

<sup>11</sup>M. XVI, 325.

<sup>12</sup>Voltaire, Lettres philosophiques, ed. F. A. Taylor (Oxford: Blackwell, reprinted 1961), pp. 34-5.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

of colonialism, or what could be called overseas aggression. This play is set in Peru, and it concerns the colonization of the local peoples by Spanish conquerors, who intend to christianize and 'civilize' the American 'savages', that is to say, the Indians. What the play actually shows, however, is the brutality of the Spanish, and especially of the young and tyrannical governor Gusman, toward the conquered people. The Americans complain of the Spanish cruelty; they are depicted idealistically as representing natural virtue in a primitive setting, a land where war was unknown before the arrival of the Europeans. In the second act Zamore, the young king of one of the American tribes, whose lover Alzire has been taken from him by Gusman, complains of the introduction of war into his peaceful country:

Le fer manque à nos mains; les cieux, pour nous avarés,  
 Ont fait ce don funeste à des mains plus barbares;  
 Mais pour venger enfin nos peuples abattus  
 Le ciel, au lieu de fer, nous donna des vertus.<sup>14</sup>

This reversal of roles leads Ridgway to comment: "Alzire représente donc une contribution voltairienne à la théorie du bon sauvage".<sup>15</sup>

The resentment of the Peruvians towards Gusman's brutality is shared by the former governor Alvarez, who is also the father of Gusman. Alvarez, whom Ridgway calls "le porte-parole de Voltaire",<sup>16</sup> reproaches his son for the harsh way in which the Americans are being subjugated and converted to Christianity, expressing his horror that his fellow Spanish should be responsible for such cruelty:

<sup>14</sup>M. III, 402.

<sup>15</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 108.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

Notre nom, je l'avoue, inspire la terreur,  
 Les Espagnols sont craints, mais ils sont en horreur:  
 Fléaux du nouveau monde, injustes, vains, avares,  
 Nous seuls en ces climats nous sommes les barbares.<sup>17</sup>

According to Ridgway, Voltaire's main intention in this play was religious criticism, but he also expresses his opinions about colonialism:

Ici Voltaire prend nettement position sur une question qui intéresse encore le monde moderne. Il est fermement contre cette forme de colonialisme qui consiste à opprimer les peuples 'primitifs' sous prétexte d'une mission civilisatrice et d'une prétendue supériorité de race ou de religion.<sup>18</sup>

It should be made clear, however, that Voltaire did believe that the European culture had something to offer the Americans. His criticism of colonialism in Alzire only applies to the oppressive type of colonialism which the Spanish conquerors practice in the play.

Ridgway links Alzire with Mahomet (1742) in the development of Voltaire's ideas; in both plays the problem of religious fanaticism is associated with that of conquest. Although Mahomet has been discussed in connection with Voltaire's ideas on war and religion, it should be noted here that the fanaticism studied in this play finds its expression in a desire on the part of Mahomet to conquer the world. The criticism of military aggression is again not the main concern of the play, but it nevertheless is implied in it.

In the period between these two plays, Voltaire continued to work on the larger history which he had started to write before the Lettres philosophiques were finished, but which was not finally published until 1751 - the Siècle de Louis XIV. The history of Louis XIV, like that of

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<sup>17</sup>M. III, 388.

<sup>18</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 106.

Charles XII of Sweden, is to a great extent a story of aggressive wars; it therefore offered Voltaire another ready-made example of the 'folie des conquêtes'. The basis for his criticisms of aggression is much the same in the Siècle as it was in Charles XII: he points out the futility and the social uselessness of military campaigns, which seldom bring the conqueror any material benefit, and which drain the conqueror's country of its resources, leaving it in a position of economic weakness.

Speaking in general of "les monarchies chrétiennes",<sup>19</sup> that is, the European monarchies (a group Voltaire singles out several times in the Siècle as a special case of monarchy), he deplores the wanton devastation of both the victorious and the defeated countries which inevitably accompanies a battle:

Le peuple vainqueur ne profite jamais des dépouilles du peuple vaincu: il paye tout; il souffre dans la prospérité des armes comme dans l'adversité; et la paix lui est presque aussi nécessaire après la plus grande victoire que quand les ennemis ont pris ses places frontières.<sup>20</sup>

Later on in the Siècle, Voltaire repeats this observation, placing it in a historical context: "Depuis les anciens Romains, je ne connais aucune nation qui se soit enrichie par des victoires".<sup>21</sup> War, he says, is "un gouffre où tous les canaux de l'abondance s'engloutissent".<sup>22</sup>

It is for these reasons that Voltaire criticizes the wars of Louis XIV, saying that they detract from his elevated status as a monarch:

<sup>19</sup>M. XIV, 218.

<sup>20</sup>M. XIV, 218-19.

<sup>21</sup>M. XIV, 525.

<sup>22</sup>M. XIV, 525-6.

Louis XIV fit plus de bien à sa nation que vingt de ses prédécesseurs ensemble; et il s'en faut de beaucoup qu'il fît ce qu'il aurait pu. La guerre, qui finit par la paix de Rysvick [the war of the League of Augsburg], commença la ruine de ce grand commerce que son ministre Colbert avait établi; et la guerre de la succession l'acheva.<sup>23</sup>

The result of the loss of commerce and of the constant diversion of resources necessary to sustain a long succession of wars exhausted France economically. Similar criticisms of Louis XIV can be found in the Notebooks,<sup>24</sup> and in a letter which Voltaire wrote to Lord Hervey in 1740.<sup>25</sup>

Voltaire was also horrified by the unnecessary destruction of land and of property which accompanied the campaigns of Louis XIV. In Chapter XVI of the Siècle he comments at some length on the king's desolation of the Palatinate in 1689. This destruction was actually ordered by Louvois, Louis XIV's secretary of war, and carried out by Louis' generals, but Voltaire blames Louis himself for it, and laments the loss: "Si le roi avait été témoin de ce spectacle, il aurait lui-même éteint les flammes".<sup>26</sup> This act of destruction was blameworthy in itself. It could also have harmful consequences, because it would incite the enemies of France to similar action, if they should ever invade Louis' territory.

Such devastation, he further complained, was not confined to Europe alone, but similar acts were being carried out in the colonies as well:

<sup>23</sup>M. XIV, 513-14.

<sup>24</sup>Voltaire, Notebooks, p. 98, 108.

<sup>25</sup>Best. 2089.

<sup>26</sup>M. XIV, 309.

C'est, depuis deux siècles, un des effets de l'industrie et de la fureur des hommes que les désolations de nos guerres ne se bornent pas à notre Europe. Nous nous épuisons d'hommes et d'argent pour aller nous détruire aux extrémités de l'Asie et de l'Amérique. Les Indiens, que nous avons obligés par force et par adresse à recevoir nos établissements, et les Américains, dont nous avons ensanglanté et ravi le continent, nous regardent comme les ennemis de la nature humaine, qui accourent du bout du monde pour les égorger et pour se détruire eux-mêmes.<sup>27</sup>

Here is a confirmation in a historical context of what Voltaire said in a dramatic context in Alzire.

Voltaire further underlines the injustice of the wars of conquest in which Louis XIV engaged by pointing out that Louis was in many cases fighting his own relatives. Speaking of the war of the League of Augsburg, he says:

Ceux qui ont plus d'humanité que de politique remarqueront que, dans cette guerre, Louis XIV était armé contre son beau-père le roi d'Espagne; contre l'électeur de Bavière, dont il avait donné la soeur à son fils le dauphin; contre l'électeur palatin, dont il brûla les États après avoir marié Monsieur à la princesse palatine....La plupart des guerres entre les princes chrétiens sont des espèces de guerres civiles.<sup>28</sup>

Louis XIV sometimes took the law into his own hands, twisting it to satisfy his ambitions, or simply arrogating privileges which he could not justify by any other means. In 1667 he invaded Flanders, claiming it belonged to his wife Maria Theresa, even though she had renounced her right to the territory on marrying him. Voltaire comments sarcastically on this invasion: "Entre les rois la convenance et le droit du plus fort

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<sup>27</sup>M. XIV, 320.

<sup>28</sup>M. XIV, 321.

tiennent lieu de justice, surtout quand cette justice semble douteuse."<sup>29</sup>

The preceding analysis shows that it is possible to find in these major works of Voltaire's 'pre-Geneva' period a definite and fairly continuous line of condemnation of military aggression. The evolution of Voltaire's attitude toward the question of conquests can be seen in the increasing force and bitterness with which these condemnations are delivered, later on in the period. In the Histoire de Charles XII, kings are advised against aggression because long-term success as a conqueror is impossible. The principle of social utility is stressed, as it is in the Lettres philosophiques. Then Voltaire embodies these ideas in a dramatic form, in Alzire and Mahomet, giving the utterances more impact. Ridgway notes<sup>30</sup> the increase in pessimism in the period from 1734 to 1742 which these plays show, since the first has a happy ending, with Gusman's miraculous conversion to Christianity, while the second ends on a note of apprehension, with Mahomet still in power, and presumably ready to pursue his plan to conquer the world. Criticism of aggression is still more forceful in the Siècle de Louis XIV, taking on an emotional tone as Voltaire protests the thoughtlessness and the unnecessary destruction of the wars of the Sun-King.

This growing pessimism may have been the result of the several personal misfortunes which Voltaire suffered during this period of his life. Some time had elapsed since the troubles of his younger days, which had included two stays in the Bastille, the Rohan affair, and finally his

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<sup>29</sup>M. XIV, 234.

<sup>30</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 130.

exile from Paris in 1726. From 1734 to 1749 Voltaire enjoyed a period of relatively greater happiness and security at the isolated estate of Madame du Châtelet at Cirey. But later in the Cirey period, in 1744 and 1745, he attempted to gain favour at the court of Louis XV. After a brief success, during which he received a pension and a title, Voltaire began gradually to lose favour in the eyes of the king. Then in 1749 Madame du Châtelet died. These two losses left Voltaire much distressed. It is possibly because of the disillusionment caused by these personal setbacks that Voltaire's works in this later period show a stronger criticism of military aggression.

## 2. Voltaire and the Conquerors

Voltaire's reaction to the conquerors themselves, on the other hand, is not always that of a philosophe. Both in his published writings about conquerors and in his correspondence, Voltaire's interest in them seems to prevent him from condemning their aggression as strongly as he might have done in other circumstances. In the period under study, Voltaire writes extensively about three conquerors, Charles XII, Frederick the Great, and Louis XIV, and in each case his preoccupation with other aspects of their characters prevents him from condemning philosophically their aggressive policies as he would have if he had followed the humanistic principles he often enunciates elsewhere. At times he even praises openly the heroic deeds of the successful conqueror.

The case of Charles XII is an example of this seemingly paradoxical attitude. Although the Histoire de Charles XII has an avowed moral purpose, there is ample evidence, both in the work itself and in the other writings which discuss it, which suggests that Voltaire was attracted

to the story of this conqueror not so much because of its philosophical content as because of its artistic possibilities.

Indeed, the text of the Histoire is striking precisely because of the lack of moralizing in it. Brumfitt remarks that it is "free from all but the most reasonable forms of 'philosophic' propaganda",<sup>31</sup> and even this "reasonable" propaganda is relatively slight; for the most part the reader is left to draw out the moral himself. The fact that the Histoire, on its first appearance in 1731, was accompanied by a Discours which points out explicitly the moral of the story, suggests that Voltaire may have felt it necessary to state his intentions more clearly than the text itself made them appear.

In the Discours Voltaire gives as one of his reasons for writing the history of this conqueror the uniqueness of Charles XII: he and Peter the Great are called the most unusual people who have appeared in the world in over twenty centuries.<sup>32</sup> The fact that more than half of the Discours is devoted to the justification of the Histoire on the grounds of Charles' uniqueness, whereas the moral value of the story is discussed in less than a paragraph, suggests that Voltaire was attracted to Charles XII more as the hero of a dramatic adventure than as the main character of a moral story.

Further confirmation of this preoccupation is provided by a letter Voltaire wrote to the Journal des Savants in February of 1742, in which he explains the genesis of the Histoire. It was inspired, he says, in much the same way as the Henriade:

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<sup>31</sup>Brumfitt, Voltaire, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup>M. XVI, 132.

Quand je composai cette histoire du monarque le plus singulier qui ait jamais régné en Europe, je ne prétendis faire qu'un simple essai; je me trouvais en un sens dans la même situation d'esprit où j'étais quand je fis la Henriade. J'avais eu l'honneur de jouir quelques mois à la campagne en 1716 de la société de feu m. de Caumartin, l'homme de France qui savait le plus d'anecdotes sur la vie de Henri IV, il m'apprenait mille traits si sublimes & si touchants de ce grand roi, que mon imagination échauffée par ces conversations, osa concevoir l'idée d'un poème épique...

De même, me trouvant à la campagne en 1727 avec m. de Fabrice qui avait passé sept années auprès de Charles XII, il me conta des faits si extraordinaires que je ne pus résister à l'envie qu'il m'inspira de les écrire.<sup>33</sup>

Again, it is the unusual nature of the story which appealed to Voltaire; its moral implications seem to have been of lesser importance.

The story of Charles XII appears to have attracted Voltaire also for its artistic possibilities, although the Discours does not mention this. Charles Rihs is of this opinion:

Séduit par la personnalité étrange de Charles XII, ses aventures extraordinaires, Voltaire voulut retracer l'histoire de ce roi comme on écrit une tragédie.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the life of Charles XII, as Voltaire wrote it, contains many of the elements necessary for a classical tragedy. Brumfitt gives an outline of its dramatic form:

It possesses, as French classical tragedy should, the three elements of exposition, noeud, and dénouement; the first in the introductory picture of Swedish history and of the childhood of Charles himself; the second in

<sup>33</sup>Best. 2426.

<sup>34</sup>Charles Rihs, Voltaire, recherches sur les origines du matérialisme historique (Geneva: Droz, 1962), p. 114.

his entry into the war and his campaigns in Denmark, Poland, and Russia; and the third in his tragic death before the walls of Frederickshall.<sup>35</sup>

It would have been difficult, of course, to make a true French classical tragedy out of this story, without radically changing the plot. What is important here is that the facts of the history of Charles XII naturally lend themselves to an interpretation in which concern for artistic form is a major consideration, and that Voltaire exploited this dramatic potential. The style of the narrative shows this concern: it is "direct and vivid".<sup>36</sup> The frequent use of anecdotes shows Voltaire's intention to interest the reader.

Charles himself has dramatic qualities, as Voltaire portrays him; Brumfitt calls him a tragic hero. He goes on to say:

Like the tragic heroes of antiquity, Charles is a victim of hubris. Voltaire portrays him as a man of extraordinary fearlessness and resolution, but subtly manages to hint at the obsessional nature of his ideal of glory. Charles's one aim is to become a second Alexander, and to achieve it he will not hesitate to sacrifice the welfare of his peoples. Nor will he turn his eyes from his goal in order to make a realistic appraisal of the means of achieving it. He is shown to be a skilful and courageous tactician and a great visionary. But as a strategist he is a failure; and it is this which leads to his downfall.<sup>37</sup>

Like the hero of classical tragedy, Charles XII is also to be pitied, and his fate is to inspire fear. Out of the pity and fear generated in the mind of the reader or spectator is to arise the moral teaching of the story; this is in effect the meaning of Voltaire's statements about the "folie des conquêtes" in the Discours.

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<sup>35</sup> Brumfitt, Voltaire, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

But Voltaire also admires Charles XII - not as a great man, of course, but as a glorious and unusual warrior. Rowe says that Voltaire gives Charles "greatness of soul"<sup>38</sup> in the Histoire, making him attractive as a person to the reader. This admiration is evident in the passage near the end of the last chapter, in what Brumfitt calls the "funeral oration",<sup>39</sup> delivered just after the story of Charles' death. Charles died, says Voltaire:

...après avoir éprouvé ce que la prospérité a de plus grand, et ce que l'adversité a de plus cruel, sans avoir été amolli par l'une ni ébranlé un moment par l'autre.<sup>40</sup>

His misfortunes stem not from his bad qualities so much as from an excess of good qualities:

C'est peut-être le seul de tous les hommes, et jusqu'ici le seul de tous les rois, qui ait vécu sans faiblesse; il a porté toutes les vertus des héros à un excès où elles sont aussi dangereuses que les vices opposés. Sa fermeté, devenue opiniâtreté, fit ses malheurs dans l'Ukraine, et le retint cinq ans en Turquie; son courage, poussé jusqu'à la témérité, a causé sa mort; sa justice a été quelquefois jusqu'à la cruauté, et, dans les dernières années, le maintien de son autorité approchait de la tyrannie. Ses grandes qualités, dont une seule eût pu immortaliser un autre prince, ont fait le malheur de son pays.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, by using paradoxical expressions, Voltaire attempts to praise Charles XII for the very qualities which he seemed to want the Histoire to criticise in a monarch.

The moral teaching is still there, of course. Closer

<sup>38</sup> Rowe, Voltaire and the State, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Brumfitt, Voltaire, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> M. XVI, 350-51.

<sup>41</sup> M. XVI, 351.

analysis cannot serve to deny the condemnation of aggression implicit in the story, and explicitly stated in the Discours. What it shows is that the effect of the moral intention is made weaker because in writing the Histoire Voltaire was concerned not only with its philosophic content, but also with its artistic potential. Furthermore, Voltaire was attracted to the person of Charles XII in a way which made it impossible for him to condemn wholeheartedly the military policies of this king, even though as a disinterested philosophe he might normally have preached unreservedly against military aggression.

Similar preoccupations colour his opinions of another conqueror, this time one of his contemporaries - Frederick the Great of Prussia. Their relationship is recorded in their correspondence, which amounts to over six hundred letters, covering the period from 1736 until Voltaire's death in 1778, although with some periods of silence.

The exchange of letters was opened in 1736 by Frederick, who was at that time still the crown prince of Prussia, a sensitive and somewhat delicate young man of twenty-four years of age, much persecuted by his father, the Soldier-King Frederick William I.

Frederick praises highly Voltaire's poetic abilities in this opening letter, and solicits the privilege of corresponding with him, a privilege which he says "ne peut être que profitable à tout être pensant".<sup>42</sup> He asks Voltaire to send him all his works, even those which

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<sup>42</sup>Best. 1081.

Voltaire does not wish to have revealed to the public, pledging to keep them secret. The letter closes with the hope expressed by Frederick that he may one day see Voltaire; he praises Voltaire as one of those "qui, suivant pour guide le flambeau de la vérité, consacrent leurs travaux au bien public".<sup>43</sup>

Upon receiving such a letter Voltaire was overjoyed, as might be expected. Besides flattering his vanity, the friendship of a prince who would one day be king of Prussia gave him an opportunity to introduce his 'philosophic' propaganda at the highest level of government, where it could be the most effective; furthermore, Frederick appeared to be an eager and receptive pupil. The first paragraph of Voltaire's answer to Frederick's opening letter shows Voltaire's interest:

Monseigneur, il faudrait être insensible pour n'être pas infiniment touché de la lettre dont v.a.r. m'a daigné m'honorer. Mon amour propre en a été trop flatté; mais l'amour du genre humain, que j'ai eu toujours dans le coeur et qui, j'ose dire, fait mon caractère, m'a donné un plaisir mille fois plus pur, quand j'ai vu qu'il y a dans le monde un prince qui pense en homme, un prince philosophe qui rendra les hommes heureux.<sup>44</sup>

The ensuing correspondence deals at times with questions of kingship, but the main topics of discussion in these letters are, as Gay puts it, "persons, poetry, and philosophy".<sup>45</sup> Gay remarks on the "mild tone" of political discussions, and on the "rarity of Voltaire's

<sup>43</sup>Best. 1081.

<sup>44</sup>Best. 1094.

<sup>45</sup>Gay, Voltaire's Politics, p. 158.

allusions to political questions".<sup>46</sup> The question of aggression is never raised specifically in the early correspondence, as Frederick is not yet the aggressor he was to be after mounting the throne; outwardly, he espouses Voltaire's idea that a king should work for the social advancement of his people.

Proof of this concern on the part of Frederick is provided by the Anti-Machiavel, a work which Frederick undertook to write under Voltaire's guidance. Voltaire welcomed with enthusiasm Frederick's idea of a refutation of Machiavelli's The Prince, as he shows in this letter, written in April 1738:

...c'est à un prince comme vous à instruire les princes. J'oserais supplier, avec la dernière instance, votre altesse royale de s'attacher à ce beau dessein et de l'exécuter.<sup>47</sup>

Frederick does not exactly condemn aggressive war in the Anti-Machiavel. He does say, however, that kings should work for the economic and cultural advancement of their countries, in preference to undertaking conquests.

Il y a deux manières par lesquelles un souverain peut s'agrandir: l'une est celle de la conquête, lorsqu'un prince guerrier recule par la force des armes les limites de sa domination; l'autre est celle de l'activité, lorsqu'un prince laborieux fait fleurir dans ses États tous les arts et toutes les sciences, qui les rendent plus puissants et plus policés.<sup>48</sup>

The second of these roads to royal greatness is preferable to the first,

<sup>46</sup>Gay, Voltaire's Politics, p. 158.

<sup>47</sup>Best. 1886.

<sup>48</sup>Charles Fleischauer, ed., "L'Anti-Machiavel, par Frédéric, Roi de Prusse, édition critique par Charles Fleischauer", Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century, V (1958), 305.

says Frederick: it is "plus innocente, plus juste et tout aussi utile que la première".<sup>49</sup>

Frederick thus appears to espouse Voltaire's ideas about social utility and the duties of kings towards their country, in his writings before 1740. In 1740, however, Frederick became king of Prussia. He at once renewed his request for Voltaire's friendship, saying of himself:

Ne voyez en moi, je vous prie, qu'un citoyen zélé, un philosophe un peu sceptique, mais un ami véritablement fidèle. Pour dieu, ne m'écrivez qu'en homme, et méprisez avec moi les titres, les noms et l'éclat extérieur.<sup>50</sup>

Frederick was still interested in Voltaire's friendship, but it was only a few months later, in December 1740, that he renounced Voltaire's ideas publicly, with his undeclared attack on Silesia. Frederick invaded Silesia to advance his claims on several duchies in this area, to which he thought he had a right, after the death of the Austrian Emperor Charles VI. Whether or not his claim to these territories was legitimate, Frederick certainly committed an act of aggression in starting this war. The summary of events given by Besterman makes this clear:

Frederick came to the throne on 31 May, Charles VI died on 20 October, Frederick welcomed Maria Theresa to her throne, but immediately advanced Prussia's claims to various Silesian

<sup>49</sup> Fleischauer, "L'Anti-Machiavel", p. 305.

<sup>50</sup> Best. 2097.

duchies; these had scarcely been received in Vienna before Frederick simultaneously offered the queen an alliance, and invaded her territories.<sup>51</sup>

It might be expected that Voltaire would react violently to this sudden and most un-philosophical change in Frederick, but he was surprisingly slow to react at all. Although after 1752 he would be more open in his criticisms, the allusions to this attack in Voltaire's letters of this period are few, and he seldom criticizes Frederick directly. To Cideville he writes, in March of 1741, or four months after the invasion:

Il est vray que l'invasion de la Silésie est un héroïsme d'une autre espèce que celui de la modération tant prêchée dans l'Antimachiavel. La souris\* métamorphosée en femme court aux souris dès qu'elle en voit, et le prince jette son manteau de philosophe et prend l'épée dès qu'il voit une province à sa bienséance.<sup>52</sup>

(\*souris changed later to chatte)

Besterman comments on the slowness of Voltaire's reaction, in the notes to this letter in his edition of the Correspondence: "It is with some relief that we at last find Voltaire explicitly condemning Frederick's aggression".<sup>53</sup>

Other instances are known of Voltaire's having objected to this invasion. Besterman records the sending of a letter, now lost, by Voltaire to the Margravine of Bayreuth, Frederick's sister, "in which

<sup>51</sup>Best. X, 359.

<sup>52</sup>Best. 2290.

<sup>53</sup>Best. XI, 59.

Voltaire shows much distress at the transformation of Frederick".<sup>54</sup>

Baldensperger reports that Voltaire is said to have remonstrated directly with the king during the journey to Aix in September of 1742.<sup>55</sup> (This report is third-hand, but both Baldensperger and Gay accept it as authentic.) Voltaire is said to have taken great care not to offend the king, however, and it is doubtful whether the protest would have any effect.

It would thus be incorrect to say that Voltaire completely avoided criticizing Frederick for his aggression. Gay says that Voltaire "tried to make him feel guilty about waging war".<sup>56</sup> But this was not the criticism of a teacher of philosophy to a pupil, it was the writing of a poet to a king, and the middness of tone of Voltaire's criticisms of Frederick indicates that Voltaire was conscious of the difference of rank between them, despite the protestations of friendship and the avowed disdain of titles on the part of Frederick. During Voltaire's visit to Frederick at The Hague in November of 1740, Voltaire had attempted to treat the king as an equal. In response, "Frederick showed royal irritation", as P. M. Conlon describes it.<sup>57</sup> This incident provided Voltaire with ample proof that Frederick's modesty was not to be taken at face value. Consequently, as Gay says, "Voltaire was not likely to tell Frederick much that Frederick would not like to hear".<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Best. 2293.

<sup>55</sup>Fernand Baldensperger, "Les prémices d'une douteuse amitié: Voltaire et Frédéric II de 1740 à 1742", Revue de littérature comparée, X (1930), 230-261.

<sup>56</sup>Gay, Voltaire's Politics, p. 159.

<sup>57</sup>P. M. Conlon, "Voltaire's literary career from 1728 to 1750", Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century, XIV (1960), 272.

<sup>58</sup>Gay, Voltaire's Politics, p. 157.

The letters Voltaire wrote to Frederick after the invasion of Silesia therefore contain outright praise of the glories of the conquering hero of Prussia. Here is an example, taken from a letter written in 1741:

Grands critiques des rois, allez en Silésie;  
 Voyez cent bataillons près de Neiff écrasés;  
 C'est là qu'est mon héros, venez si vous l'osez.  
 Le voilà ce savant que la gloire environne,  
 Qui préside au combat, qui commande à Bellone,  
 Qui du fier Charles douze égalant le grand coeur,  
 Le surpasse en prudence, en esprit, en douceur.<sup>59</sup>

Voltaire even went as far as to defend Frederick's aggression, saying that his claims on Silesia were just. In a letter sent to Frederick in 1743, Voltaire said to him: "N'aviez vous pas des droits réels sur la Silésie, du moins sur la plus grande partie; et le déni de justice ne vous autorisait-il pas assez?"<sup>60</sup> Voltaire himself published later a defence of Frederick's claims.<sup>61</sup>

In 1742 Frederick, by the Treaty of Breslau, withdrew from the war of the Austrian Succession after having started it himself, and declared his neutrality in the quarrel. Voltaire praised him for this move, again apparently ignoring the fact that Frederick was to blame for the war in the first place:

...je crois que vous forcerez toutes les puissances à faire la paix, et que le héros du siècle sera le pacificateur de l'Allemagne et de l'Europe.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Best. 2313.

<sup>60</sup> Best. 2590.

<sup>61</sup> M. XXIII, 153-58.

<sup>62</sup> Best. 2452.

Henriot criticizes Voltaire for adopting this attitude:

Voltaire, certes, avait bien raison d'aimer la  
paix. Mais il eut tort de mettre tant de chaleur  
à célébrer celle que son ami venait de signer  
perfidement dans le dos de ses alliés.<sup>63</sup>

According to P. M. Conlon,<sup>64</sup> however, there was a philosophical motive behind Voltaire's praise, in this case. Voltaire saw that Frederick's withdrawal from the war would, as he said, force the other powers to conclude a general peace. He was prepared to forgive Frederick for abandoning the French forces in the field, because by so doing Frederick was contributing to the good of the whole of Europe, and Voltaire considered the good of Europe more important than that of France alone. He saw Frederick's act as the lesser of two evils.

It is possible that Voltaire's actions are the result of more personal considerations as well, however. There is no doubt that he enjoyed the friendship of the Prussian sovereign, and the chance it gave him to discuss poetry and philosophy with royalty. "Again and again", says Gay, "Voltaire confessed to an overwhelming attraction" for Frederick.<sup>65</sup> Even when the part of exaggeration inherent in these effusions, as in all eighteenth century social relations, is discounted, there remains the fact that Voltaire counted this friendship as a valuable one, and it is quite possible that he was prepared to forgive some of Frederick's aggression for the sake of maintaining it.

<sup>63</sup> Emile Henriot, Voltaire et Frédéric II (Paris: Hachette, 1927), p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> Conlon, "Voltaire's literary career", p. 275.

<sup>65</sup> Gay, Voltaire's Politics, p. 147.

In any case, what emerges from this analysis is that Voltaire did not express himself in his correspondence with Frederick as he would have, had he been writing a philosophical treatise about war. Furthermore, what was true of Voltaire's statements about Charles XII is also true of his attitude toward Frederick: Voltaire's admiration of these conquerors and of their heroic actions prevents him from judging these actions 'philosophically', otherwise his condemnations of them would probably be stronger.

In 1750 Voltaire began his stay at the court of Frederick in Berlin, and it was there that in 1751 he finished and published his Siècle de Louis XIV. Here again he was writing about a conqueror, and as before his philosophical opinions about aggression are softened by other considerations, particularly his personal admiration of Louis XIV and of the century he dominated.

Voltaire admired not only Louis XIV himself, but also the entire seventeenth century; he therefore set out in the Siècle to write a history of the entire age, as the title suggests, and not of the king alone. This aim is stated in a letter written to the Abbé Dubos in 1738:

Ce n'est point simplement la vie de ce prince que j'écris, ce ne sont point les annales de son règne; c'est plutôt l'histoire de l'esprit humain, puisée dans le siècle le plus glorieux à l'esprit humain.<sup>66</sup>

This purpose was not carried out in practice as faithfully as Voltaire intended. The published Siècle does in fact contain the annals of the reign of Louis XIV, and particularly of his wars. Twenty-four

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<sup>66</sup>Best. 1569.

chapters out of the thirty-nine are devoted to the story of these wars, almost two-thirds of the work.

Voltaire seems to enjoy the story of these wars; he recounts them with obvious relish. Pomeau notes this tendency in several of Voltaire's works, including the Siècle: "Il est évident que Voltaire, qui mit au point un projet de chars blindés, se laisse séduire par les récits de guerre".<sup>67</sup> Voltaire talks with evident pleasure in the Siècle of the "grandes batailles qui ébranlent les États, et qui restent à jamais dans la mémoire des hommes".<sup>68</sup>

Voltaire's admiration of these wars makes him fairly indulgent about condemning Louis XIV's aggression. The Siècle thus appears to Lanson as a glorification of both the military and the cultural grandeur of this monarch:

Très librement pensé, tout son livre n'est qu'une glorification de l'esprit français du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, et du roi qui en a été la splendide expression: le philosophe qui hait la guerre a bien de la peine à ne pas se laisser parfois éblouir par la grandeur militaire et les conquêtes de la France polie.<sup>69</sup>

Successful warriors are praised in the Siècle. In chapter XII, Voltaire praises Turenne for his successful conquests in the north of France in 1674, saying that he showed "ce que l'art de la guerre peut avoir de plus grand et de plus habile". Turenne gained a great reputation as a result of these victories, says Voltaire, commenting

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<sup>67</sup> François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Oeuvres historiques, texte établi, annoté et présenté par René Pomeau (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 20. (Note: the "projet de chars blindés" refers to Voltaire's idea of an armoured horse-drawn carriage, which in 1757 he tried to persuade the French army to try out as a special weapon.)

<sup>68</sup> M. XIV, 178.

<sup>69</sup> Lanson, Voltaire, p. 114.

with regard to him that "l'estime des hommes se mesure par les difficultés surmontées".<sup>70</sup>

The text contains many obviously laudatory references to the grandeur and the military glory of Louis XIV himself; Voltaire even criticizes those who fought against him, accusing them of jealousy. Speaking of the war of the League of Augsburg, he comments on the causes of this war: "Cette guerre avait été presque sans objet; du moins elle n'avait été, du côté des alliés, que le dessein vague d'abaisser la grandeur de Louis XIV". The motives of Louis himself are more worthy, however: they are "la suite de cette même grandeur qui n'avait pas voulu plier".<sup>71</sup>

The attitude of Voltaire towards the aggressive policies of Louis XIV is therefore a double one. As in the case of the two conquerors studied previously in this chapter, Voltaire's writings about the wars of Louis XIV do not always appear to be consistent with his habitual opposition to military aggression. His admiration of the Sun-King makes it impossible for him to react 'philosophically' to the King's wars, so that while he sometimes condemns them, at other times he celebrates their glory.

The explanation of these inconsistencies may be found in the character of Voltaire. His nature is double; while he was capable of thinking profoundly in a philosophical way, he possessed at the same time

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<sup>70</sup>M. XIV, 267.

<sup>71</sup>M. XIV, 323.

the capacity to feel deeply. He therefore reacted to aggression in different ways, depending on the circumstances surrounding it. In the abstract, he would condemn war; if, however, the abstract concept took on a human form, and was embodied in a real or a historical figure, Voltaire reacted to the figure as a person; the more emotional side of his character was attracted by the heroism of the conqueror, and, his imagination fired, Voltaire would celebrate the glories of war.

### CHAPTER III

#### WAR IN DRAMATIC LITERATURE

The problem of interpreting philosophical ideas in works of dramatic literature is an extremely difficult one. Since a play depicts a situation which, however it may resemble real life, is still manifestly artificial, the student of the play must separate the statements in it which have philosophical significance from those which are merely a part of the mechanics of the action in the drama, and are not intended to apply outside the play itself. R. S. Ridgway discusses this problem in his recently published thesis entitled La propagande philosophique dans les tragédies de Voltaire; in it he says:

Essayer d'extraire d'une pièce de théâtre une 'leçon', une philosophie, est toujours une entreprise délicate. Un ouvrage dramatique présente un conflit, ou plusieurs conflits, en forme de dialogue. Comment séparer avec certitude les opinions de l'auteur des sentiments exprimés par ses personnages dans les situations particulières où ils se trouvent?<sup>1</sup>

It is because of this problem that the philosophical interpretation of Voltaire's theatrical works has been a subject of controversy among literary critics ever since his plays first appeared. Ridgway gives a survey of critical reaction to these plays from the eighteenth century to the present, showing how scholars have interpreted them in widely varying ways. He quotes a statement by Mornet in his Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française, published in 1947; Mornet

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<sup>1</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 22.

says that Voltaire's plays contain neither political nor social tendencies, although he does find some religious criticism in them. T. W. Russell, in a book published in 1946, is of an entirely different opinion: no matter what the theme of the play, he says, "The didactic purpose of his plays is always evident."<sup>2</sup>

The issue is further confused by the fact that Voltaire's writings about his plays do not clarify his intentions. "Les déclarations officielles de Voltaire lui-même sur la fonction didactique de l'art théâtral sont contradictoires", says Ridgway.<sup>3</sup> Voltaire praised the theatre as a school of morality when he was trying to defend it against those who wanted to have it suppressed; on the other hand, he knew also that the secret of success for a playwright is to please his audience, and he sometimes sacrificed didactic intentions to the wish to succeed. This is the case of Zaïre, which Voltaire called a "tragédie tendre",<sup>4</sup> and in which, according to Ridgway, "Son premier souci est de captiver les spectateurs et de s'assurer une réussite éclatante en suivant la direction de ses propres talents et des tendances de l'époque".<sup>5</sup> Philosophical considerations in this play are therefore of secondary importance.

The conclusion to be drawn from these comments is that extreme caution must be exercised in the interpretation of Voltaire's philosophical

<sup>2</sup> Trusten Wheeler Russell, Voltaire, Dryden, and Heroic Tragedy (New York: Columbia, 1946), pp. 19-21.

<sup>3</sup> Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Best. 533.

<sup>5</sup> Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 96.

intentions in his plays, and especially in the earlier ones, because in his pre-Geneva period Voltaire was primarily a poet, rather than a philosopher. Statements about war in the plays must be carefully examined in their context in order to determine whether they are of philosophical or merely of episodic importance.

If Voltaire's plays are studied in the light of the above considerations, relatively few philosophical statements about war will be found in them. Besides the ideas expressed in Alzire and Mahomet, in which the condemnation of war has been seen as a corollary to the criticism of religious fanaticism, most of the statements about war in the plays can be considered to arise out of the internal necessities of the plays themselves, and not out of any didactic intention on the part of Voltaire.

One non-philosophical aspect of Voltaire's treatment of war in his plays has an important influence on the expression of his philosophical ideas, however. This is his use of what can be called the 'heroic' convention, a literary tradition which he inherited from Corneille and the seventeenth-century theatre, and which he employs extensively in his tragedies. Because this convention exalts the glories of military achievement, it necessarily contradicts any criticisms of war which a play may contain.

Voltaire makes use of the heroic convention in his non-dramatic works as well. References to heroism, to military glory and to the nobility of war occur in his writings about Charles XII, Frederick the Great, and Louis XIV, the conquerors discussed in the previous chapter. Here again, Voltaire sees them as heroes in the literary tradition, and thus his philosophical intentions are clouded or contradicted.

### 1. The Condemnation of War in the Tragedies

A survey of the tragedies Voltaire wrote during the period 1713-1755 indicated that, with the exceptions noted in the two plays Alzire and Mahomet, Voltaire rarely puts condemnation of war into the speeches of his characters; nor does he portray on the stage any situations that could be considered to have as their main purpose the condemnation of war.

There are, it is true, plays in which descriptions of the horrible effects of battles occur. These are usually caused by personal motives of the speaker, and as they are occasioned by the internal necessity of the play, they cannot be credited with having any didactic import. In the editions of Brutus (1730) published between 1731 and 1736, for example, there is a scene in which Tullie, the young heroine, exclaims: "Rome! séjour sanglant de carnage et d'horreur!"<sup>6</sup> Purely personal considerations on the part of Tullie motivate this criticism of the destructiveness of war, since she is the daughter of the deposed king of Rome, Tarquin, while her lover Titus is the son of the consul Brutus, who aided in the overthrow of Tarquin. As the parents of the young lovers are enemies, Tullie and Titus are frustrated in their love; this is the reason for Tullie's horror of war.

An analogous case occurs in Ériphyle (1732), in which Zélonide, the heroine's confidant, bewails the desolation of Argos by the army of Hermogide, the pretender to the throne and to Ériphyle's hand:

Le désordre est partout; la discorde, la rage,  
D'une vaste cité font un champ de carnage;  
Les feux sont allumés, le sang coule en tous lieux,  
Sous les murs du palais, dans les temples des dieux.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>M. II, 382.

<sup>7</sup>M. II, 497.

This description of the horrors of war is not used for any philosophical purpose, however. Far from accusing the soldiers of Hermogide of the atrocities, Ériphyle blames herself, saying that the gods are punishing Argos because she murdered her former husband Amphiaraus:

J'ai fait tous vos malheurs; oui, c'est moi qui sur vous  
Des dieux que j'offensais fais tomber le courroux.<sup>8</sup>

By making the gods responsible for the carnage, Ériphyle thus absolves the human beings from guilt, and any moral possibilities are lost.

Ridgway sees in this play very little didactic intention of any kind on the part of Voltaire. Ériphyle is not a "pièce à thèse", he says, but only "un composé purement voltairien de romanesque, de pathétique, de nouveautés techniques et de quelques vers frondeurs".<sup>9</sup>

Only one other play written by Voltaire in this period contains any possible moralizing about war, and that is the last one, the Orphelin de la Chine, composed in 1754, but not acted until 1755, when Voltaire was settled at Les Délices in Geneva.

The plot of this play, like that of Zaïre, offers some possibility for criticism of war. The Orphelin de la Chine is set in Peking, just after its capture by the Tartar lieutenants of Gengis-Kan. The conquerors kills the Emperor and all his family, with the exception of a son who has been entrusted to the care of a Chinese mandarin Zamti and his wife Idamé. Summoned to deliver up the young prince for execution, Zamti resolves to substitute his own son for that of the

<sup>8</sup>M. II, 497.

<sup>9</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 148.

Emperor, and thus to preserve the royal line.

At this point in the plot, Gengis-Kan himself appears. Contrary to all expectation, he turns out to be tired of war; he wants to exterminate the Chinese Emperor's line before ending the killings, however, and insists that the boy be released to him. Upon discovering the substitution plot, Gengis becomes angry and has Zamti and Idamé put into custody, but he hesitates to harm them, because he had formerly loved Idamé, and now the old love revives. The couple impress him by their devotion to duty, Zamti refusing, even in the face of torture, to give up the emperor's son, and Idamé refusing to be turned from her duty to her husband, even though their marriage had been arranged without her consent, and though she admittedly loved Gengis. Zamti and Idamé fail in their attempt to deliver the boy to friendly Koreans who are outside the city; in desperation the couple resolve to commit suicide together, and thereby to cheat Gengis of any chance to punish them. Gengis is so struck by this example of courage and conjugal devotion that he pardons them, in a typically Voltairean coup de théâtre, in the last scene, and decides to allow the Chinese to govern themselves under Zamti.

The play contains many descriptions of the horrors of war. In the opening lines of the first scene, Idamé bemoans the fact that the author of this wanton destruction of Peking is a man whom she once loved:

Se peut-il qu'en ce temps de désolation,  
 En ce jour de carnage et de destruction,  
 Quand ce palais sanglant, ouvert à des Tartares,  
 Tombe avec l'univers sous ces peuples barbares,  
 Dans cet amas affreux de publiques horreurs,  
 Il soit encore pour moi de nouvelles douleurs?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> M. V, 301.

Idamé criticizes Gengis for having become a barbarous conqueror, calling him:

...ce tyran de la terre interdite,  
 Sous qui de cet État la fin se précipite,  
 Ce destructeur des rois, de leur sang abreuvé,<sup>11</sup>

Zamti voices the same horror of war in describing the massacre he witnessed in the emperor's palace; he compares the peaceful ways of the Chinese to the atrocious barbarity of the Tartar hordes:

Nous étions vainement, dans une paix profonde,  
 Et les législateurs et l'exemple du monde;  
 Vainement par nos lois l'univers fut instruit:  
 La sagesse n'est rien; la force a tout détruit.  
 J'ai vu de ces brigands la horde hyperborée,  
 Par des fleuves de sang se frayer une entrée  
 Sur les corps entassés de nos frères mourants,  
 Portant partout le glaive et les feux dévorants.<sup>12</sup>

Gengis-Kan, who ordered this slaughter, is thus made to appear as a bloodthirsty and heartless conqueror whose only thoughts are of war and destruction.

The first words spoken by Gengis when he is introduced near the end of the second act are therefore striking for their contrast with the picture of ruthless ambition which prepared his entrance. He expresses himself in these terms:

On a poussé trop loin le droit de ma conquête.  
 Que le glaive se cache, et que la mort s'arrête:  
 Je veux que les vaincus respirent désormais.  
 J'envoyai la terreur, et j'apporte la paix.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>M. V, 301.

<sup>12</sup>M. V, 305.

<sup>13</sup>M. V, 320.

Gengis has not found peace of mind in his political power. He has overcome his former love of Idamé, he says, and now wants only to make her regret that she refused the love of a man who has become the ruler of the world. Upon meeting Idamé, however, he feels the old love returning; this love prevents him from punishing either Idamé or Zamti for disobeying his orders.

His love for Idamé also makes him realize more fully the brutality of his wars, which have only led to the spread of unhappiness:

Qu'ai-je fait, après tout, dans ma grandeur suprême?  
J'ai fait des malheureux, et je le suis moi-même.<sup>14</sup>

Now his soldiers appear to him as a pack of savage murderers:

Je ne vois près de moi qu'un tas ensanglanté  
De monstres affamés et d'assassins sauvages,  
Disciplinés au meurtre, et formés aux ravages;  
Ils sont nés pour la guerre, et non pas pour ma cour;  
Je les prends en horreur, en connaissant l'amour.<sup>15</sup>

In the end Gengis is converted to a policy of tolerance and peace by the example of courage shown by Zamti and Idamé in the face of torture and death. He makes Zamti the regent and the guardian of the young prince, and expresses his change of attitude in these words:

Que la sagesse règne, et préside au courage;  
Triomphez de la force, elle vous doit hommage:  
J'en donnerai l'exemple, et votre souverain  
Se soumet à vos lois les armes à la main.<sup>16</sup>

The conclusion of the play thus apparently shows the triumph of peace and wisdom over military might.

<sup>14</sup>M. V, 337.

<sup>15</sup>M. V, 338.

<sup>16</sup>M. V, 356.

As in the case of Zaïre, however, the question must be asked: what was Voltaire's purpose in writing this play? According to Ridgway, he was trying above all, as he had done in Zaïre, to succeed by pleasing the Parisian audience. He hoped that his reputation in Paris would be enhanced by a dramatic success, so that his return would then be possible:

Que Voltaire ait d'abord songé à plaire au public parisien en écrivant L'Orphelin de la Chine, qui est marqué d'ailleurs par un retour à l'intrigue amoureuse, nous paraît incontestable. Il avait besoin d'un grand succès au théâtre. Retiré en Alsace à l'époque de sa composition en 1754, il espérait encore pouvoir revenir à Paris, si l'opinion se montrait favorable.<sup>17</sup>

Voltaire was also afraid that the appearance of a pirated edition of his La Pucelle, a very irreverent satire based on the story of Jeanne d'Arc, might hurt his reputation; the success of his new play would serve as 'contrepoison à cette héroïne d'Orléans'.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these considerations, Ridgway is of the opinion that the play has moral intentions. By glorifying a very old civilisation like that of China, Voltaire was necessarily implying a criticism of French society. Furthermore, by showing noble and selfless behaviour on the part of a Confucian mandarin, he was saying that the Christian religion was not the only faith in which virtue was practised. This was a common method of criticism at the time, says Ridgway. "La comparaison de moeurs

<sup>17</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", pp. 179-80.

<sup>18</sup>Best. 5673.

était un procédé reconnu depuis longtemps comme l'un des meilleurs moyens de libérer l'esprit et de critiquer la société actuelle."<sup>19</sup> It had been used in Télémaque and in the Lettres persanes, and also by Voltaire himself in his Lettres philosophiques. It is therefore very likely that Voltaire's secondary purpose in writing L'Orphelin de la Chine was to criticize French society.

The didactic intentions are not well carried out, on the other hand. The play suffers in fact because there are too many moral lessons in it. Voltaire has attempted in one play to show parental, conjugal, and passionate love, patriotism, courage and devotion to duty, as well as to give some details about the Chinese civilisation and about the teachings of Confucius, in an effort to portray a society superior to that of France. The inclusion of all these elements seriously overburdens the plot. Voltaire has further complicated the play by trying to follow in it the classical unity of time; all the action, including two full-scale battles, is compressed into the length of a single day. The resulting confusion makes it impossible to draw from the play any single important moral teaching. Ridgway has this to say, in summing up the play:

La vérité, c'est que Voltaire avait trop à dire. Le sujet déborde le cadre, et le développement des différents thèmes philosophiques se réduit en fin de compte à une série de petits sermons prononcés par les personnages.<sup>20</sup>

Condemnation of war in Voltaire's tragedies seems therefore to be a fairly rare occurrence. Except for a few isolated references to the

<sup>19</sup> Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

horrors of war by characters whose personal motives in each case cast doubt on the philosophical importance of their statements, the criticism of war is found only as a secondary moral lesson, whereas the main intention of the play is either merely to please, or to point a moral of a different nature.

## 2. Heroism in the Tragedies

While the condemnation of war occupies very little place in Voltaire's tragedies, there is still much talk of war in them. Almost all of them involve warriors, or take place on a background of war. Most of the main characters in these plays derive their interest and their glory chiefly from their military abilities.

These plays appear therefore to exalt the glories of war, but it would be incorrect to suggest that Voltaire is expressing in them any personal approval of war. This apparent praise of war does not constitute a philosophical utterance on the part of Voltaire; it is in a sense the result of an external influence on his plays, because it originates in a tradition which was handed down to Voltaire and the eighteenth-century theatre from the classical drama of the preceding century. This tradition is used by Voltaire as the framework on which his tragedies are built, and all his tragedies, regardless of their philosophical content, can be seen to obey this convention.

While the heroic convention, since it is a convention, does not contribute to the ideas expressed in the tragedies, it nevertheless exercises a considerable influence on their philosophical content, since the use in a play of a convention which by definition praises war makes it almost impossible to introduce pacifist ideas at the same time. On

the occasions when Voltaire tried to do this, he produced inconsistencies in his characters which weaken the plays in which they appear.

Voltaire's adherence to the traditions of the heroic convention can be seen at the outset in his choice of subject matter for his tragedies. Almost all of them are based on stories from Greek and Roman history or from classical literature. Having drawn his plots from this 'heroic' source, the same as that which Racine and Corneille had used for most of their tragedies, Voltaire was to some extent obliged to make his characters conform to the heroic tradition which the classicists had used, and which his audiences were therefore accustomed to seeing in plays on classical subjects. Voltaire recognized this necessity fairly early in his dramatic career; in the preface to his Mariamne (1724), he says:

Une des premières règles [de la tragédie] est de peindre les héros connus tels qu'ils ont été, ou plutôt tels que le public les imagine; car il est bien plus aisé de mener les hommes par les idées qu'ils ont qu'en voulant leur en donner de nouvelles.<sup>21</sup>

There are, it is true, a number of Voltaire's tragedies in this period which deal with other than strictly classical themes. Examples are Zaïre, Alzire, Mahomet, and L'Orphelin de la Chine. Even in these plays, however, when Voltaire was perhaps under less obligation to make his heroes conform to the classical type, the male characters resemble closely their heroic counterparts in the plays on Greek and Roman themes. Ridgway has noted this family resemblance among Voltaire's heroes:

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<sup>21</sup>M. II, 162.

Tous les héros idéalisés par Voltaire dans ses tragédies ont un air de famille, qu'ils soient espagnols ou scythes, chinois ou romains.<sup>22</sup>

This makes it possible to consider Voltaire's heroes as a group, and to gather together from various plays the characteristics which combine to make the Voltairean hero.

The essence of the heroic tradition as seen in Voltaire's dramatic heroes is that the practice of war, which is the profession of all men of noble birth (and hence of almost all the male characters in Voltaire's tragedies), is a worthy pursuit. Not only is it a prime source of glory for the hero, but it also confers on him a large measure of moral worth.

Military successes make the hero a fitting candidate for the esteem and the love of the Voltairean heroine. *Zaïre* illustrates this feeling when she is justifying to her confidant the love she feels for the sultan Orosmane:

Mets-toi devant les yeux sa grâce, ses exploits:  
Songe à ce bras puissant, vainqueur de tant de rois,  
A cet aimable front que la gloire environne.<sup>23</sup>

It is here Orosmane's victories over many kings, more than his personal attributes, that give him the victory over the heart of the lady.

A similar attitude is found in Corneille's *Le Cid* (1636), where in the closing lines of the last scene the king of Castille tells

<sup>22</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", p. 182.

<sup>23</sup>M. II, 561.

Rodrigue to merit the love and the hand of Chimène by distinguishing himself in battle:

Reviens-en, s'il se peut, encor plus digne d'elle;  
Et par tes grands exploits fais-toi si bien priser,  
Qu'il lui soit glorieux alors de t'épouser.<sup>24</sup>

This episode shows the classical parentage of this aspect of the heroic convention as it appears in Zaïre.

The hero who is courageous and capable in war is also considered to be morally unimpeachable. This can be seen in the case of Philoctète, in Voltaire's Oedipe: when accused of the murder of Laius, the old king of Thebes, Philoctète haughtily declares himself innocent of the crime, saying that a soldier of his caliber does not need to furnish proof of his innocence, but that he should be believed on his word alone:

C'est aux hommes communs, aux âmes ordinaires  
A se justifier par des moyens vulgaires;  
Mais un prince, un guerrier, tel que vous, tel que moi,  
Quand il a dit un mot, en est cru sur sa foi.<sup>25</sup>

That this is not mere conceit on the part of Philoctète is shown by the fact that the Thebans themselves exhibit the same attitude toward him. Although they suspect him to be guilty of the murder, they hesitate to lay hands on him because of his reputation as a warrior. Araspe, the confidant of Jocaste, explains their reluctance:

Cependant ce grand nom qu'il s'acquit dans la guerre,  
Ce titre si fameux de vengeur de la terre,  
Ce respect qu'au héros nous portons malgré nous,  
Fit taire nos soupçons et suspendit nos coups. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Pierre Corneille, Oeuvres de P. Corneille (12 Vols. Paris: Hachette, 1862-68), III, 198.

<sup>25</sup>M. II, 78.

<sup>26</sup>M. II, 71.

The Thebans do not think that a hero who has distinguished himself many times in battle would stoop to murder an old king. Here again, military prowess is equated with moral worth.

Success in war is also considered to qualify the Voltairean hero for kingship, regardless of his social rank. This idea is brought out in Ériphyle: although he thinks himself only the son of a slave, Alcéméon says that his military record makes up for his lowly birth, and it is on the strength of this record that he pretends to the throne of Argos, saying:

Je n'ai plus rien du sang qui m'a donné la vie;  
Il a dans les combats coulé pour la patrie:  
Je vois ce que je suis et ce que je fus,  
Et crois valoir au moins les rois que j'ai vaincus.<sup>27</sup>

Ériphyle, the queen of Argos, agrees with the sentiments expressed by Alcéméon:

Ah! quels rois dans la Grèce en seraient aussi dignes?  
Ils n'ont que des aïeux, vous avez des vertus.  
Ils sont rois, mais c'est vous qui les avez vaincus.<sup>28</sup>

An almost identical situation occurs in the later play Mérope (1743), into which Voltaire transferred several of the lines from his unsuccessful Ériphyle, and which has a plot similar to that of the earlier play. In justifying his claim to the throne of Messina, Polyphonte uses his military success in defending the country as an argument for saying that he would be successful as a ruler as well, maintaining that:

Un soldat tel que moi peut justement prétendre  
A gouverner l'État quand il l'a su défendre.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> M. II, 471.

<sup>28</sup> M. II, 483.

<sup>29</sup> M. IV, 204.

He repeats the line spoken by Alcmon in the same situation, in the earlier play,<sup>30</sup> saying that: "Qui sert bien son pays n'a pas besoin d'aïeux."<sup>31</sup>

The same idea is again expressed in a later play on a Roman theme, although in a slightly different context. In Rome sauvée (1750), Catilina tries to enlist Caesar's support in a bid to overthrow the Roman senate and to make himself king of Rome. Caesar opposes Catilina's ambition on the grounds that Catilina does not have the military accomplishments necessary for a king, saying to him:

Qu'as-tu fait? quels États, quels fleuves, quelles mers,  
Quels rois par toi vaincus ont adoré nos fers?  
Tu peux, avec le temps, être un jour un grand homme;  
Mais tu n'as pas acquis le droit d'asservir Rome.<sup>32</sup>

Here again the military achievement of the Voltairean hero is one of the main factors which determine his suitability for the position of ruler.

It is natural that the plays on Roman themes should praise the glories of war, since the Roman empire was founded as a result of a program of conquests, and participation in these wars was considered the patriotic duty of a Roman citizen, at least during the earlier, more republican period of Roman history, from which the plots for these plays are taken. When in the second scene of the first act of Brutus (1730), Voltaire has the Roman senate worshipping Mars, the god of war, he is merely referring to the glorification of war which the Romans actually practised. This is not a philosophical commentary on war.

<sup>30</sup>M. II, 471.

<sup>31</sup>M. IV, 204.

<sup>32</sup>M. V, 232.

War for the Voltairean hero is attended with the same politeness and observance of decorum that one might expect at a king's court. Even enemies treat each other with respect: thus in Zaïre, the French warrior Nérestan addresses the sultan Orosmane with the words "Respectable ennemi qu'estiment les chrétiens".<sup>33</sup> Orosmane in his turn responds in like chivalrous manner, saying to Nérestan: "Chrétien, je suis content de ton noble courage".<sup>34</sup> This tone of mutual respect is characteristic of the exchanges of rhetoric between heroes in Voltaire's tragedies, and it helps to lend an air of legitimacy and dignity to the practice of war.]

It can be seen from this survey that, far from condemning the practice of war, the heroes of Voltaire's tragedies praise it as a noble profession, which confers both glory and moral integrity on the warrior. The expression of any pacifist ideas in these plays was therefore necessarily hampered by the use of the heroic convention.

Proof of this difficulty can be found in Alzire, where Voltaire tried to deliver a condemnation of brutal colonialism, while at the same time remaining within the context of the heroic tradition. It has been said earlier that Voltaire wanted in this play to contrast the barbarity of the Spanish conquerors with the peaceable innocence of the American peoples, who were supposed to have known war only with the arrival of the Europeans. Zamore, one of the young American kings, continually rages against the cruelty of the conquerors, who have brought destruction and violent death to his country. At the same time, he is bent on

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<sup>33</sup>M. II, 564.

<sup>34</sup>M. II, 565.

vengeance. One of his statements is particularly revealing. While proclaiming to his band of followers that he intends to repay Gusman for this brutal subjugation of his people, he says:

Après l'honneur de vaincre, il n'est rien sous les cieux  
De plus grand en effet qu'un trépas glorieux.<sup>35</sup>

This concern with grandeur and with military success is typical of the Voltairean hero, but it is in complete contrast with the natural sentiments of the noble savage that Zamore is supposed to represent. Zamore becomes inconsistent, and thus the moral lesson of *Alzire* is undermined. This is an obvious example of the disturbing influence which the use of the heroic convention has on the expression of condemnations of war in Voltaire's theatre.

### 3. The Dramatic Conception of Aggressors

Examples of the use of the heroic convention occur not only in Voltaire's tragedies, but in other works as well. It can be seen that when he is admiring the military achievements of the conquering Kings, Louis XIV, Charles XII and Frederick the Great, Voltaire actually speaks of them as if they were heroes in the traditional, literary sense. The praise is always delivered in terms of grandeur, honour and glory, the main attributes of the hero of Voltairean tragedy; thus by literally 'dramatizing' his portrayal of these conquerors, Voltaire removes from them some of their reality, thereby making their aggressive acts seem less serious. He is able in this way to excuse in some measure the aggressive military policies they practised, or to divert the attention of the reader away from the more philosophical questions which their

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<sup>35</sup> M. II, 397.

aggression raises.

The case of the first of these conquerors, Charles XII, provides an excellent example of this dramatic approach. Voltaire's Histoire de Charles XII has been seen to exhibit a definite artistic aim; he was attracted to this story in the first place because of its dramatic characteristics, and his portrayal of Charles XII makes the Swedish monarch into a tragic hero, whose attractiveness is derived from his military glory. Voltaire appears to have been less interested in the didactic possibilities of this story than in the artistic; he therefore emphasized the dramatic aspect of the adventures of Charles XII rather than their more philosophical implications.

Voltaire also depicts Frederick the Great according to the dramatic convention. In his letters written to Frederick in 1741, just after the Prussian invasion of Silesia, Voltaire praises Frederick's military exploits in terms that make of him a hero in the literary sense. All these letters say the same thing: in them Voltaire repeatedly professes his surprise that a military hero of Frederick's capability should also be able to compose poetry of high quality. Here is a typical example of this kind of flattery; Voltaire is rejoicing about a poem he has received from his hero:

Du bouclier de Mars il s'est fait un pupitre;  
De sa main triomphante il me trace une épître,  
Une épître où son coeur a paru tout entier,  
Je vois le bel esprit, et l'homme, et le guerrier.<sup>36</sup>

The style of the heroic convention can be found in profusion in these

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<sup>36</sup> Best. 2308.

letters. Voltaire often refers to Frederick in terms like "ce héros auguste",<sup>37</sup> praising him for his "grandeur suprême",<sup>38</sup> and saying to him "Je suis sûr de votre gloire, grand roi".<sup>39</sup>

It has been made clear that these effusions of admiration are in part a deliberate attempt on the part of Voltaire to cultivate the friendship of the Prussian monarch. In order to be the friend of this absolute ruler, the poet was necessarily compelled to flatter him. In this case, the heroic convention is used as the vehicle of Voltaire's insincerity. By casting Frederick in the role of a dramatic hero, he is able to concentrate on the stirring, attractive aspect of these wars, and thus to avoid discussing the more serious issues they raise.

A similar admiration of the military grandeur of Louis XIV has been noted. In the Siècle de Louis XIV Voltaire again couches his praise of this conqueror in dramatic terms. Repeated references are made to Louis' military glory and his greatness of soul. Other phrases convey the impression that Voltaire is idealizing Louis in dramatic terms: he says, for example, that Louis XIV conquered the Franche-Comté in 1674 "Avec cette facilité et cet éclat attaché encore à sa destinée".<sup>40</sup> The poetic expression of this phrase, and the use of the word 'destinée', which is part of the vocabulary of classical tragedy, suggests that it was the dramatic, not the philosophical, which appealed to Voltaire in these wars.

<sup>37</sup> Best. 2308.

<sup>38</sup> Best. 2313.

<sup>39</sup> Best. 2324.

<sup>40</sup> M. XIV, 266.

That Louis XIV was preoccupied with the acquisition of military glory is of course true. W. H. Lewis, in his colorful account of life in the time of the Sun-King, comments on this fact: speaking of the French people of the time, he says: "Louis was to give them their bellyful of la gloire before they were done with him".<sup>41</sup> Voltaire is not therefore placing excessive emphasis on the glorious military achievements of this reign, but nevertheless, in stressing the heroic and the dramatic qualities of Louis XIV and of his wars, he lessens the effect of the condemnation of aggression which he also expresses in the Siècle, when he is speaking in a more philosophical context.

This way of looking at Voltaire's attitude to conquerors does not explain or excuse the admiration of aggression he often expresses in writing about them, which sometimes involves a definite refusal to consider rationally the question of wars of conquest. The fact that he does react to real or historical figures in terms of a literary convention, the heroic convention of classical tragedy, demonstrates the importance in the formation of Voltaire's temperament of the classical education he received from the Jesuits at the Collège Louis-le-Grand. Study of the theatre was an important part of the curriculum at that institution, and it was there that Voltaire learned his love of classical drama.

Throughout his life he remained devoted to the theatre. He had a stage set up in every house where he settled, and on it he and his friends would rehearse and perform plays at an alarming rate. A letter written in February of 1739 by Madame de Graffigny illustrates the frenzy

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<sup>41</sup>W. H. Lewis, The Splendid Century. Life in the France of Louis XIV. (Garden City (New York): Doubleday, 1957), p. 26.

of the dramatic activity at Cirey: writing to Devaux during a visit she made to the country estate, Madame de Graffigny says: "Nous avons compté hier au soir que, dans les vingt-quatre heures, nous avons répété et joué trente-trois actes, tant tragédies, opéras, que comédies".<sup>42</sup>

The Jesuits also gave Voltaire a taste for classical tragedy which never left him. The majority of his plays, including his first and his last, are tragedies, and despite the innovations he made in the treatment of the tragedy, he respects for the most part the conventions which governed tragic drama of the seventeenth century.

It is not surprising, then, considering the importance in Voltaire's life of the classical type of tragedy, that he should have respected the heroic convention in his plays. Voltaire's passion for the theatre, and his capacity for becoming deeply involved emotionally in dramatic situations, explains as well how he could have been so impressed with the exploits of military heroes in real life that he covered them in his writings with the aura of glory and of idealism normally reserved for the heroes of classical tragedy, thereby reducing the didactic effect of the condemnations of war that he delivered in moments of more rational thought, sometimes in the same work in which he praised heroic actions.

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<sup>42</sup>Best. 1776.

## CONCLUSION

It can be seen from the analysis of Voltaire's attitude to war in these three areas that the problem is one of some complexity. Faced with a large number of often contradictory statements about war, made by Voltaire in the enormous volume of writings he produced even in the period on which this study is based, the student must attempt to separate the true from the false, the rational from the emotional, the ironical from the serious, and the philosophical from the dramatic, in order to discover what Voltaire's opinions actually were.

In the case of the first question, that of war and religion, there is little doubt of what his true attitude was. From his initiation at a fairly early age into the libertinage of the Société du Temple, Voltaire had learned to be irreverent and disrespectful of the Roman Catholic religion; evidence of this influence can be seen all through the works he wrote during his pre-Geneva period. Lanson considers this disrespect the most salient feature of Voltaire's literary work in this period, saying of this work: "Elle est déjà avant tout, et hors de toute doctrine positive, une terrible école d'irrespect et d'incroyance".<sup>1</sup> Criticisms of religion as a cause of unnecessary war occur in almost every work in which the question of religion is discussed; Voltaire seems to have expressed this criticism whenever the opportunity arose, and he continued to express it later in his writings as well, although many of his later works continue the trend toward a more rational approach to religion which has been noted in the Siècle de

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<sup>1</sup>Lanson, Histoire, p. 698.

Louis XIV.

The other two areas of discussion do not yield as simple a conclusion as does the first. In Voltaire's works examples of both praise and condemnation of aggression have been found. The same is true of his attitude to heroes: both his dramatic and non-dramatic works show Voltaire at times condemning war, and at others glorifying heroes and military exploits.

The reasons for this apparent inconsistency can be found by examining the particular circumstances in which Voltaire was given to praising war. It can be seen from such an examination that Voltaire's praise of war is almost always the result of some immediate personal necessity, or else that it is directly explainable in the light of Voltaire's personality and his character.

Voltaire may praise war, first of all, for reasons of expediency. Besides the fact that the restrictions of the French authorities on the expression of liberal ideas forced him at times to assume a mask of political and religious orthodoxy, he also did not hesitate to contradict himself or to tell outright untruths, if by so doing he could further his personal ends. Instances of this behaviour can be found several times during his life: although a militant anti-Christian, for example, he took communion on several occasions, and called himself a good Roman Catholic, once to secure his election to the French Academy, and once in an effort to obtain for himself a decent burial.

It was in part as a result of his personal attraction to Frederick the Great that Voltaire praised the wars of the Prussian king. Apparently Voltaire did not want to sacrifice his friendship with

Frederick for the sake of philosophical integrity, so he did not voice, at least in the beginning, his objections to these wars. He did, of course, indicate his displeasure to other friends, and later on in his life he condemned more explicitly Frederick's practice of aggression, but at first he was reluctant to offend the Prussian monarch, for fear of losing his friendship.

When Voltaire praised Frederick's withdrawal from the war of the Austrian Succession, however, he was expressing a philosophical reaction. P. M. Conlon has explained Voltaire's reasons:

Frederick's withdrawal from the war meant that the date when hostilities would cease completely had been brought nearer. Voltaire rejoiced. 'En bon cosmopolite', he considered the general good of Europe to be of greater importance than the particular advantage of France; and he believed that Frederick had acted in this spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Some of Voltaire's praise was therefore sincere, but there was certainly a large part of interested flattery in the way he at first celebrated Frederick's exploits on the field of battle.

Voltaire also praised war in a literary context. The theatre played a very important part in his life, and his education was strongly imbued with the precepts of classical tragedy, as embodied in the teachings of his Jesuit instructors. Commenting on the strength of this influence, Lanson says: "Si forte fut la prise, qu'il ne put jamais se libérer".<sup>3</sup> It is therefore understandable that he should obey the classical convention of heroism in his own tragedies, thereby appearing

<sup>2</sup> Conlon, "Voltaire's literary career", p. 275.

<sup>3</sup> Lanson, Voltaire, p. 13.

to praise war.

Voltaire's passion for the theatre, and in particular for classical tragedy, is a result of his emotional temperament; since one of the main purposes of this type of play was to move the spectators, and since Voltaire was naturally endowed with the capacity to feel deeply, it is not surprising that he was attracted to this form of expression.

The fact that Voltaire wanted to preserve this form of tragedy, while at the same time attempting to use it as a medium for the expression of philosophical ideas, explains the eventual failure of this theatre, both to convey effectively the messages he incorporated in it, and to please his audiences. Ridgway makes this clear:

Voltaire n'avait pas tort d'exprimer une philosophie sur la scène. Mais cette philosophie est aussi éloignée que possible de l'univers tragique qu'il voulait évoquer. Il y a là une contradiction fondamentale entre le génie de Voltaire et son moyen d'expression. Sa tentative de prolonger un genre qui ne pouvait survivre dans le climat intellectuel du siècle des lumières était condamnée inéluctablement à l'insuccès.<sup>4</sup>

The inconsistency of Voltaire's attitude to military heroes, both in dramatic and non-dramatic works, can therefore be seen to arise from the fundamental duality of his character. For Voltaire, throughout his life, was both a poet and a philosopher; he was capable of reacting to a given situation in terms either of rationality or of sentiment. The exploits of heroes and the glories of the battlefield appealed to his imagination and stimulated his emotions, so that he would praise the conquests of Charles XII or of Louis XIV, elevating them even to the

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<sup>4</sup>Ridgway, "La propagande philosophique", pp. 239-40.

ideal heights of the classical hero. When guided by more philosophical motives, however, he unquestionably pronounces himself against war.

Confirmation of Voltaire's true philosophical attitude can be found in his writings after 1755. Once established in Switzerland and relatively safe from persecution by the French authorities, Voltaire was more free to speak his mind on philosophical subjects. Writings produced in the security of Les Délices and of Ferney show an unmistakable condemnation of war. For example, in the third chapter of his Candide (1759), Voltaire describes with biting satire the "boucherie héroïque"<sup>5</sup> of a war between the Bulgares and the Abares, stressing the atrocities and the suffering which occurred on both sides of the battle. According to Henri Bénac, the editor of the Garnier edition of Voltaire's Romans et Contes, this is a criticism of the Seven Years' War, with the Bulgares representing the Prussians and the Abares standing for the French.<sup>6</sup>

Further evidence that Voltaire opposed war in his later period can be found in the Dictionnaire philosophique, which appeared in 1764, and which is a compendium of many of his favourite ideas. The article "Guerre" contains another sarcastic description of the horrors of war, which Voltaire calls "un très bel art...qui désole les campagnes, détruit les habitations et fait périr, année commune, quarante mille hommes sur cent mille".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Voltaire, Romans et Contes, p. 142.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 633 note 215.

<sup>7</sup>Voltaire, Dictionnaire, p. 229.

These statements are in accordance with the philosophical utterances about war made by Voltaire in the earlier period of his writing career. The evidence presented in this study thus demonstrates the fundamental continuity in Voltaire's attitude to war. Once the inconsistencies which appear in his writings about war are explained, it becomes clear that, both before and after his settlement in Geneva, Voltaire was in agreement with the general current of liberal thought of his time, in voicing his opposition to war.

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