

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN *CONTES* OF VOLTAIRE

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SELECTED *CONTES* OF VOLTAIRE

By

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Abstract

Women in the eighteenth-century were faced with a systematic denial of their most basic human rights. This was accomplished through the institutions of the time. These same institutions were the objects of the criticism of the *philosophes*. Voltaire is commonly recognized as the father of the Enlightenment and it is, therefore, important to determine his attitude towards women as reflected in the genre for which he is best known, the *conte*.

This thesis deals with Voltaire's depiction of women on three levels. The first chapter situates women in their social environment as portrayed by Voltaire and his depiction's philosophical implications. The second chapter deals with the female characters' mental and emotional reactions to their status. The third chapter deals with Voltaire's portrayal of women's bodies and its significance to his philosophy. A complete vision of women as portrayed by Voltaire is provided, along with the implications of his depiction of women.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father,
John Bates.

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Introduction

The status of women in the eighteenth century is a field of study which has not been neglected. There have been numerous publications devoted entirely to this subject. There exist useful general resources¹, although there are also sources dedicated to various authors' treatment of the theme of women,. It can, therefore, be regarded as curious that the subject of women is one which has largely been overlooked by scholars studying the works of Voltaire². The place of women in Voltaire's philosophy is a field of study which has yet to yield a great deal of useful insights into his thoughts. Because women's studies are relatively new, there exists only limited resources for the study of women in the works of Voltaire. The lack of reference material was not,

¹ There is the enduring La Femme au dix-huitième siècle by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, (Paris: Firmin-Didot frères, fils et Cie., 1862; Paris: Flammarion, 1935); French Women and the Age of Enlightenment, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), a diverse collection of essays edited by Samia I. Spencer, ; Candice Proctor's Women, Equality and the French Revolution, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), which establishes women's status before and after the Revolution; but the most useful and thorough study is Léon Abensour's La Femme et le féminisme avant la Révolution, (Paris: Éditions E.Leroux, 1923; Geneva: Mégariotis Reprints, 1978), which provides information for women of all classes, in diverse regions of France, drawn primarily from the regional and National Archives.

² Apart from D.J. Adams' La Femme dans les contes et les romans de Voltaire, (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1974), there exists only one journal article which deals directly with the question: Madeleine Rousseau Raaphorst's " Voltaire et féminisme: un examen du théâtre et des contes, " Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, v.89 (1972): 1325-1335.

however, an impediment to this thesis. Indeed, the subject has proven to be interesting, and hopefully, this project will provide some insights into Voltaire's attitude towards women and will help to clarify their place in his philosophy. Given that the works presently available were written some twenty years ago, the necessity of a study concerning Voltaire's portrayal of women is evident. Hopefully, this thesis will add to the existing works on Voltaire and his portrayal of women in his short prose fiction. Firstly, its somewhat larger parameters in relation to the journal article allow for a greater depth and range. Secondly, it is organized by theme, not by *conte* as is Adams' work. This facilitates comparison between the *contes*. Adams tends to be somewhat critical of the female characters and their actions. This is not the case here. I believe my interpretation to be more sympathetic towards the women in the *contes*. Furthermore, Adams does not delineate the historical context in which the *contes* were written. I have included this because I feel it is necessary for a thorough understanding of many aspects of the *contes*.

Naturally, it is impossible to interpret any literature without the aid of theory. Whether it be a singular theory that is employed or an amalgam of various theories, there is always a guiding principle to any interpretation. Throughout this thesis I have utilised various theories. I have, as much as possible, avoided the excessive use of jargon, my reason being that, in general, jargon tends to confuse rather

than to clarify. I have also refrained from creating a closed, complicated system of interpretation. Although such interpretations can shed new light on subjects, they do tend to be less accessible to many readers. I did, however, consult some studies which were the result of the application of highly structured systems to Voltaire's writings, and gained many new insights from them. So, although I have chosen not to create a complex system of interpretation, this type of critique has proven useful. It is, therefore, important to consult as many varied resources as possible.

Evidently, with an author as prolific as Voltaire, it is necessary to limit the field of study. The first consideration is genre. Voltaire wrote, among other things, plays, poems, histories and letters, all of which complete many volumes of his works. Although these all embody his philosophy, they do not represent that for which he is best known. This distinction belongs to his many *contes*. These short stories, some of which border on being novels, are the most widely read portion of his work. They are also the genre which allowed Voltaire the greatest creative freedom. His poems, plays and histories, for example, were subject to many aesthetic dictates. It is reasonable to believe that this creative freedom is what allowed the *contes* to take on the tone that made them uniquely Voltaire's. These are representative of the most unrestricted exposition of Voltaire's thought. They, therefore, furnish a greater amount of material not affected by rules governing the

various genres. There were, for example, many rules governing classical theatre. The *contes* allowed the greatest liberty of expression because there were no rules. Thus, this thesis deals only with women in the *contes*.

It was necessary to place further limits on the proposed subject. Voltaire wrote an extensive number of *contes*. The dimensions of this thesis did not permit an analysis of all the women in all of Voltaire's shorter prose fiction. Therefore, certain criteria were applied to each example to determine if it would yield sufficient information. It was essential to ascertain the significance of the role of women in each *conte*. Thus, it was very easy to eliminate some, such as Micromégas, where women occupy less than a page. It is because of the extreme importance of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves in L'Ingénu, where half the story is truly her story, that it was immediately chosen. La Princesse de Babylone provided a story centred largely on a female protagonist, thus proving its significance. Candide, being Voltaire's masterpiece, was naturally considered. Ultimately Candide was chosen because of the large number of female characters. It is also important because the women in Candide represent several layers of eighteenth-century French society. The same holds true of Zadig. Here Voltaire presents women from many walks of life. The final *conte* considered in this thesis is Cosi-Sancta. Although it is short and centred on the plight of one woman, it demonstrates the plight of many women clearly and concisely. There are

many other women portrayed in Voltaire's short prose fiction, but these represent the richest, most pertinent examples.

In the first chapter, the rights of women in the eighteenth century are discussed in relation to their place in Voltaire's *contes*. It is necessary to recognize the great variation in women's rights across France. Some regions were governed by Roman law, while others were under customary law. This is not the only difference; there were many others. As much as possible, I have tried to limit my observations to instances with relevant examples in the *contes*. Many of the particularities of the status of women which are discussed can be said to be generally true. It is, in fact, somewhat erroneous to refer to women's rights in eighteenth-century France. Women were faced with a systematic denial of their most basic rights. This state of non-entity before the law exposed women to a great deal of exploitation and abuse. This is something of which Voltaire was aware. Many of the women in his short prose fiction are subject to abuses which also plagued the women of his time. This concern with the rights of women provides much evidence which will, hopefully, clarify Voltaire's position.

The subject of the second chapter is the reaction of Voltaire's female characters to the status of victim. There are certain women in his short prose fiction who willingly accept the role of victim and there are others who actively reject this onus. Some women act on the insistence of others, often to their detriment. There is a common

denominator in their actions: their emotions. Other women prove themselves the intellectual equals of the men who oppress them, and in some cases, are able to outwit them. The reaction of Voltaire's female characters is very significant to an understanding of the role of women in his philosophy.

The third chapter deals with women's bodies and their treatment and portrayal in the *contes*. Women's bodies fulfil multifarious functions in Voltaire's narrative. Women's physical depictions are often comic in nature. The descriptions, therefore, conform to the tone of the tales, but the purpose of the caricatural portrayals of women proves to be far more profound. The role women's bodies play within the *contes*, also, divulges a great deal about the place of women in Voltaire's philosophy, and his social criticism. Women's bodies become a metaphor for the female characters' rank in society and of its treatment of women.

Hopefully, this thesis will be useful in ascertaining Voltaire's attitude towards a subject which he rarely appears to address directly in his short prose fiction. There exist, however, many indicators of women's place in his philosophy. Indeed, in some instances the female characters can be said to take precedence over the male characters. Much of L'Ingénu, for example, can be said to be the story of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves, rather than of being that of the Huron. Such cases are very revealing and much remains to be considered. The dimensions of this project do not allow a

more substantial treatment of a subject which should provide abundant information on the thought of Voltaire to those who are willing to pursue it.

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Chapter One
The Rights of Women in the Eighteenth Century and
their
Reflection in Voltaire's Contes

Women of eighteenth-century France were faced with a systematic denial of their most basic human rights. Everywhere they turned institutions wrested from their hands the most precious of all rights : their liberty. Add to this their non-status before the law and an interesting problem develops¹. Given that many of the foremost thinkers of the Enlightenment were preoccupied with the question of equality, it is remarkable that several of these champions of equality did not extend its benefits to both sexes. In Émile, for example, it is evident that Rousseau does not envisage either equitable education, or equal roles in society, for men and women. In Book Five of Émile Rousseau writes:

toute l'éducation des femmes doit être relative aux hommes. Leur plaire, leur être utiles, se faire aimer et honorer d'eux, les élever jeunes, les soigner grands, les conseiller, les consoler, leur rendre la vie agréable et douce, voilà les devoirs des femmes dans tous les tems, et ce qu'on doit leur apprendre dès leur enfance...²

¹ For a fuller treatment see Proctor or Abensour passim.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Émile, Oeuvres complètes, eds. Bernard Gagnebin et Marcel Raymond (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969) 4 vols., v.4, p.703.

Women are assigned traditional, subservient, supportive roles, and their suggested education is appropriately refined and restricted to a basic knowledge of the arts and the necessary domestic instruction.

If Rousseau's vision merely serves to exacerbate the already pitiful plight of women in the eighteenth-century, the same cannot be said of Voltaire's view . Voltaire may, at times, render harsh judgements concerning certain women, but he also admonishes as many men. Voltaire portrays individuals as a mixture of good and evil, and while he may criticize the evil inherent in human beings, the object of his most damning reproach is the evil he saw in the institutions of his day. This is because Voltaire's writings tend to be more sociologically motivated, rather than psychologically motivated. It is, however, important to recognize that these institutions were the products of, and under the sway of a privileged group of individuals. They served to reinforce the authority of those in power, and, naturally, willingly oppressed those who represented a challenge to their control. Voltaire recognized that women, bereft of power, were at the mercy of these institutions, be it the Church, the family, or the law, and this is reflected in his portrayal of women in the *contes*. Many of Voltaire's female characters are faced with the same abuses as the women of his day. In several contes, women must come to terms with institutions which seek to limit their personal liberty. There is often a philosophical objective behind the fictional

abuses Voltaire portrays. It is, therefore, important to determine the implications for the women of Voltaire's time of fictional mistreatment within the *contes*. The examples of exploitation in Voltaire's fiction are readily identifiable with actual abuses of his time. The mistreatment to which women were subjected will be considered along with its philosophical origins.

Women as Property

X Women were, until relatively recently, regarded as chattel. They were not considered individuals in their own right, but as goods belonging to a man. This was the case in the eighteenth-century France that Voltaire knew and which is portrayed in his *contes*. *Cosi-Sancta*, in the *conte* of the same name, realizes that she is her husband's property which he may dispose of as he pleases: "il est le maître...chacun fait de son bien ce qu'il veut..."³. The bluntness of this statement serves to accentuate the unequal status of husband and wife. When a woman married she was no longer considered an individual, much like before her marriage: her person and her property became her husband's and he could do with them as he wished. Legally, a wife could demand her dowry back if she instituted a separation of goods, but if it was not returned and she still wanted it back, she would have to prove that her husband wilfully misused it. Abensour writes:

³ Voltaire, *Cosi-Sancta*, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Moland, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-1885), 52 vols., v.21, p.28.

"pour qu'on fasse droit à sa demande de séparation de biens, la femme doit prouver que le mari dilapide volontairement sa fortune et que « la répétition de sa dot est en danger »..."⁴.

Voltaire not only realizes that this was the actual status of women, but he draws attention to this fact in several manners. He does so not only through the situations he portrays, but also through the use of irony, his choice of language, and comparisons of male and female characters which are favourable to the latter.

Many women in Voltaire's *contes* are literally treated as property by the men who surround them, regardless of their social rank. In *Zadig*, for example, Arbogad is not concerned with the women he sells. They are simply commodities from which he makes a profit. He explains to Zadig that: "j'ai pris plusieurs femmes dans mes courses, je n'en garde aucune; je les vends cher quand elles sont belles, sans m'informer de ce qu'elles sont..."⁵. Argobad is not unique in the *contes*.

Once the Bulgarian captain tires of Cunégonde, he sells her to Don Issacar⁶, and *la vieille* is sold no fewer than seven

⁴ Op.cit., p.20.

⁵ Voltaire, Zadig ou la destinée : Histoire orientale, ed. Georges Ascoli, (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1962), p.68.

⁶ Voltaire, Candide ou l'optimisme, ed. René Pomeau, (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1980), p.144-145.

times before she encounters Candide and Cunégonde⁷. The women in the *contes* are aware of their status as objects passed among men. Astarté states that: "mes liens avec Moabdar étaient rompus, je pouvais être à Zadig, et je tombais dans les chaînes d' un barbare!..."⁸. The language used by Voltaire evokes very clearly the image of a slave.

In more than one case, women are the objects of contracts. In *Candide*, Cunégonde describes the arrangement between Don Issacar and the inquisitor:

on proposa de sa part à don Issacar de me céder à monseigneur. Don Issacar, qui est le banquier de la cour, et homme de crédit, n'en voulut rien faire. L'Inquisiteur le menaça d'un auto-da-fé. Enfin mon Juif intimidé conclut un marché par lequel la maison et moi leur appartiendraient à tous deux en commun, que le Juif aurait pour lui les lundis, mercredis et le jour du sabbat, et que l'inquisiteur aurait les autres jours de la semaine...⁹

Cunégonde is ultimately regarded as a possession, not a person. Her destiny no longer lies in her own hands, but is to be decided by two men who use their influence in order to come to an agreement. Cunégonde is not consulted at all. She is denied control over her physical being. This lack of control over her physical person is the essence of slavery. If the disdain Voltaire felt for the Church is taken into consideration, the fact that the inquisitor is, in part, the perpetrator of this abuse would indicate that it is an act

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.159-160.

⁸ *Op.cit.*, p.80.

⁹ *Op.cit.*, p.145.

which he scorns. This repudiation of her most fundamental human rights is unacceptable to Voltaire, not because he sees her as weak, but because he sees her as a human being who is exploited.

There is a similar situation in La Princesse de Babylone, where, although it is clearly not a question of a formal contract, a woman is given, in exchange for the needs of a man. Bélus explains to Formosante why she needs a husband: "il vous en faut un pourtant: *le salut de mon empire l'exige*¹⁰ . J'ai consulté l'oracle, qui, comme vous savez, ne ment jamais, et qui dirige toute ma conduite; il m'a ordonné de vous faire courir le monde. Il faut que vous voyagiez ..."¹¹. The King, in essence, agrees to send his daughter on a voyage, which he himself believes to be dangerous¹², in order to protect his own interests. The destinies of these women are entirely beyond their control. This lack of power over their own affairs essentially means that women are bereft of all liberty¹³.

At the beginning of La Princesse de Babylone, Voltaire uses language very effectively to underscore the plight of women. When describing the tournament which will determine

¹⁰ My italics.

¹¹ Voltaire, La Princesse de Babylone, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Louis Moland, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-1885) 52 vols., v.21, p.386.

¹² Ibid., p.379.

¹³ This is not the case with all women in the *contes*. There are, indeed, women who do not submit and who triumph. Please see chapter two.

whom Formosante will marry, he uses language which makes it very clear that Formosante is a prize to be won, an object, like a trophy. The king of the Egyptians: "avouait que la possession de Formosante était d'un grand prix..."¹⁴ and his *grand aumônier* assures him that: "la princesse de Babylone doit appartenir¹⁵ au prince qui a le plus d'esprit...elle doit épouser le plus vertueux...le plus généreux doit l'emporter¹⁶ ...personne ne peut vous disputer¹⁷ Formosante..."¹⁸. The three italicized verbs are usually associated with some type of prize or possession. It is also interesting to note the use of the present tense of the verb *devoir*: this would suggest that Formosante has no choice in the matter, that it is a question of necessity. This phenomenon is repeated in this chapter of La Princesse de Babylone on at least three occasions: "Formosante ne pourrait appartenir qu'à celui qui tendrait l'arc de Nembrod..."¹⁹; "il se présenta trois rois qui osèrent disputer Formosante ..." ²⁰ ; "ils tireraient au

¹⁴ Op.cit. , p.375.

¹⁵ My italics.

¹⁶ My italics.

¹⁷ My italics.

¹⁸ Op.cit., p.373.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.370.

²⁰ Ibid., p.370.

sort la belle Formosante ..."²¹ . Voltaire's use of language makes it abundantly clear that the women in the *contes* are, much like the women of Voltaire's day, dominated by the will of men. The fact that these ideas reducing Formosante to an object are espoused by a figure representative of the Church, the *grand aumônier*, and by the two princes who are portrayed as foolish, clearly suggests that Voltaire's position would have been the opposite. The negative reversal is unquestionably a form of criticism. This attitude and the consequential treatment the women experience clearly undermine their individual liberty, because as property they could have no significant rights. The fact that Voltaire portrays women as objects should by no means be taken as a tendency towards misogyny: on the contrary it can be seen as another abuse to which he calls attention because of the underlying criticism. It is generally recognized that the *philosophes* sought the betterment of society as it existed. As, arguably, the greatest of the *philosophes*, it is only natural that Voltaire's *contes* contain a considerable amount of social criticism. This is to be expected because eighteenth-century France was a society founded on values contrary to those of the *philosophes*. It was repressive, authoritarian and unjust. There is, therefore, little content which is lacking in philosophical importance within the *contes*, including the portrayal of women. It is, therefore,

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.375.

important to ascertain the significance of his depiction of women for his philosophical intent.

Women and the Family

In Voltaire's *contes*, even the most elementary of institutions, the family, is despotic in nature with its male members exerting an absolute authority over women. As a married woman was considered the property of her husband, an unwed woman was deemed to be the property of her father. D. J. Adams explains the power a husband or father held:

Léon Abensour cite Le Traité de la Puissance Maritale (1774) d'un certain Pothier qui observe:« La lettre de la loi est celle-ci: 'Le mari a pleine puissance sur sa femme et les biens de sa femme. Il a le droit d'exiger tous les devoirs de soumission qui sont dus à un supérieur»"...²²

If no father was present another male relative would fulfil this function. This is the case for Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves in L'Ingénu, where her brother the Abbé de Saint-Yves is responsible for her. It is also the case for Aldée in La Princesse de Babylone, where her uncle Bélus acts as her father. In both instances the men in question abuse their power over Saint-Yves and Aldée.

In the case of both Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves and Aldée, their liberty in choosing whether or not to marry has been usurped by their male guardian, and in both cases it would seem that the wishes of his charge are not of the

²² Op.cit., p.84.

utmost importance in his decision. Bélus is motivated by purely political factors. Aldée represents what he believes to be the last of a line which could legitimately lay claim to his throne. Aldée explains that, thus: "Bélus...ne craignant rien de moi, voulut bien m'élever auprès de sa fille; mais il a décidé que je ne serais jamais mariée..."²³ . It is never really made clear why the Abbé believes the bailiff's: "grand benêt de fils"²⁴ would make a suitable husband for his sister, but it is presumably because he feels this would enhance their family's wealth or social status. Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves expresses her surprise at being forced to marry: "et on veut me forcer ainsi à épouser le fils ridicule d'un homme ridicule et méchant!..."²⁵ . Voltaire's criticism is evident through the positive portrait of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves, who forms and expresses her own opinion, and its obvious contrast with that of the bailiff's son. Clearly the husband her brother has chosen is not the husband she has envisaged for herself. Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves wants to marry the man she loves, and not for money or social position.

These were, however, the fundamental factors in choosing a husband for a woman. Rarely was any consideration given to the feelings of the two individuals involved. A marriage

²³ Op.cit., p.381-382.

²⁴ Voltaire, L'Ingénu: Histoire véritable, ed.William R. Jones, (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1957), p.143.

²⁵ Ibid., p.151.

based on love and mutual respect as Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves hoped for was not the norm during the epoch. The large majority of marriages were arranged, and often it was against the will of at least one of the parties involved, as is the case with Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves. According to Candice Proctor:

At all levels of French society, marriages were traditionally arranged. In the upper classes, girls were commonly married as soon as they emerged from the convent, somewhere between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The engagement was usually contracted while the girl was still in the cloister, and many a bride who went to the altar met a groom she had barely seen before...²⁶

It is precisely this type of forced marriage which Voltaire opposed. According to D. J. Adams, "s'il critique le mariage secret ou le mariage forcé, c'est moins parce qu'il plaint la faiblesse du sexe féminin auquel les hommes imposent leur volonté que parce qu'il le tient pour un crime contre l'humanité: les femmes ne sont pas des objets, mais des êtres humains..."²⁷. Forced marriage is generally viewed as a significant challenge to basic personal liberty. What is arguably one of the most important decisions an individual makes became another example of unjust and absolute power. It is, indeed, not the fact that Voltaire views women as being essentially weak and in need of protection, but rather the notion that forced marriage seriously undermined their liberty which incited him to criticize the authoritarian

²⁶ Op.cit., p.102.

²⁷ Op.cit., p.85.

nature of this practice. Liberty was, of course, one of the main principles which the *philosophes* sought to defend because they believed it to be a logical consequence of the application of reason to society and its institutions.

Many women were ignored by their husbands because they were neither loved, nor respected by them. This is clearly the case of the wife of milord Qu'importe who Amazan encounters in La Princesse de Babylone. Voltaire portrays her in a very positive light. Voltaire writes:

il [milord Qu'importe] avait une femme jeune et charmante, à qui la nature avait donné une âme aussi vive et aussi sensible que celle de son mari était indifférente...la maîtresse de la maison n'avait rien de cet air emprunté et gauche, de cette roideur, de cette mauvaise honte qu'on reprochait alors aux jeunes femmes d'Albion; elle ne cachait point, par un maintien dédaigneux et par un silence affecté, la stérilité de ses idées et l'embarras humiliant de n'avoir rien à dire : nulle femme n'était plus engageante...²⁸

This very positive depiction contrasts sharply with that of milord Qu'importe. If she is extremely engaging, her husband is at best ridiculous. He shows a complete lack of interest in his surroundings, including his wife, as his name (Lord Whatever) suggests. It would, indeed, seem that he is capable of only the most superficial conversation:

il fut encore un quart d'heure sans parler; après quoi il redemanda à son compagnon *comment il faisait faire*, et si on mangeait du bon roast-beef dans le pays des Gangarides. Le voyageur lui répondit avec sa politesse ordinaire qu'on ne mangeait point ses frères sur les bords du Gange. Il lui expliqua le système qui fut, après tant de siècles, celui de Pythagore, de Porphyre, de Jamblique. Sur quoi milord s'endormit, et ne fit

²⁸ op.cit., p.409.

qu'un somme jusqu'à ce qu'on fût arrivé à sa maison...²⁹

This, again, represents a positive evaluation of a woman, which is further reinforced by its inescapable comparison with the man in question. The function of this comparison is to create a sympathetic portrait of the woman and thereby to implicitly criticize the abuse to which she is subjected by her male counterpart through his negative portrait. It is, therefore, not surprising that his wife is attracted to Amazan and suggests a liaison to him. Amazan rejects her advances, leaving:

la dame du logis désespérée. Dans l'excès de sa douleur, elle laissa traîner la lettre d'Amazan; milord Qu'importe la lut le lendemain matin. «Voilà, dit-il en levant les épaules, de bien plates niaiseries»; et il alla chasser au renard avec quelques ivrognes du voisinage...³⁰

This was the plight of many women in the eighteenth century. Forced into loveless marriages, they were often neglected and abused by their husbands. This result of arranged marriages was recognized by many of the *philosophes*. Candice Proctor quotes from another of the *philosophes*, D'Holbach, in his Système social:

[A girl] is led to the altar like a victim and forced to swear inviolable love to a man for whom she feels nothing, whom she has never seen, or even detests. She is placed in the power of a master who, content to possess her person for an instant and to enjoy her dowry, disappoints her, neglects her, makes himself odious by his bad manners and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p.412-413.

lack of regard, who very often, by his example and harshness, pushes her to wrong, as a means to revenge herself on the despot become the arbiter of her destiny...³¹

Women are, therefore, valued for their bodies and regarded as being on the same level as property, their dowry. This is clearly unacceptable to D'Holbach, as it was to other *philosophes*, including Voltaire. Thus, Voltaire's depiction of arranged marriages not only criticizes their basis in an unjust authority, but also accentuates the abuses to which they led. Since the partners often felt little more than indifference for one another, it is not astonishing to read of neglect and abuse.

Many women were abused by their husbands and there was little they could do to prevent it, precisely because they were their property. *Cosi-Sancta*, for example, is forced to marry a husband for whom she has little feeling: "la jeune créature faisait tout ce qu'elle pouvait pour l'aimer, parce qu'il devait être son mari; elle y allait de la meilleure foi du monde, et cependant n'y réussissait guère..."³² . Although her feelings for her husband are primarily negative ("elle se mit au lit auprès du petit Capito, avec un peu de répugnance..."³³), *Cosi-Sancta* realizes that she is now his property and that there is very little she can do about it. When Ribaldos sends her a letter and Capito becomes

³¹ Op.cit., p.103.

³² Op.cit. , p.25.

³³ Ibid., p.26.

suspicious, her only possible course of action is to break with Ribaldos, unless she wants to risk abuse at the hands of her husband. She writes: "si vous avez de la vertu, cessez de me rendre malheureuse: vous m'aimez et votre amour m'expose aux soupçons et aux violences d'un maître que je me suis donné pour la reste de ma vie..."³⁴ . In the end society approves of Cosi-Sancta because she has sacrificed herself for the good of the family: "on trouva qu'une pareille femme était fort nécessaire dans une famille, on la canonisa après sa mort, pour avoir fait tant de bien à ses parents en se mortifiant..."³⁵ . The irony in the sentence is evident. The fact that society approves of Cosi-Sancta's sacrifice is implicitly criticized by Voltaire because the action is approved of by a body which he held in little esteem, the Church (*on la canonisa après sa mort*). Since it is an unjust institution which sanctions her sacrifice, it would then seem that her sacrifice is not approved of by Voltaire. Thus, the sacrifice of the individual to the common good of the family is approved of and represents yet another example of the woman's liberty being denied.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.30.

Women and Education

Just as Voltaire raises the question of the power of the family, he also raises the question of the education of women. Many families could not afford to educate their daughters, and even those women who were educated received what in the view of Voltaire was a questionable education. D. J. Adams points out the following quotation from L'Ingénu explaining what happens when the Huron bursts into Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves' room: "en effet il [*L'Ingénu*] l'épousait, si elle [*Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves*] ne s'était pas débattue avec toute l'honnêteté d'une personne qui a de l'éducation..."³⁶ , and he states that, "ce qui revient à dire que, si elle donnait dans ses désirs naturels, elle ne se comporterait pas du tout ainsi..."³⁷ . This is not the only instance in L'Ingénu where Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves' education inhibits her natural instincts, "comme elle était bien élevée et fort modeste, elle n'osait convenir tout à fait avec elle-même de ses tendres sentiments..."³⁸ . Therefore, Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves' education has served only to teach her to deny her feelings and to act conversely to how she naturally would. This is a recognizable form of mimesis. Mimesis is generally accepted to be a mode of

³⁶ Op.cit., p.105.

³⁷ Op.cit., p.207.

³⁸ Op.cit., p.101.

imitation. In this case, Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves has been taught to deny who she really is in order to conform to society's dictates of what a woman is and how she should act. She is, therefore, in a sense imitating a manmade ideal of a woman and effectively disavowing who she truly is. Society has, therefore, failed women because it does not allow them to become true individuals but mere imitations of an ideal which is most likely unattainable.

Many women in the *contes*, much like their historical counterparts, received very little education. Formosante has never left her father's palace: "Formosante...n'avait mené qu'une vie très-insipide dans l'étiquette du faste et dans l'apparence des plaisirs..."³⁹. It would seem that Cunégonde received the same faulty education that Candide did from Pangloss. Of the Bulgarian captain she says that he exhibited "peu d'esprit, peu de philosophie; on voyait bien qu'il n'avait pas été élevé par le docteur Pangloss..."⁴⁰. Evidently Cunégonde is able to judge that his philosophy was not that of Pangloss. Her ability to discern Pangloss' philosophical system from others suggests that she was educated by Pangloss. Cossi-Sancta's education is equally limited: "elle avait un père et une mère jansénistes, qui l'avaient élevée dans les principes de la vertu la plus

³⁹ Op.cit., p.387.

⁴⁰ Op.cit., p.144.

rigide..."⁴¹ . She, thus, has been taught primarily her sect's particular principles of virtue. The adjective *jansénistes* does suggest a very sectarian view of virtue, which implies a certain intolerance. Her education would have been typical for the women of Voltaire's day. Léon Abensour describes a typical education for a woman in eighteenth-century France:

il faut préparer la femme à son rôle essentiel, celui d'épouse et de mère. Or, on ne saurait être ni l'une ni l'autre sans une pratique raisonnée de la vertu et sans une connaissance, également raisonnée, des devoirs religieux. Destinée à faire le bonheur de son mari, ce à quoi elle ne pourra parvenir qu'en lui rendant son foyer agréable, elle doit, certes, repousser le pédantisme...⁴²

Thus, Cossi-Sancta's education , like that of many women in the eighteenth century, would have served to prepare her to the roles chosen for her by society. It is, therefore, unlikely that it would have provided her with sufficient opportunity to escape these roles.

Voltaire presents a very negative view of religious education, because it primarily filled women's heads with many irrelevant dogmas, rather than teaching them how to be good citizens, for example, who would contribute to society and be active in its betterment. There were, however, other dangers for women associated with conventual education. There are numerous examples of women who are seduced by their instructors. Cases of seduction represent an extreme of

⁴¹ Op.cit., p.25.

⁴² Op.cit., p.38.

reification. This is the process by which people and ideas are reduced to commodities. Thus, in the case of seduction, women are dehumanized to the point that they are considered primarily as objects to provide pleasure to the men who abuse them. This is an important tool used by Voltaire in his social criticism. In Zadig the rich young woman who receives lessons from two mages finds herself pregnant in a very short time⁴³. This example is not unique. In Candide, Paquette recounts that: "j'étais fort innocente quand vous m'avez vue. Un cordelier qui était mon confesseur me séduisit aisément..."⁴⁴. Thus, a man Paquette should be able to trust abuses his position in order to seduce her, knowing that she is innocent and uneducated. This type of seduction by priests and monks is frequent not only in the *contes*, but in many of the works of the Enlightenment.

Many *philosophes* criticized conventual education and for good reason. Young women were to be taught about the world by women, who by definition, were ignorant to its ways. The convent was, in essence, a closed space which also sought to close the mind of its pupils by severely limiting their experience and by ruthlessly censoring the ideas to which they were exposed. In L'Ingénu, it is, therefore, not surprising that Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves "s'était bien

⁴³ Op.cit., p.29-30.

⁴⁴ Op.cit., p.227.

formée dans son couvent par les romans qu'elle avait lus à la dérobée..."⁴⁵. These novels would, most likely, have taught her more about the world than women who never knew anything but the cloister. In her essay "Women and Education" in French Women and the Age of Enlightenment, Samia Spencer quotes Voltaire on his position: "Voltaire's Sophrone summed up the century's position: ' I owe to the education that my mother gave me the balance and reason I enjoy. She did not raise me in a convent, because it was not in a convent that I was destined to live. '"⁴⁶ . It would, indeed, seem that Voltaire believed experience to be the best teacher of all.

Just as many of the male protagonists acquire their education through experience, so do many of the women in the *contes*. Voltaire, therefore, creates equal opportunities for women in his fiction by opening new spaces to them. They are no longer sequestered behind the walls of the convent and the familial home. This phenomenon is particularly striking in La Princesse de Babylone. Of Formosante's education in D. J. Adams writes: "la princesse...fait un voyage à travers l'expérience, tout comme Candide, Zadig et Scarmentado..."⁴⁷ . This is true: Formosante is educated by her travels across the world, but the same can be said of several female characters. This is particularly important because it

⁴⁵ Op.cit., p.143.

⁴⁶ Op.cit., p.90.

⁴⁷ Op.cit., p.241.

represents a significant change Voltaire has made to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Normally this novel of experience is centred around a naïve male protagonist who is enlightened through his confrontation with the world. This genre was considered to be a male genre for obvious reasons. Women were not generally permitted to leave their family's home until their marriage, thus rendering a *Bildungsroman* with a female protagonist unbelievable and, in society's view, unacceptable. Voltaire's writing proves that it is possible to have a female protagonist. This obviously proves that Voltaire viewed women as men's equals and the example of La Princesse de Babylone is not unique. It is obvious that *la vieille* has learned a great deal about the world through her experiences. For many women in the contes, however, the experiences from which they learn a great deal more are misfortunes. During their voyage to the New World Cunégonde tells Candide: "j'ai encore l'âme tout effarouchée de ce que j'ai vu, de ce que j'ai éprouvé...j'ai été si horriblement malheureuse dans le mien [her universe] que mon coeur est presque fermé à l'espérance..."⁴⁸. A similar effect is brought about in *Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves* by her misfortunes. They have affected her to the point that she is no longer the same person. Voltaire writes: "ce n'était plus cette fille simple dont une éducation provinciale avait rétréci les idées. L'amour et le malheur l'avaient formée...son aventure était plus instructive que quatre ans

⁴⁸ Op.cit., p.151-152.

de couvent..."⁴⁹. Thus women are changed and moulded by the abuses to which society subjects them. It is important to note that a similar effect is present in many of the men, Candide for example, in the contes.

Women and the Law

Ideally, laws are instituted to protect the general good. It is, therefore, to be hoped that women are able to seek refuge from their husbands or families if they are somehow abused. This was not, however, the case in eighteenth-century France, where the legislators constructed a judicial system which protected an elite, and which proved to be detrimental to the general good. If anything, the laws only served to reinforce the social structure which tended to oppress women, rather than free them. Indeed, women suffered from a non-status before the law. According to Candice Proctor:

as a result of this status of civil non-existence, a wife could neither buy nor sell anything of value without the expressed authorization of her husband. Nor could she receive payment due her, or pay any sum of money or goods that she might owe. Likewise, a wife required her husband's authorization to either accept or repudiate an inheritance. All contracts made by a wife without the consent of her husband were considered null and void. Nor could a wife either institute civil proceedings against someone without her husband's authorization, or testify in court (unless she was so ordered). About the only thing she could do without his authorization was to sign a contract freeing her husband from prison, although

⁴⁹ Op.cit., p.158-159.

authorities argued over whether or not she had the right to do the same to get herself out of prison. In some provinces, such as Normandy and Burgundy, a wife even needed her husband's authorization on her last will and testament, although the laws of other areas considered such authorization unnecessary, regarding the will as coming into being only after the wife's death, at which time the power of the husband over her person might be supposed to have ceased...⁵⁰

Thus, there was very little recourse for a woman who believed she was being treated unjustly. The necessary authority from the husband made his power over his wife almost absolute, much like the power of the monarchy. The legal system was constructed to strengthen male dominance in almost every sphere of life. Everywhere a male authority held absolute power over women: God the Father; the king; the priest; their father; their husband. Women were subject to a great deal of abuse, because there were no laws to protect them from violence. Such laws would clearly undermine male authority. Zadig first encounters Missouf as she is being mercilessly beaten by Clétofis:

il vit non loin du grand chemin, une femme éplorée qui appelait le ciel et la terre à son secours, et un homme furieux qui la suivait. Elle était déjà atteinte par lui, elle embrassait ses genoux. Cet homme l'accablait de coups et de reproches. Il jugea à la violence de l'Egyptien et aux pardons réitérés que lui demandait la dame, que l'un était un jaloux et l'autre une infidèle...⁵¹

However excessive Clétofis' behaviour may seem, for women in eighteenth-century France bodily harm was a real possibility. It was not the only course of action that a husband who

⁵⁰ Op.cit., p.91.

⁵¹ Op.cit., p.43.

suspected his wife of infidelity could take. The husband could choose to obtain a *lettre de cachet* against his wife and have her placed in a convent for two years, after which he could take her back if he chose to do so. Léon Abensour describes what could happen if he chose not to take her back: "le mari n'en a pas moins, après réunion du conseil de famille, le droit de faire enfermer pendant deux ans l'épouse infidèle et si, au bout de ce laps de temps, il n'a pas jugé bon de la reprendre, elle doit être rasée, voilée et enfermée dans le monastère, sa vie durant..."⁵². There were no similar courses of action a wife could take if her husband committed adultery. Many husbands vented their frustrations against their wives, either verbally or physically. This is what happens to Cossi-Sancta. She is attracted to Ribaldos, but does not succumb to his advances:

comme elle combattait son goût et qu'elle n'avait rien à se reprocher, elle sauvait tout, hors les apparences; et son mari la croyait très-coupable...le petit bonhomme...l'outragea cruellement, et la punit de ce qu'on la trouvait belle. Elle se trouva dans la plus horrible situation où une femme puisse être: accusée injustement, et maltraitée par un mari à qui elle était fidèle...⁵³

Since her husband believes her to be guilty, he treats Cossi-Sancta as if she were. The verbs *outrager* and *punir* suggest a certain severity in her husband's attitude. This impression is reinforced by the final sentence. Cossi-Sancta is fortunate enough to escape one of the worst punishments a

⁵² *Op.cit.*, p.9.

⁵³ *Op.cit.*, p.27.

woman could suffer, the worst being death. For the mere suspicion of adultery a woman could, without formal trial, have her liberty taken from her and be exposed to physical abuse.

This is not the only case in Voltaire's *contes* where a man seeks to deny a woman her liberty by the use of the convents and the *lettre de cachet*. In the case of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves it is her brother who compromises her liberty. He resorts to having her put in a convent when he wishes to limit her relationship with the Ingénu:

l'abbé, qui non-seulement était le frère très aîné de Mlle de Saint-Yves, mais qui était aussi son tuteur, prit le parti de soustraire sa pupille aux empressements de cet amant terrible. Il alla consulter le bailli, qui, ...lui conseilla de mettre la pauvre fille dans une communauté...⁵⁴

Her brother is, therefore, able to control Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves without the aid of any legal authority. This denial of the most basic liberty shocks the Ingénu: "sitôt qu'il fut instruit que cette assemblée était une espèce de prison où l'on tenait les filles refermées, chose horrible, inconnue chez les Hurons et chez les Anglais, il devint...furieux..."⁵⁵. Indeed, the convents served as prisons for women, many of who had committed no crime. They were denied their liberty because they were suspected of some crime or because they refused to conform to the will of those who surrounded them.

⁵⁴ *Op.cit.*, p.107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.108.

One common act during the eighteenth century was prostitution. The numbers of prostitutes in Paris alone were considerable. According to Candice Proctor: "Retif de la Bretonne estimated the number of prostitutes in Paris at 20,000; Mercier put the figure at 30,000, while a document in the archives of the police estimated their numbers at 25,000; Paris at the time had a population of about 600,000..."⁵⁶.

Many women were forced into prostitution out of economic necessity, and as prostitutes were vulnerable to increased abuse. Voltaire creates a highly sympathetic portrait of Paquette in Candide. Paquette describes life as a prostitute:

Ah! monsieur, si vous pouviez vous imaginer ce que c'est que d'être obligée de caresser indifféremment un vieux marchand, un avocat, un moine, un gondolier, un abbé; d'être exposée à toutes les insultes, à toutes les avanies; d'être souvent réduite à emprunter une jupe pour aller se la faire lever par un homme dégoûtant; d'être volée par l'un ce qu'on a gagné avec l'autre; d'être rançonnée par les officiers de justice, et de n'avoir en perspective qu'une vieillesse affreuse, un hôpital, et un fumier; vous concluriez que je suis une des plus malheureuses créatures du monde...⁵⁷

Voltaire implicitly criticizes the social structure which created these conditions for women by reversing the accepted norm. He attaches a positive judgement to the portrait of Paquette, and thus, he condemns those who abuse her. It is obvious that Voltaire has a great deal of sympathy for the plight of the prostitute, despite the fact that many of his

⁵⁶ Op.cit., p.85.

⁵⁷ Op.cit., p.228.

contemporaries believed that women who became prostitutes were debauched. This was a prevalent point of view. Léon Abensour writes:

les législateurs...inspirés par les dogmes chrétiens et la loi romaine, ils continuent à ne voir dans la prostitution que le vice, le crime, la maladie honteuse causée par le goût de débauche de quelques filles impures et, loin de penser à atteindre le mal en sa source en modifiant le statut économique féminin, ils ne visent qu'à punir l'inconduite des femmes et à en prévenir les fâcheux effets. Ils ont donc élaboré une législation répressive...⁵⁸

It is not unreasonable for Paquette to fear the *hôpital*, where the majority of prostitutes were sent if they were arrested. In her essay "Women and the Law" in French Women and the Age of Enlightenment, Adrienne Rogers states that:

a prostitute had absolutely no individual rights or liberty. She was constantly in danger of being rounded up either for medical examination or to be sent to prison ...conditions were so terrible in these prisons- starvation diet of bread and broth, hard labor, overcrowded conditons- that some women committed suicide rather than be subjected to them...⁵⁹

Therefore, these women are subjected to inhumane conditions and deprived of their liberty. It is interesting to note that the men who employed the services of prostitutes were legally innocent⁶⁰.

Even in the political arena the role a woman could play was restricted by the law. Succession to the throne was

⁵⁸ Op.cit., p.234.

⁵⁹ Op.cit., p.40.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.40.

systematically denied to women in many countries in Europe, including France, in accordance with Salic law. Robert Niklaus explains the origins of this law:

ce recueil des lois des anciens Francs, qui excluait les filles de la succession aux biens de leurs parents ... il ne s'agit pas d'une loi, mais d'une série de coutumes et de décisions qui comporte 343 articles de pénalité... A l'origine il s'agissait uniquement de la terre salique, *lod* ou *fief* donné au guerrier lors du partage de la terre de conquête à la condition du service militaire et qui ne devait logiquement jamais passer à une femme...⁶¹

Thus, an ancient custom, which had, in fact, fallen into disuse, was used to prevent women from ascending to the throne. In La Princesse de Babylone Voltaire provides a positive example of a female monarch. The empress of the *Cimmériens* is quite clearly Catherine the Great:

notre impératrice embrasse des projets entièrement opposés [in comparison with most rulers]: elle considère son vaste État, sur lequel tous les méridiens viennent se joindre, comme devant correspondre à tous les peuples qui habitent sous ces différents méridiens. La première de ses lois a été la tolérance de toutes les religions, et la compassion pour toutes les erreurs. Son puissant génie a connu que si les cultes sont différents, la morale est partout la même; par ce principe elle a lié sa nation à toutes les nations du monde...elle a fait plus: elle a voulu que cette précieuse tolérance, le premier lien des hommes, s'établît chez ses voisins; ainsi elle a mérité le titre de mère de la patrie, et elle aura celui de bienfaitrice du genre humain, si elle persévère...⁶²

Whether or not Voltaire's portrait of Catherine the Great is

⁶¹ Robert Niklaus, " Etude comparée de la situation de la femme en Angleterre et en France," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, v.193 (1980): 1909-1910.

⁶² Op.cit., p.404.

historically accurate is questionable, but that is of little importance. What is truly significant is the fact that he has provided us with a portrait of the ideal enlightened despot, and that it is a woman. He obviously believes that women are capable of ruling and he praises the empress' merits. The law sought to suppress women and deny them their basic human rights. This repudiation of women's most basic human liberties was the effect desired by the legislators. This oppressive stance was contrary to the beliefs of not only Voltaire, but to those of many of the *philosophes* who regarded the protection of the citizen as the chief purpose of legislation. This denial of women's rights is another failure on the part of the legislation of the time. Voltaire portrays the mistreatment of women at the hands of the authorities with compassion and criticizes the law for its inequities.

Women and Religion

When all earthly authorities abandoned them, women were oppressed by those traditionally regarded as God's representatives in the church as well. It has already been noted that the Church was implicated in the placing of women in convents by their families, but they were not the only authority capable of doing so. The *dévôte* with whom Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves stays in Paris warns her that if she tries to talk to the King: "si vous aviez le malheur de

parler, Mons de Louvois et le révérend P. de La Chaise pourraient vous enterrer dans le fond d'un couvent pour le reste de vos jours..."⁶³. Voltaire's use of the verb *enterrer* clearly suggests the power of the Church was so great that by placing a woman in a convent, its officials could render her dead to the world in a certain sense. This blatant abuse of power by officials of the Church was unacceptable to Voltaire. The complicity between the Church and the state allowed this type of abuse to exist. Both institutions sought to maintain their authority and the power of those who controlled them. They were, therefore, inclined to support one another in their actions and philosophical positions. A small group was, consequently, able to reinforce their influence in almost every sphere of public life. The Church's dogmas and the state's laws were inextricably bound. Many women would have turned to the Church as their last refuge. They would have found an institution willing to deny them their most basic human rights if they compromised or questioned the Church's authority.

Voltaire also clearly demonstrates throughout his fiction that the primary motive behind many of the abuses to which the Church subjects women is money. In La Princesse de Babylone Formosante is accused of being a witch as soon as the priests discover that she has many diamonds with her: "les chercheurs, apprenant que la dame avait une

⁶³ Op.cit., p.157.

prodigieuse quantité de diamants, la jugèrent incontinent sorcière..."⁶⁴. The reference to the barbaric medieval practice of witch hunts is a technique which allows Voltaire to criticize the Church. It exposes the Church as an institution based in and motivated by superstition and it emphasizes the despotic misuse of power which the Church readily exhibited. In *Zadig* there is another instance where the Church is motivated primarily by money, *le bûcher de veuvage*, and this fictional rite has an interesting parallel with a custom in eighteenth-century France. Voltaire describes the *bûcher*:

lorsqu'un homme marié était mort, et que sa femme bien-aimée voulait être sainte, elle se brûlait en public sur le corps de son mari...Zadig remontra à Sétoc, combien cette horrible coutume était contraire au bien du genre humain; qu'on laissait brûler tous les jours de jeunes veuves qui pouvaient donner des enfants à l'État, ou du moins élever les leurs...⁶⁵

This practice has an effect similar to the fashion in France during Voltaire's time of pious women retiring to convents. They, too, could give no children to the State or raise their own. This is one reason Voltaire opposed this practice. They could not be useful to society, so they were also in a certain sense dead. Just as is the case in France, where the convents received considerable dowries, in *Zadig* the *prêtres des étoiles* also benefit from this ceremony and insist that, "les pierreries et les ornements des jeunes veuves qu'ils

⁶⁴ *Op.cit.*, p.425.

⁶⁵ *Op.cit.* , p.52.

envoyer au bûcher leur appartenait de droit..."⁶⁶, thus making clear the Church's motives. So the Church also fails women. Its primary concern is not their welfare, but what it can gain from them.

Voltaire's portrayal of the status of women and their rights is accurate according to our reading of his *contes*. He demonstrates, with a good deal of sympathy, the abuses to which women were subjected and how the institutions of the day did not seek to free women, how, on the contrary, they thwarted women's efforts to attain the liberty which was systematically denied them. Even in the most intimate of spheres, women were abused and treated as little more than property, and the institutions which should have helped them were working against them. Their status as property and their non-existence before the law both served to place women in a figurative state of permanent minority, never having the power necessary to determine their own lives. Voltaire effectively uses one of the most oppressed groups in France under the *ancien régime*, in order to criticize society's inequitable distribution of power and the abuses inherent in the institutions of the period. It is interesting to note at this point that under Napoleonic law the customary state of minority to which women were reduced under absolute monarchy became a legal state of minority⁶⁷. It will be important to

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁶⁷ Rogers, *Op.cit.*, p.45.

examine how Voltaire's female characters react to this state of non-entity.

Chapter Two
The Reactions of Voltaire's Female Characters
to the Role of Victim

Women in the eighteenth century were faced with a society which through its institutions, laws and customs sought to limit their individual liberty and their actions. Women were not able to freely determine their own future, but had it instead decided by a male authority : father, husband, or brother. Given their restricted power, women had essentially two choices. They could accept the role of victim, which society assigned them, or they could reject this and try to define themselves separately from the role given them. Considering their lack of control, it was tempting for women to accept the dictates of society, but in doing so they stagnated.

It is this latter type of inactivity which is, generally, unacceptable to Voltaire. His philosophy is focused on taking action and taking part in society. It is for this reason that, in contrast with some female characters who seemingly chose to accept the role given them by society, Voltaire also presents many women in the *contes* who are both intelligent and triumphant. Miriam J. Benkovitz writes: "the woman of the eighteenth century who liberated herself came to the realization that for self-development and self-

fulfilment, she must first escape the narrow role assigned her by society..."¹ Women in the *contes* utilize what little is theirs in order to achieve their goals. They use their minds, and at times their bodies, for their advantage. They are also able to identify and exploit their adversaries' weaknesses. The reactions of many of the women in the *contes* are largely active in nature. Presented as human, and not mythical in character, they do, however, naturally at times show both weakness and strength. Again, his depiction of women's weaknesses cannot be attributed to any misogynist tendency on Voltaire's part. It can more appropriately be seen as a human attribute. He condemns the injustices women faced not because he believes them to be weak, but because he essentially views women first as human beings who should be treated with respect.

Women Who Seek Counsel and its Consequences

The act of seeking advice or counsel is not in and of itself a passive act. Indeed, it can be seen as being ultimately reasonable and active, because it is a deed which expands one's knowledge. Many women in the *contes* seek the advice of others. This gives them the opportunity to judge their particular situation in an informed manner. This possibility should aid them in coming to their own decisions.

¹ Miriam J. Benkovitz, "Some Observations on Woman's Concept of Self in the 18th Century," Woman in the 18th Century and Other Essays, eds. Paul S. Fritz and Richard Morton (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert & Co., 1976), p.40.

This assessment of possibilities is a phenomenon exhibited by some male characters. The best example of a male protagonist's logic in evidence is in Candide. When Candide has killed the inquisitor and Don Issachar, Voltaire clearly illustrates Candide's thinking:

Voici dans ce moment ce qui se passa dans l'âme de Candide, et comment il raisonna: Si ce saint homme appelle du secours, il me fera infailliblement brûler; il pourra en faire autant de Cunégonde; il m'a fait fouetter impitoyablement; il est mon rival; je suis en train de tuer, il n'y a pas à balancer. Ce raisonnement fut net et rapide...²

The reasoning behind Candide's actions is made plain. This mechanism is, however, absent from the decision-making process demonstrated by some female characters in the contes. There is no indication of their reasoning between the reception of suggestions and their execution. Since this is presented in other cases and not in the latter, the impression is created that these women are passively following the advice given to them.

Many women seemingly heed the counsel given to them without this crucial appraisal of the advice in question. This can at times be seen as a reflection of their legal status as property. This is the case in Cosi-Sancta. The conte's namesake, is first forced to abandon her virtue in order to save her husband. For D.J. Adams, this is essentially a moral dilemma that Cosi-Sancta must resolve. He writes: "pour Cosi-Sancta...la question de rester fidèle à son mari se pose sous une toute autre forme: doit-elle

² Op.cit., p.148-149.

écouter la voix de la conscience, ce qui entraînerait la mort de son mari ou doit-elle succomber à la nécessité d'abandonner ses principes?..."³. This question would be valid if Cosi-Sancta was an autonomous individual, but she is not. It is made very clear that she is property, and it is her acceptance of this state that leads her to forsake her virtue. When told of her husband's decision she replies: "il est le maître...chacun fait de son bien ce qu'il veut..."⁴. She views herself as her husband's property to dispose of as he will, and that is exactly what he does. She relinquishes her power in the decision making process to her husband, (there is no indication that she questions his instructions), and does as he instructs her.

In Zadig there are also examples of women who make detrimental decisions at the insistence of others. Although no case can be made for Azora's complete innocence, if viewed in context, her plan to cut off part of Zadig's nose becomes more comprehensible. After learning of her husband's supposed death, "Cador lui confia, que son ami lui avait laissé la plus grande partie de son bien, et lui fit entendre qu'il mettrait son bonheur à partager sa fortune avec elle..."⁵. Cador also suggests to Azora that he suffers with an affliction that can only be relieved by the tip of the

³ Op.cit., p.139.

⁴ Op.cit., p.28.

⁵ Op.cit., p.11.

nose of a man who had died on the previous day. Thus, this information coupled with the fact that she may be left with little money and Cadore's willingness to share his fortune with her, is likely her motive for trying to mutilate her husband's corpse. It is unlikely that Azora would have followed this course of action without Cadore's influence. Azora is not specifically portrayed as a victim by Voltaire. Her main purpose is to show how Zadig is disillusioned by marriage. Yet the motive behind her actions is obvious.

Given Voltaire's attitude towards the Jesuits, as expressed in the *contes* and elsewhere, it is hardly surprising that Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves' ruin begins when she seeks the guidance of a Jesuit priest. She places her trust, and herself, in the hands of Father Tout-à-tous, a figure representative of an institution which excludes women from any meaningful role: "elle imagina de s'adresser à un jésuite du bas étage...la belle Saint-Yves s'adressa à un...qui s'appelait le P. Tout-à-tous. Elle se confessa à lui; lui exposa ses aventures, son état, son danger, et le conjura de la loger chez quelque bonne dévote qui la mît à l'abri des tentations..."⁶. Saint-Yves fully reveals her situation, seeking direction in her quest to free the Huron. What she actually receives can be at best described as misleading advice. She is placed with a *dévôte* of questionable devotion. When faced with the odious proposition of Saint-Pouange, both Tout-à-tous and the

⁶ Op.cit., p.144-145.

dévôte serve to minimize the baseness of the exchange he suggests.

Tout-à-tous lives up to his ironic name (meaning that he is capable of making himself everything to everyone, and thus is without any kind of integrity, much like the reasoning of the Jesuits in general) and the casuistic tradition of the Jesuits by arguing that a woman who sacrifices herself to a man in power in order to save her husband or lover does not commit a sin because her intention is pure. He attempts to persuade Saint-Yves that a sin is not a sin. According to his reasoning there are degrees of sin, which then means that sin is no longer an absolute concept. In order to further sway Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves, Tout-à-tous also evokes Saint Augustin as an authority. He subsequently argues that her infidelity is not tantamount to adultery because Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves is not the *Ingénu*'s wife. This is an attempt to lead her down a path which eventually leads to her destruction. Levy describes a similar function performed by the *dévôte* who argues that:

sur le plan dramatique, son action est déterminante. Quand la Saint-Yves lui expose son projet de se jeter aux pieds du roi, la *dévôte* lui montre la vanité de cette intention...en enlevant ainsi à la Saint-Yves l'illusion de ce recours, la *dévôte* supprime un des termes de l'alternative proposée par le père jésuite, en fait, elle referme le piège dont la Saint-Yves n'échappera pas...⁷

Thus, Saint-Yves sees her options diminish before her because of the counsel she receives from both Tout-à-tous and the

⁷ Zvi Levy, "L'*Ingénu* ou L'Anti-Candide," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, v.183 (1980): 51.

dévote. Indeed, Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves herself remarks: " je n'ai que le choix du malheur et de la honte; il faut que mon amant reste enseveli tout vivant, ou que je me rende indigne de vivre. Je ne puis le laisser périr, et je ne puis le sauver..."⁸. It is in this manner that her acquiescence to Saint-Pouange, who guarantees the Ingénu's freedom in exchange for sleeping with her, becomes necessary, as all other possibilities are taken from her before she has the chance to attempt them.

Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves' choices are severely limited. She has, indeed, one choice: to refuse or accept Saint-Pouange's proposition. What is important, however, is that the women in Voltaire's short prose fiction find themselves in positions where they are not permitted to take an active role in their own lives. Or, perhaps more precisely, they find themselves in situations where when they are presented with a choice, they seem to accept the opinions of others, without evaluating them before accepting them. This is clearly the case at least once in Candide. Cunégonde often depends upon the counsel given to her by *la vieille*. In fact, when the governor of Buenos Ayres asks Cunégonde to marry him, "Cunégonde lui demanda un quart d'heure pour se recueillir, pour consulter la vieille et pour se déterminer..."⁹. Cunégonde does not appraise *la vieille's*

⁸ Op.cit., p.153-154.

⁹ Op.cit., p.166.

counsel herself. This function is performed by *la vieille*: "vous ne pouvez fuir, dit-elle à Cunégonde, et vous n'avez rien à craindre, ce n'est pas vous qui avez tué monseigneur; et d'ailleurs, le gouverneur qui vous aime ne souffrira pas qu'on vous maltraite; demeurez..."¹⁰. The tone of this section is similar to that displayed in *Candide's* reasoning¹¹. It is possible that *la vieille*, much like some of the old men in Voltaire's fiction, represents wisdom. This would explain why her advice is always beneficial and why she is portrayed as eminently reasonable. In the case of Cunégonde, it is almost as though consulting *la vieille* has replaced thinking for herself, and although the decision is best for Cunégonde, the fact that she did not come to it herself casts it in a certain doubt. It may be significant that Cunégonde seeks the advice of another woman. The female characters in the previous examples act at the insistence of mostly men and they find themselves in unfortunate circumstances. This contrasts sharply with the consequences of Cunégonde's following the advice of another woman. *La vieille* understands Cunégonde's circumstances, and she would seem to have her best interests at heart. This strongly suggests a solidarity among the female characters. Cunégonde repeatedly proves herself incapable of independent action. She often does not know what to do. It is true that, until the end of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.167.

¹¹ Please see above.

the *conte*, Candide acts similarly, but it is perhaps noteworthy that he receives a great deal of his best advice from *la vieille*. Thus, in many instances the female characters display a lack of independence in their reasoning. This often appears similar to a dependence on others, whether it is welcome or not, which undermines their ability to function as autonomous adults. Often this also leads them to make detrimental choices because they must place their complete trust in someone else and not in themselves. Voltaire, therefore, shows that accepting the opinions and advice of others, especially those who hold power, without careful consideration can lead to poor choices if the counsellor's advice is motivated by self interest. Voltaire's message would then seem to be that it is important to take an active stance when faced with a decision, rather than merely accept the dictates of others.

Women and Social Dictates

It is not necessarily always the influence of an individual which apparently inclines women to forego the process of appraising instructions. Societal pressure can be equally, if not more, persuasive. An example of a woman who feels pressured into unfortunate circumstances because of her culture is found in *Zadig*. The ritual burning of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre represents just such an instance. In this case, it is not an individual who

influences the widow to become a sacrificial victim, but public opinion. Voltaire writes: "la tribu dans laquelle il y avait eu le plus de femmes brûlées était la plus considérée..."¹². Therefore, society, which is controlled largely by men to benefit their own interests, dictates that women must be victims. This abuse has, in this case, become institutionalized. It is not only culturally acceptable, but demanded. If a woman is to fulfil her duties to society, she is forced to become a victim. Religion, then, becomes a tool of oppression. Women would be indoctrinated into a system of belief which ultimately demands their sacrifice. The dogmas of the religion would be part of not only the men's, but also the women's mentalities. The pressure to fulfil social obligations would be great, this would lead many women to willingly sacrifice themselves, and their lives. They would do so willingly because they would not have been taught anything which would contradict the strictures of their religion. Thus, those who are in power and control religion are able to perpetuate their own authority through the teachings of this institution.

The Role of Emotions and their Effect

Upon examination the *contes* provide a recurrent theme behind the motives of the female characters who appear dependent upon others. In several cases before the female

¹² Op.cit., p.52.

character turns to others for guidance she is overcome with a powerful emotion such as rage or overwhelming character trait such as pride. Given that women's choices are drastically reduced, their expression of emotion and their dominant character traits being exposed can be seen as active responses to their circumstances. They do, at times, seemingly impair their reason, but they represent, none the less, a response. This is not to say that the specific emotion or character trait does not change from situation to situation; it depends very much on the circumstances. What is important is their overwhelming nature. It seemingly incapacitates the woman, because she no longer is guided by her reason.

In Zadig, it is Azora's rage which first causes Zadig to want to test her virtue: "un jour Azora revint d'une promenade toute en colère, et faisant de grandes exclamations... Azora se répandit en des invectives si longues, éclata en des reproches si violents contre la jeune veuve, que ce faste de vertu ne plut pas à Zadig..."¹³. It is also only later that she agrees to slice off part of Zadig's nose: "elle pleura, s'arracha les cheveux, et jura de mourir...pleura, se fâcha..."¹⁴. Missouf is called *la capricieuse* because she is ruled by her whims. Almona has been indoctrinated in the dictates of her culture and taught

¹³ Op.cit., p.10.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.11.

to be proud to follow these dictates. She, thus, is prepared to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre because of one of her overbearing character traits: her pride: " je suis fermement résolue de me jeter sur son bûcher...il faut en passer par-là. Je suis dévote; je serais perdue de réputation, et tout le monde se moquerait de moi, si je ne me brûlais pas..."¹⁵ . It is important, however, to note at this point that Almona is responding to a manmade construct which has been presented to her as an absolute truth. She has been indoctrinated into her way of thinking and truly would believe she has little choice. Indeed, she has little desire to fulfil this contemptible duty. Zadig converses with her about her plans: " vous aimiez donc prodigieusement votre mari? lui dit-il. Moi? point du tout, répondit la Dame Arabe. C'était un brutal, un jaloux, un homme insupportable..."¹⁶. Thus, Almona has been so thoroughly conditioned by her society that she is prepared to sacrifice herself for a man she obviously neither loves nor respects. She is the victim of an oppressive tradition which demands her sacrifice and that has taught her to be proud to sacrifice herself. Thus all three women make detrimental choices because they are driven by their emotions and character traits, not by their reason.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

This is not a phenomenon unique to Zadig, but one which is found elsewhere in the *contes*. Cunégonde's emotions are so strong at the *auto-da-fé* that she is rendered physically incapable of intervention: "je fus, à la vérité saisie d'horreur. Cette vue redoubla tous les sentiments qui m'accablaient, qui me dévoraient. Je m'écriai, je voulus dire: Arrêtez, barbares!, mais la voix me manqua..."¹⁷. This is a natural reaction to such a spectacle, but it is important that her reaction incapacitates her, because she is unable to save Candide. Given that her sentiments overwhelm even her physical capacities, it is not then surprising to see Cunégonde turn to others for guidance in situations where emotion plays a large role. When the governor of Buenos Ayres asks her to marry him, Cunégonde must first: "se recueillir"¹⁸, which suggests that this has created a certain disorder in her thoughts. It is this disorder, caused by her emotions, which then leads her to consult *la vieille*. Although Cunégonde, following the advice of *la vieille*, experiences happier consequences than Saint-Yves following the advice of Tout-à-tous, the difference lies only in the counsellor, since *la vieille*, unlike Tout-à-tous, gives Cunégonde beneficial guidance, and does not take advantage of her.

¹⁷ Op.cit., p.146.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.166.

Even Formosante, in the Princesse de Babylone, who generally acts and thinks independently, is prey to an overwhelming character trait. It is evident that her pride is deeply wounded when she finds Amazan in the arms of another woman : "ainsi donc celui qui a refusé pour moi tant de princesses m'abandonne pour une farceuse des Gaules! Non, je ne pourrai survivre à cet affront...partons dans l'instant même..."¹⁹. Once her anger subsides, Formosante regrets her decision to leave without allowing Amazan to explain himself, but again is motivated by her pride: " le coeur de Formosante fut enfin plus calme et plus paisible, elle aurait voulu n'être point sitôt partie: elle trouvait que ses licornes allaient trop vite, mais elle n'osait revenir sur ses pas, combattue entre l'envie de pardonner et celle de montrer sa colère, entre son amour et sa vanité, elle laissait aller ses licornes..."²⁰. Thus, many of the female characters, even those who could be described as independent and strong, at some point are the victim of their own overwhelming emotions. This cannot be construed as misogyny on Voltaire's part. There are also many men who are controlled by their emotions, like Moabdar in Zadig "qui avait été assez honnête homme...semblait avoir noyé ses vertus dans l'amour prodigieux qu'il avait pour la belle capricieuse..."²¹, and

¹⁹ Op.cit., p.421.

²⁰ Ibid., p.422.

²¹ Op.cit., p.79.

there are many who make poor choices because of them, such as Pangloss, whose pride drives him to continue philosophising even though he knows he is wrong. Thus, it would seem that emotions and dominant character traits inhibit the characters' reason. Although Cunégonde does not make a poor decision when the governor asks her to marry him, it is because of the intervention of *la vieille*, a figure representing wisdom.

Emotion overshadowing reason would seem to be a common human attribute. This notion is specifically supported by two quotations: one from Zadig and one from La Princesse de Babylone. Voltaire writes of the passions: "ce sont les vents qui enflent les voiles du vaisseau...elles le submergent quelquefois; mais sans elles il ne pourrait voguer..."²². He, therefore, views them as being necessary to human progress, but recognises that they can be overpowering. It is in this case that the individual would seem to lose control. In La Princesse de Babylone, the phoenix being immortal, and thus, not prey to overwhelming emotion, is infinitely more reasonable than his human companions: "le phénix, qui était plus sage que Formosante, parce qu'il était sans passion, la consolait en chemin..."²³. It is perhaps possible that *la vieille* can be considered similar to the phoenix, because as an old woman she could be thought to be

²² Ibid., p.94.

²³ Op.cit., p.422.

free from overpowering emotion. Her most memorable character traits are her intelligence and reason. It is, therefore, evident that the emotions experienced by the female characters lead them to make unwise decisions. There are a significant number of male characters who are guided by their emotions or character traits, and not their reason, such as Moabdar. Thus, it is obvious that Voltaire did not believe that women alone are controlled by emotion. The overwhelming emotions of these women should not, then, be seen as evidence of a tendency towards misogyny on Voltaire's part. They can be more appropriately seen as a human attribute, not a uniquely female attribute.

Perhaps the most striking example of emotion overpowering both the reason and the body is found in L'Ingénu. When Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves first hears Saint-Pouange's proposition she is: "épouvantée et confuse"²⁴, but is sufficiently coherent to: "feignit longtemps de ne le pas entendre"²⁵, or to take action to protect herself in some way. By the end of her encounter with Saint-Pouange she is, however, weakened and her emotions begin to take control. The *dévôte* sees her companion: " sortit de l'arrière-cabinet tout éperdue, sans pouvoir parler, réfléchissant

²⁴ Op.cit., p.151.

²⁵ Ibid., p.151.

*profondement*²⁶ sur le caractère des grands et des demi-grands..."²⁷. There is not yet a dissociation of her body and mind, but this marks the beginning of a process which will produce an alienation between these faculties. Saint-Yves' physical capabilities are already being diminished and she has begun to turn her thoughts inward. Her distraction grows after consulting Tout-à-tous: " la belle Saint-Yves, non moins effrayée des discours du jésuite que des propositions du sous-ministre, s'en retourna éperdue chez son ami..."²⁸. When confronted with her fatal rendez-vous with Saint-Pouange, Saint-Yves resists as long as she is able:

Saint-Yves jure qu'elle n'ira point. La dévote veut lui essayer les deux boucles de diamants. Saint-Yves ne le put souffrir. Elle combattit la journée entière. Enfin n'ayant en vue que son amant, vaincue, entraînée, ne sachant où on la mène, elle se laisse conduire au souper fatal... Saint-Yves était si confuse, si troublée, qu'elle se laissait tourmenter...²⁹

It would seem then, that a schism has been created between her mental being and her physical being. The phrase : "ne sachant où on la mène" suggests that she is totally alienated from what is being done to her. Even the pronoun "on" implies that she is unaware who is doing this to her. She is in what can only be described as a stupor. This impression is further reinforced by the passive verb construction

²⁶ My italics.

²⁷ Op.cit., p.152.

²⁸ Ibid., p.155.

²⁹ Ibid., p.157-158.

se laisser followed by the infinitive. She is powerless to object to the abuse to which she is subjected because of her overpowering emotions. Indeed, as she believes that she has no real choices³⁰, this alienation between her physical and mental being may be a defense mechanism. Even as she goes to free the *Ingénu* from the Bastille she is still in a similar state. Saint-Yves finds herself in a state of unconsciousness where she is unaware of what is being done to her, much like Suzanne in Diderot's La Religieuse³¹ when she takes her vows. She is, therefore, an unwilling participant and thus effectively absolved of any guilt, because it is unreasonable to hold her accountable for abuses she suffers in an alienated state.

Women of Strength and Merit

While creating women who appear dependent and who seek guidance, Voltaire also created many who are self-reliant, intelligent, and triumphant. Many of the female characters display an independent quality, despite the fact that they too live under a system that seeks to make victims of them. Many of the women exhibit a natural intelligence equal to, and at times surpassing that of their male counterparts. When Zadig stands before the court accused of writing

³⁰ Please see above.

³¹ Denis Diderot, La Religieuse, Oeuvres Complètes, eds. Georges May et al. (Paris: Hermann, 1975), 25 vols., v.11, p.123-124.

inflammatory poetry criticizing the king: "la reine qui se souvenait de ce qui avait été écrit sur une pièce de la tablette de Zadig, se la fit apporter..."³². It is, in fact, Astarté who rescues Zadig. Formosante also displays a great deal of natural intelligence. D.J. Adams writes: "il [Voltaire] lui confie aussi un rôle dans lequel la raison est souvent l'élément principal. Formosante critique certains aspects de la société du dix-huitième siècle...la partie majeure du conte est la narration des observations philosophiques d'Amazan et de Formosante..."³³. The fact that Formosante is placed on an equal level with her male counterpart is significant. It is perhaps of greater importance, however, that Formosante's philosophical observations are conferred merit equal to Amazan's. This would be an activity of the utmost importance to Voltaire. The equality between Formosante and Amazan evidently suggests that Voltaire believed women to be men's mental equals. Thus, there are prominent examples of women capable of original and independent thought, which counterbalance those who depend so heavily on others.

For a woman to be intelligent and to take an active role, not only in society but in her own affairs, it is necessary for her to be able to adapt to the situation at hand. This is something of which Formosante is aware. When

³² Op.cit., p.22.

³³ Op.cit., p.239.

the King of Egypt intends to take her prisoner and force himself on her, Formosante realises what she is capable of: "Formosante vit bien qu'elle n'était pas la plus forte; elle savait que le bon esprit consiste à se conformer à sa situation; elle prit le parti de se délivrer du roi d'Égypte par une innocente adresse [she flatters him]...ce discours fit tourner la tête au roi d'Égypte..."³⁴. Formosante frees herself from her adversary by recognizing his weakness, his vanity, and quite rightly, playing upon it. She is able to judge the situation and then determine an appropriate course of action. Voltaire's approval is evident through his use of the adjective *bon*. Formosante does not need to consult anyone when opportunity presents itself to her.

Similarly, *la vieille* acts independently and seizes the occasion. This is a quality discussed by Jacques Van den Heuvel. He points to "quelques êtres actifs, généreux somme toute et fidèles, comme Cacambo, comme la vieille, qui en sachant s'accomoder de la vie en tirent instinctivement ce qu'elle peut leur [Cacambo, la vieille, etc.] donner à condition qu'on sache la prendre..."³⁵. It is important to note that the characters in question do not, as Saint-Pouange does, benefit at the expense of others, if anything those who surround them also benefit. *La vieille* proves time and again that she knows how to handle a wide variety of situations.

³⁴ Op.cit., p.390.

³⁵ Voltaire dans ses contes: de « Micromégas » à « L'Ingénu », (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1967) p.267.

After Candide is flogged at the auto-da-fé it is la vieille who takes care of him. When Cunégonde and Candide are reunited and extremely excited " la vieille leur recommande de faire moins de bruit, et les laisse en liberté..."³⁶. After the murders of both Don Issacar and the Inquisitor, only la vieille is thinking clearly enough to plan their escape:

la vieille prit alors la parole, et dit: Il y a trois chevaux andalous dans l'écurie avec leurs selles et leurs brides: que le brave Candide les prépare; madame a des moyadors et des diamants, montons vite à cheval ... allons à Cadiz...³⁷

When their money is stolen she suggests that they sell the horses. She also uses her competence in order to escape slavery: "ce seigneur ayant été roué au bout de deux ans avec une trentaine de boïards pour quelque tracasserie de cour, je profitai de cette aventure; je m'enfuis..."³⁸. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is la vieille who suggests that Candide purchase the farm. She, therefore, in a sense, leads the group to a certain physical and philosophical harmony. She is a woman, who having lost both social status and physical beauty and, indeed, part of her body, is nonetheless able to manage the situations with which she is confronted, and reap any possible benefits.

³⁶ Op.cit., p.142.

³⁷ Ibid., p.149.

³⁸ Ibid., p.161-162.

There are other cases where women take charge and are able to have an effect on other people and their own destinies. In L'Ingénu, only Saint-Yves exhibits any great influence on the Huron. When he wishes to be baptised in the river, it is only Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves who can convince him otherwise:

la tante, désespérée, avait remarqué que la première fois que son neveu avait fait la révérence qu'il en avait fait une plus profonde à Mlle. de Saint-Yves qu'à aucune autre personne de la compagnie...elle prit le parti de s'adresser à elle dans ce grand embarras; elle la pria d'interposer son crédit pour engager le Huron à se faire baptiser de la même manière que les Bretons...³⁹

And she does, indeed, succeed in her commission. Her influence over Hercule is, in fact, used many times. Cunégonde is also, eventually, able to affect those around her and in turn have an impact on her own life: "Cunégonde ne savait pas qu'elle était enlaidie, personne ne l'en avait avertie: elle fit souvenir Candide de ses promesses avec un ton si absolu, que le bon Candide n'osa pas la refuser..."⁴⁰. Thus, although both these women are at times weak, they are capable of strength as well. They are a very human combination of the two qualities. Thus, Voltaire is progressive because he shows that women are as equally capable of strength as men.

³⁹ Op.cit., p.98-99.

⁴⁰ Op.cit., p.252-253.

Women's Mental Capabilities

Another quality which Voltaire depicts in his female characters, which many believed was a uniquely male domain, is their ability to think both rapidly and logically. Given the lack of power experienced by women in eighteenth-century France, they were left with few options if they wished to achieve goals contrary to those society set for them⁴¹. Many of the women are able to formulate and carry out a coherent plan of action, without the aid of a man. Very often because of their lack of power women were forced to use deceit to reach their goals. Proctor writes: "women...had been enervated and corrupted by the state of non-entity to which they had been reduced, and were condemned to the use of subterfuge and ruse to escape their slavery and to triumph..."⁴². There are, indeed, many instances when women in the contes employ artifice in order to escape unfavourable situations. This takes essentially two forms. Many women in the contes are able to formulate and carry out plans with their only tool being their mind. Other women are forced to use their bodies as well. These are the two main possibilities because they represent two areas over which women had any degree of control. It is evident, however, that Voltaire sympathizes with the women and approves their

⁴¹ Please see Chapter One.

⁴² Op.cit., p.27.

actions. In Zadiq, Astarté escapes slavery, literally, by conspiring with Missouf. The two women are able to determine that this is the best for both of them. Voltaire writes: "Belle Missouf, lui dis-je [Astarté], vous êtes beaucoup plus plaisante que moi, vous divertirez bien mieux que moi le Prince d'Hyrkanie. Facilitez-moi les moyens de me sauver, vous régnerez seule, vous me rendez heureuse, en vous débarrassant d'une rivale. Missouf concerta avec moi les moyens de ma fuite..."⁴³. Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves escapes marriage to the bailiff's son by ruse:

elle ne rebute plus son sot prétendu; elle accueille le détestable beau-père, caresse son frère, répand l'allégresse dans la maison; puis le jour destiné à la cérémonie, elle part secrètement à quatre heures du matin avec ses petits cadeaux de noce, et tout ce qu'elle a pu rassembler. Ses mesures étaient si bien prises qu'elle était déjà à plus de dix lieues lorsqu'on entra dans sa chambre...⁴⁴

She is able to escape a forced marriage through her own power by deceiving those who support the marriage. Her action is portrayed as just by Voltaire because those she is deceiving have already proven themselves unjust. Saint-Yves' brother has already had her placed in a convent against her will and in the quote the bailiff is characterized as *détestable*. Thus, the comparison between Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves and those who oppress her is favourable to the former and, therefore, is critical of the latter.

⁴³ Op.cit., p.81-82.

⁴⁴ Op.cit., p.143-144.

In Zadig, Almona also provides an excellent example of what a woman is capable of doing with the little freedom society grants her. Almona does formulate a plan and, thus, uses her mind: "elle roula son dessein dans sa tête, sans en parler à personne..."⁴⁵. Her tactic require the use of her body, however, because it would be a temptation to those she wishes to expose. It is true that she must use her body in her plan to free Zadig, but ultimately she remains virtuous. Adams writes: "Almona montre ce dont une femme foncièrement vertueuse est capable si elle sait employer ses charmes à des fins louables..."⁴⁶. Although her body is very much a means to an end, it is important to consider the fact that her other options have been removed by society. The four *magés* give Almona the signature she needs in order to secure Zadig's freedom in exchange for her promise to spend the night with them. Her virtue is, however, never in danger because "elle fit avertir les Juges de venir chez elle pour une affaire importante. Il s'y rendirent: elle leur montra les quatre noms, et leur dit à quel prix les prêtres avaient vendu la grâce de Zadig..."⁴⁷. Thus, these women demonstrate that they are capable of planning and executing their own schemes, and are able to use subterfuge if necessary. Voltaire does not condemn these women for using ruse. It is

⁴⁵ Op.cit., p.61.

⁴⁶ Op.cit.,p.109.

⁴⁷ Op.cit.,p.63.

not that he portrays them as calculating and manipulative, rather he realizes that eighteenth-century society offered them few alternatives. He is aware that in order to gain their freedom that women had limited means at their disposal and approves of them using the procedures available to them.

Other women in the *contes* display quick, logical reasoning. This is certainly true of *Cosi-Sancta*: "la chose était pressante: elle venait de sauver la vie à son mari, qu'elle n'aimait guère; elle allait perdre un frère qu'elle aimait beaucoup; d'ailleurs le danger de son fils l'alarmait; il n'y avait pas de moment à perdre..."⁴⁸. She later reasons with equal clarity and conciseness when the doctor demands the same price to save her son's life. She has no husband to consult, and the rapidity of her thinking certainly implies that she does not need his counsel. In *Candide, la vieille* proves to be a woman of great reason and understanding on many occasions.

Perhaps the most detailed examples of a woman's power to reason is found in *La Princesse de Babylone*. In order to escape from the King of Egypt, Formosante orders bottles of wine to be drugged, makes sure that the king and his servants drink a sufficient quantity, and even provides herself with the excuse that she cannot drink any because her physician has put her on a diet. Once the drug puts her adversaries to sleep, she supplies herself with the marks of one of the Egyptian dignitaries, including his beard. She then makes

⁴⁸ *Op.cit.*, p.29.

good her escape with Irla. She could neither be weak, ignorant or without imagination to develop such a plan. This very strongly suggests that Voltaire saw equal capabilities in both men and women.

There seemingly exists an interesting dichotomy in Voltaire's portrayal of women in the *contes*. While most of the women are a combination of both weakness and strength, many are predominantly one or the other. Their weakness would originate from their reaction to the role society has assigned them. Women were expected to be good wives and mothers, and were deprived of rights and freedoms which should have been theirs. Some women passively accepted their status as non-persons before society, just as some women in the *contes* do. In doing so many are forced into situations where they have no control, and where they give up what power they have. Their apathy thus renders them victims of themselves because they stop evolving as individuals. They remain mere puppets waiting for their cue. Other women, however, take a much more active stance and gain a great deal more from life. They perhaps do not openly demand what they want, but they go about achieving their goals in their own ways. They have been barred from traditional paths to power, so they find their own way, and do so independently, which is a triumph in and of itself.

Chapter Three

Voltaire's Portrayal of the Female Body and Some of its Implications

The lack of power and control to which women were subjected in the eighteenth century and Voltaire's portrayal of it have already been examined. The figurative state of non-existence before the law to which women were reduced left them with control over few areas of their lives. It is reasonable to assume that one of these areas would have been their physical person, their body. Indeed, one aspect of Voltaire's *contes* which is particularly revealing is his portrayal of the female body and the treatment to which it is exposed. When carefully analyzed, Voltaire's portrayal of the female body yields many indicators of his attitude towards women in general, which will be examined. The female body is interesting because, although in some ways the portraits Voltaire paints are somewhat similar in content, they fulfil diverse functions in the narrative and are significant on many levels. Again, it is important to remember that the texts must be considered in their historical context. Some modern readers, who do not remain aware of the conditions in which many women found themselves at the time the *contes* were written, may find certain aspects

of Voltaire's portrayal of the female body offensive. It is, therefore, important to consider the context in which the *contes* were written, and also to determine Voltaire's intent when describing women as he does. One aspect which has not escaped the critics and which many readers often find disturbing is the incredible violence to which the female characters are subjected. Alain Faudemay writes:

le sadisme des Contes frappe encore davantage si l'on songe, outre les mutilations, aux différents traitements auxquels y sont soumis les femmes: la Vieille et Cunégonde, violée; Sémire, enlevée, blessée, ensanglantée; Missouf, battue; les dames aux singes de Candide, mordues, et toutes quatre y prenant du plaisir; la mère de la vieille, princesse de Palestrine, «coupée en quartiers». Sans doute tant de cruauté doit-elle être resituée à la fois dans un contexte historique et dans un contexte culturel...¹

It is important, however, to note that it is not solely female characters who are subjected to violence and mutilation, but many characters both male and female. Thus, the sometimes too hastily applied label of misogyny is avoided.

Women's Physical Descriptions

The satirical tone of the *contes* leaves many subjects open to comic treatment. The women's bodies do not escape description unscathed. This aspect remains, in fact, constant. The comic description of the female physique

¹ Voltaire Allégoriste: Essai sur les rapports entre conte et philosophie chez Voltaire (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1987) p. 66.

conducive to caricature is present in Zadig, Candide, L'Ingénu, and La Princesse de Babylone. It is reasonable to assume that this is a product of the chosen genre of Voltaire and not of any kind of antagonism towards women. One example from Zadig is that of the cream cheese merchant. He describes his wife: " elle était plus blanche que ses fromages à la crème, qui commencèrent mon malheur..."². The humorous caricature in the comparison is evident. Mademoiselle de Kerkabon is also the subject of an amusing example of a portrait of a satirical nature in L'Ingénu. In her case Voltaire's depiction serves a double purpose. He describes her upon first seeing the Huron : "la courte et ronde demoiselle le regardait de tous ses petits yeux..."³. This is a caricatural and humorous description in and of itself, but it is possible to interpret it on another level. The repeated references to smallness such as *courte* and *petits yeux* may be a reflection or foreshadowing of her restricted, provincial point of view, which is the object of Voltaire's criticism. So her physical description, intended primarily to be amusing, fulfils another aim.

A similar example is found in Candide. Voltaire describes the baroness: "madame la baronne, qui pesait environ trois cent cinquante livres, s'attirait par là une

² Op.cit., p. 71.

³ Op.cit., p.81.

très-grande considération... "4. The phrase *par là* implies that the esteem in which the baroness is held is the consequence of her weight. The description also contributes to the false grandeur already established in the depiction of the baron and his castle: "Monsieur le baron était un des plus puissants seigneurs de la Vestphalie, car son château avait une porte et des fenêtres... "5. Thus, although the primary function of the description of the baroness is comical, it also fulfils other purposes. It serves to further enhance the characterization of the baron and it also serves a philosophical intention : to criticize the idle existence which many nobles led.

In La Princesse de Babylone, there is a description of Formosante which also serves a double function in the narrative. When Amazan writes impromptu verses praising the princess' beauty, they are quickly ridiculed:

il [Amazan's poem] fut critiqué par quelques seigneurs de la vieille cour, qui dirent qu'autrefois dans le bon temps on aurait comparé Bélus au soleil, et Formosante à la lune, son cou à une tour, et sa gorge à un boisseau de froment...⁶

The magnificence of the suggested comparisons is completely destroyed by the final image, her chest being compared to a bushel of wheat. There is an implied condemnation of those who would criticize literature without being able to write in

⁴ Op.cit., p. 119.

⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

⁶ Ibid., p. 374.

an acceptable manner themselves. The final image could be a reference to the Song of Solomon 7.3.: "Ton corps est un tas de froment"⁷. Since the final image borrowed from the Bible minimizes the images which proceed it, the use of this image for this purpose could be seen as criticizing the Bible.

These rather concise humorous descriptions have somewhat longer counterparts that serve similar functions. In many of the *contes* Voltaire employs exaggeration to an analogous effect. Often he produces a comical portrait by describing the female characters using a long list of superlatives. A good example is the description of Almona's body when she allows the old priest to observe her:

elle laissa voir le sein le plus charmant que la Nature eut jamais formé. Un bouton de rose sur une pomme d'ivoire n'eût paru auprès que de la garance sur du buis, et les agneaux sortant du lavoir, auraient semblé d'un jaune brun. Cette gorge, ses grands yeux noirs qui languissaient en brillant doucement d'un feu tendre, ses joues animées de la plus belle pourpre mêlée au blanc de lait le plus pur, son nez qui n'était pas comme la tour du mont Liban, ses lèvres, qui étaient comme deux bordures de corail renfermant les plus belles perles de la Mer d'Arabie...⁸

Despite the neutral third person narrative, the description is comical because of the use of hyperbole. The superlative is used four times in the description of Almona: "le sein le plus charmant...ses joues animées de la plus belle pourpre mêlée au blanc de lait le plus pur...renfermant les plus

⁷ La Sainte Bible, (Paris: Société Biblique de Paris, 1935), p.531.

⁸ Op.cit., p. 61-62.

belles perles de la mer d'Arabie..."⁹. The other comparisons suggest physical perfection. This description is, however, significant on another level. It is quite clearly a parody of the Song of Solomon in the Bible. The general tone is similar to the Song of Songs in that the description of the woman proceeds on a feature by feature basis with a comparison to describe the beauty of each attribute. It is important to note that the comparisons in the Bible do not, as Voltaire does, employ the superlative. Thus, Voltaire implicitly criticizes the Bible because the use of the superlative allows Voltaire's depiction of Almona to surpass the description found in the Bible. There are, however, two instances of direct contradiction of the holy text which represent more direct criticism. In the Song of Solomon 4. 2., it is written: "tes dents sont comme un troupeau de brebis tondues, qui remontent de l'abreuvoir ..." ¹⁰. This is directly contradicted in the description of Almona: "*les agneaux sortant du lavoir auraient semblé d'un jaune brun*" ¹¹. Thus, Voltaire criticizes the Bible by minimizing the description in the Song of Solomon. There is one instance when he uses negation to an analogous effect. In the Song of Songs 7. 5., it is written: "ton nez est comme la tour de

⁹ Ibid., p.61-62.

¹⁰ Op.cit., p.529.

¹¹ Op.cit., p.61-62.

Liban"¹². This image is used in a negative sense by Voltaire "son nez, qui n'était pas comme la tour du mont Liban "¹³. It would thus appear that this is a negative comparison in the Bible, rather than a positive one. Almona's description, therefore, surpasses that of a well known biblical archetype. It is not then surprising that the sight of her makes the priest feel as though he is twenty years old again. Indeed, it would seem that the reader sees Almona through his eyes. This is another instance of Voltaire criticizing the Bible, and therefore the Church. This description, therefore, also fulfils another philosophical aim.

This type of perfect physical beauty is also how la vieille in Candide remembers herself. It is important that this description is not in the neutral third person but in the first person. [La vieille, who represents wisdom, is in charge of her own description and is aware of her own body. Voltaire empowers his female characters by giving them a voice and by allowing them to tell their own stories. Thus, their unique female point of view of their personal history is not usurped by a male narrator,) as is the case in Manon Lescaut, for example. La vieille proves herself perfectly capable of recounting her own story. She even compares herself to a work of art:

ma gorge se formait; et quelle gorge! blanche,
ferme, taillée comme celle de la Vénus de Médicis;
et quels yeux! quelles paupières! quels sourcils

¹² Op.cit., 531.

¹³ Op.cit., p.153-154.

noirs! quelles flammes brillaient dans mes deux prunelles, et effaçaient la scintillation des étoiles, comme me disaient les poètes du quartier. Les femmes qui m'habillaient et qui me déshabillaient tombaient en extase en me regardant par-devant et par-derrière, et tous les hommes auraient voulu être à leur place...¹⁴

Similar effects to those produced by the use of the superlative are achieved by the use of generalization *tous les hommes*, and also through the use of exclamation. The use of the adjective *quel* before each of her physical attributes followed by an exclamation point clearly suggests that they are of an exceptional beauty. The phrase which follows, *comme me disaient les poètes du quartier*, contradicts all that precedes it, because it then all becomes relative. This deflating effect can be seen as serving another function. It can be taken as criticism for the poets of the time who often wrote poems praising the women of the nobility in order to gain favour.

The first depiction of Formosante in La Princesse de Babylone has elements in common with the previous two of *la vieille* and *Almona*. Voltaire writes:

ce qu'il y avait de plus admirable à Babylone, ce qui éclipsait tout le reste, était la fille unique du roi, nommée Formosante. Ce fut d'après ses portraits et ses statues que dans la suite de siècles Praxitèle sculpta son Aphrodite, et celle qu'on nomma la Vénus aux belles fesses. Quelle différence, ô ciel! de l'original aux copies!...¹⁵

The same procedures are used to the same effect. The use of

¹⁴ Op.cit., p.153-154.

¹⁵ Op.cit., p.370.

the superlative ("ce qu'il y avait de plus admirable"¹⁶), the comparison to works of art, and the exclamations all serve to create the impression of unsurpassable beauty. The humorous and caricatural description of Formosante approaches hyperbole, much like the depictions of Almona and *la vieille*. The exaggeration produces a similarly humorous effect. While many of these descriptions fulfil other goals as well, their function within the text is primarily comical. They are part of the tone in which the *contes* were written, which makes the satire possible.

Implications of Beauty

If there is one female protagonist who embodies all the ideal qualities, it must be Astarté in Zadig. She would seemingly be perfection personified. This is even expressed through her name with its obvious roots in the latin *astrum*, or star. Her name suggests she is a luminous archetype of perfection. She proves herself to be active, intelligent, scrupulously moral and unswervingly faithful. Indeed D. J. Adams writes:

dans Zadig, la femme vertueuse n'a jamais à affronter des situations où elle doit compromettre son honneur pour faire le bien. Tout finit bien pour Astarté: elle garde son honneur et on a l'impression que la Providence qui agit toujours pour le mieux, selon Jesrad, met à l'épreuve la seule fortitude de la reine. Elle croit à la vertu, et, si elle souffre des tourments parce

¹⁶ Ibid.

qu'elle aime Zadig sans le vouloir, son attachement
à la vertu ne nuit à qui que ce soit...¹⁷

Astarté's moral and intellectual perfection is completed by her physical perfection. Throughout Zadig she remains a paragon of beauty. Indeed, her beauty is great enough that at the beginning of the conte Zadig is so taken by it that he seemingly forgets his wife Azora's name: "Astarté était beaucoup plus belle que cette Sémire qui haïssait tant les borgnes, et que cette autre femme qui avait voulu couper le nez à son époux..."¹⁸. When Zadig and Astarté are later reunited her beauty remains unchanged. Zadig sees his name written by her: "main divine"¹⁹ and although her identity is unknown to Zadig, her beauty is evident : "sa taille paraissait majestueuse, mais son visage était couvert d'un voile..."²⁰. Her beauty is, therefore, a reflection of her overall perfection, and it remains constant because of the unchanging nature of her character.

It would, however, be erroneous to assume that in Voltaire's contes that beauty is tantamount to virtue or strength of character. In fact, beauty guarantees nothing. *La vieille* is the only notable example of a woman who is first presented as not beautiful. The other women are either

¹⁷ Op.cit., p.139.

¹⁸ Op.cit., p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.76.

²⁰ Ibid.

beautiful or pretty, and *la vieille* was beautiful at one time. Often the adjective *belle* precedes the female character's names: "*la belle Missouf*"²¹, "*la belle Almona*"²², "*la belle Astarté*"²³, "*la belle Cunégonde*"²⁴, "*la belle Saint-Yves*"²⁵, "*la belle Formosante*"²⁶, "*la belle Aldée*"²⁷. There is also a tendency for the women to remain beautiful regardless of their character. Missouf, for example, merits her name *la belle capricieuse*. The ever reasonable Zadig remarks to her: "Madame, toute belle que vous êtes, vous mériteriez que je vous battisse à mon tour, tant vous êtes extravagante..."²⁸. Thus, her admirable qualities are superficial. This is also true of Sémire: "que sa beauté, sa naissance et sa fortune rendaient le premier parti de Babylone..."²⁹. She is admired for things she has obtained by chance and not because she has done anything or displayed any qualities worthy of admiration. So, although beauty and virtue are not mutually

²¹ Ibid., p.46.

²² Ibid., p.62.

²³ Ibid., p.77.

²⁴ Op.cit., p.142.

²⁵ Op.cit., p.146.

²⁶ Op.cit., p.375.

²⁷ Ibid., p.380.

²⁸ Op.cit., p.44-45.

²⁹ Ibid., p.6.

exclusive, as the example of Astarté proves, they are neither inextricably linked, as is the case with both Missouf and Sémire.

Loss of Beauty and its Implications

There are two notable examples of women who become ugly, and both arise in Candide. The female characters in question are, of course, Cunégonde and *la vieille*. It is important to note the similarities between the two characters. Both are women of noble birth who pride themselves on their lost beauty. Both undergo a series of hardships, which rob them of their beauty and any advantages their birth might have afforded them. Cunégonde is first presented as: "sa fille Cunégonde âgée de dix-sept ans était haute en couleur, fraîche, grasse et appétissante"³⁰. It is only when she must confront the real world that Cunégonde's beauty is marred:

un grand Bulgare, haut de six pieds, voyant qu'à ce spectacle j'avais perdu connaissance, se mit à me violer; cela me fit revenir, je repris mes sens, je criai, je me débattis, je mordis, j'égratignai, je voulais arracher les yeux à ce grand Bulgare, ne sachant pas que tout ce qui arrivait...était une chose d'usage; le brutal me donna un coup de couteau dans le flanc gauche dont je porte encore la marque...³¹

Cunégonde's first experience of the world proves that her beauty and noble birth will, in no way, protect her from harm. Her acquired knowledge is represented by her physical

³⁰ Op.cit., p.119.

³¹ Ibid., p.144.

imperfection, the scar. Cunégonde exhibits a condescending attitude, even when *la vieille* tells her that her own misfortunes are no greater than what she has faced. Cunégonde's response reveals that she still believes her noble birth gives her greater cause to complain:

Cunégonde se mit presque à rire, et trouva cette bonne femme fort plaisante, de prétendre être plus malheureuse qu'elle...Hélas! lui [*la vieille*] dit-elle [Cunégonde] ...ajoutez que je suis née baronne avec soixante et douze quartiers, et que j'ai été cusinière...³²

Despite the adversity she has had to face, Cunégonde still clings to the notion that her birth affords her certain advantages. She is, evidently, unaware of the fact that her birth is something she acquired by chance, which is equally true of her beauty. She takes both her birth and her beauty for granted, believing that both should afford her advantages over others who do not possess them.

Even *la vieille* is insistent on the nobility of her own birth. She effectively shows the superiority of her own birth over Cunégonde's:

je suis la fille du pape Urbain X, et de la princesse de Palestrine. On m'éleva jusqu'à quatorze ans dans un palais auquel tous les châteaux de vos barons allemands n'auraient pas servi d'écurie; et une de mes robes valait mieux que toutes les magnificences de la Vestphalie...³³

Although she insists somewhat upon her rank in society ("je ne vous dirai point combien il est dur pour une jeune

³² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.153.

princesse d'être menée esclave à Maroc avec sa mère"³⁴), ultimately she realises that her rank is a manmade concept that means very little: "j'ai vieilli dans la misère et dans l'opprobre, n'ayant que la moitié d'un derrière, me souvenant toujours que j'étais fille d'un pape..."³⁵. She tries to show Cunégonde that she is in the same situation: "la vieille dit à Cunégonde: Mademoiselle, vous avez soixante et douze quartiers, et pas une obole..."³⁶. *La vieille* has accepted that her rank means nothing, and the misfortune she has suffered has taken her beauty. She is admired for, and is able to survive because of her experience and merit. The emphasis on her merit is an obvious condemnation of the nobility who did not owe their authority to merit, but to chance.

This is a lesson it takes Cunégonde considerably longer to learn. When she discovers *la vieille*'s true identity, she alters her behaviour out of respect for her rank, and not because of her merits: "la belle Cunégonde, ayant entendu l'histoire de la vieille, lui fit toutes les politesses qu'on devait à une personne de son rang et de son mérite..."³⁷. It is not until Cunégonde has been reduced to strenuous labour that she becomes useful. Cacambo explains to Candide:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.155.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.164.

"Cunégonde lave les écuelles sur le bord de la Propontide, chez un prince qui a très-peu d'écuelles; elle est esclave dans la maison d'un ancien souverain... mais, ce qui est bien plus triste, c'est qu'elle a perdu sa beauté, et qu'elle est devenue horriblement laide..."³⁸. Thus, Cunégonde's confrontation with the harsh realities of life mars her physically to the point that she becomes ugly. Just as her experience expands, so does her physical imperfection, which began with the scar she received from the Bulgarian soldier.

It may be that these two women lose their beauty, unlike so many other female characters, because they somehow had more to learn and farther to fall. This can be seen as a criticism of the powers of the nobility, to which both Cunégonde and *la vieille* belong. They owed their authority not to any kind of merit, but to pure hazard, just as Cunégonde and *la vieille* owe their birth and beauty to chance. Perhaps Voltaire is suggesting that merit should be a more important factor in determining who holds power, and that it is more important what you contribute to society than your place in it. *La vieille* and Cunégonde only become useful after they have lost their birth right and their beauty.

Physical Mistreatment and Abuse

Thus, in many cases, Voltaire's description of women's bodies and what they are subjected to often contains a more

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.244.

serious social criticism. His criticism is not always so neatly veiled. There are many cases of violence and mistreatment that he portrays openly in the *contes*. Again, this should not be seen as misogyny. Voltaire portrays these acts as because they are crimes, which he finds reprehensible. They are the objects of his criticism, and not of his approval. The *contes* truly are replete with the rape, mutilation and general mistreatment of women because those were the conditions under which they lived.

Many of the women in the *contes* are generally mistreated. Cossi-Sancta's husband: "la punit de ce qu'on la trouvait belle..."³⁹. Thus, her beauty is a source of misfortune for her. *La vieille* suffers corporal punishment: "j'échus en partage à un boïard, qui me fit sa jardinière, et qui me donnait vingt coups de fouet par jour..."⁴⁰. Cunégonde is also subjected to physical punishment after she is found with Candide : "Cunégonde s'évanouit: elle fut souffletée par madame la baronne dès qu'elle fut revenue à elle-même..."⁴¹. Missouf is also mistreated. When confronted by Zadig the Egyptian "laisse la dame, qu'il tenait d'une main par les cheveux..."⁴². There were no laws in the eighteenth century to prevent this kind of violence. Zadig respects women

³⁹ Op.cit.,p.27.

⁴⁰ Ibid.,p. 161.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.121.

⁴² Op.cit.,p.43.

because he respects all life. His position is far more humane and far more reasonable than that of Clétofis and others who abuse women: "« Si vous avez quelque l'humanité, je vous conjure de respecter la beauté et la faiblesse. Pouvez-vous outrager ainsi un chef-d'oeuvre de la Nature, qui est à vos pieds, et qui n'a pour sa défense que des larmes? »... "43. Indeed, it is Zadig who leads the campaign to abolish the ritual burning of widows on their husband's funeral pyres. Voltaire writes: "on eut au seul Zadig l'obligation d'avoir détruit en un jour une coutume si cruelle, qui durait depuis tant de siècles. Il était donc le bienfaiteur de l'Arabie..."44. Given that Voltaire presents Zadig as exceptionally reasonable, it is likely that his own position is comparable to Zadig's.

Many women in the *contes* are treated by the male characters as objects. They are treated like goods rather than like human beings. When Orcan's men come to carry Sémire off they are so rough with her that she is injured: "les ravisseurs la saisirent, et dans les emportements de leur violence ils la blessèrent..."45. In La Princesse de Babylone, the kings of Egypt and India agree to join forces to dethrone Bélus and that: "ils tireraient au sort la belle

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p.54.

45 Ibid., p.7.

Formosante..."⁴⁶, as if she were a prize and not a person. The best example of women being treated as objects is probably found in *Candide*. When the ship that *la vieille*, her mother and their entourage is attacked by pirates, the women are first subjected to an internal search. The men then begin to fight over the women and are so consumed in their combat that they literally tear the women limb from limb.⁴⁷ The attitude of these male characters is a reflection of a society which has dehumanised women to the point that they are not regarded primarily as people, but as things.

This is further reflected in the numerous rapes which take place in the contes. This most profound of violations takes many forms. *La vieille*, for example, is rather blunt in describing what happened to her: "...j'étais pucelle. Je ne le fus pas longtemps: cette fleur qui avait été réservée pour le beau prince de Massa-Carrara, me fut ravie par le capitaine corsaire..."⁴⁸. Formosante finds she is not even safe in her own bed: "chacun sait comment le roi d'Éthiopie devint amoureux de la belle Formosante, et comment il la surprit au lit, lorsqu'un doux sommeil fermait ses longues paupières..."⁴⁹. Although Formosante is never actually raped, it is something with which she is twice threatened. The

⁴⁶ Op.cit., p. 375.

⁴⁷ Op.cit., p.157.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.155-156.

⁴⁹ Op.cit., p.431.

other instance takes the form of an ultimatum delivered to her by the King of Egypt. He states:

vous avez fait très-peu de cas de moi lorsque j'étais à Babylone; il est juste de punir les dédaigneuses et les capricieuses: vous aurez, s'il vous plaît, la bonté de souper avec moi ce soir; vous n'aurez point d'autre lit que le mien, et je me conduirai avec vous selon que j'en serai content...⁵⁰

He evidently believes his power to be all encompassing. His authority is, in his mind, so absolute that it extends to Formosante's body. It is only by deception that she is able to escape being raped.

Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves is not so fortunate to be able to avoid being raped. She, too, is given an ultimatum. She refuses Saint-Pouange's advances, believing that she would be betraying *l'Ingénu*. Finally: "il lui déclara que c'était le seul moyen de tirer de sa prison l'homme auquel elle prenait un intérêt si violent et si tendre..."⁵¹. Thus, Voltaire exposes the frequent abuse of power, which often took place at the royal court. Indeed, forcing women into situations where they are in essence sexually assaulted is presented as an everyday experience. *La dévote* assures Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves: "les affaires ne se font guère autrement dans cette cour si aimable, si galante, si renommée. Les places les plus médiocres et les plus considérables n'ont souvent été données qu'au prix qu'on

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.390.

⁵¹ *Op.cit.*, p.152.

exige de vous..."⁵². It would, in fact, seem that it is such a common experience that it is no longer seen as an abuse, even by *la dévote* who encourages Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves to yield, but as a means to an end. Thus, the question that arises is how many women were forced into situations similar to that of Saint-Yves, and were subjected to sexual assault.

Women and War

Voltaire realized that for women, rape, mistreatment and mutilation were the consequences of war. He proves in the *contes* that he is well aware that women were often the victims of war. In *Candide* especially, his abhorrence of war is evident through his descriptions of armies and battlefields, but his depiction of the aftermath is particularly poignant. Voltaire writes: "...leurs femmes égorgées, qui tenaient leurs enfants à leurs mamelles sanglantes; là des filles éventrées après avoir assouvi les besoins naturels de quelques héros, rendaient les derniers soupirs; d'autres à demi brûlées criaient qu'on achevât de leur donner la mort..."⁵³. Voltaire portrays war as a culmination of all the worst abuses to which women were subjected. Women are the objects of gratuitous rape and mutilation in overwhelming proportions. This portrayal of

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁵³ *Op.cit.*, p.126-127.

the outcome of war has proved itself timeless. It is not a phenomenon unique to the eighteenth century.

The savagery which the hardships of war tend to create is also dealt with. The women in the harem are mutilated to provide nourishment to the soldiers in order to allow them to remain faithful to their oath not to surrender to the enemy. It is, therefore, obvious that the soldiers value their own pride over human life. *La vieille* describes what happens when the soldiers are faced with starvation:

au bout de quelques jours ils résolurent de manger les femmes...Coupez, dit-il, seulement une fesse à chacune de ces dames, vous ferez très bonne chère; s'il faut y revenir, vous en aurez encore autant dans quelques jours; le ciel vous saura gré d'une action si charitable, et vous serez secourus...⁵⁴

The brutality of war is emphasised by the feeble excuse the women are later given for such cruel treatment. The doctor who eventually attends to the women "nous assura que dans plusieurs sièges pareille chose était arrivée, et que c'était la loi de la guerre,..."⁵⁵. So although Voltaire thoroughly abhors war and its consequences, he does not, as some of its critics do, forget that it also affects many who do not fight on the battlefield. He is completely aware that many women are physically abused, mutilated and tortured during the course of a campaign.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.160-161.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.161.

Sexual Abuse and Mistreatment

There is, however, no need for extraordinary circumstances for women to be exploited. There are examples of the exploitation of women such as prostitution and of women degrading themselves in order to gain something in return. Paquette, in Candide, is the only genuine prostitute in the *contes*, and Voltaire depicts her fairly sympathetically. It is not an enviable position in the least. She finds herself in this situation because she feels obligated to prostitute herself. She explains what happens after she is driven out of the castle: "si un fameux médecin n'avait pas pris pitié de moi, j'étais morte. Je fus quelque temps *par reconnaissance*⁵⁶ la maîtresse de ce médecin..."⁵⁷. She is eventually forced into actual prostitution out of necessity: "le juge m'élargit à condition qu'il succéderait au médecin. Je fus bientôt supplantée par une rivale, chassée sans récompense, et obligée de continuer ce métier abominable..."⁵⁸. Voltaire again empowers one of his female characters by giving her control over her own narrative. Thus, although those around Paquette treat her very much as an object, Voltaire raises her to the level of subject in the narrative. Paquette is not a unique example. All female

⁵⁶ My italics.

⁵⁷ Op.cit., p.227.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

characters of any consequence are given a voice and are allowed to relate their stories in a first person narrative. The stories of both Cunégonde and *la vieille* are both told in first person narration and they occupy a chapter or more in *Candide*. In *Zadig*, Astarté also describes what happens to her in the first person. So, although all of his characters are the creations of Voltaire and controlled by him, Voltaire establishes an equality among them by allowing them all a voice in the narrative.

Many women in the contes feel obligated to disgrace themselves, to compromise their virtue in order to make some kind of gain. Often, as is the case with Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves, it is not the woman who is directly benefitting. Like the case of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves, many of these instances can be considered tantamount to rape. Although Cosi-Sancta agrees to sleep with three men, it is because she feels obligated to save a male: her husband, her brother and her son. She assures their safety by herself becoming a martyr, as is noted at the end of the conte. Zadig is saved from the mages only when Cadour "apaisa l'affaire par le moyen d'une fille d'honneur à laquelle il avait fait un enfant..."⁵⁹. Zadig is also saved by Almona. Despite the fact that she does not truly sacrifice her virtue, she must still bare herself before the priests in order to obtain their signatures and thus Zadig's freedom. Although these women ultimately are doing good, it is at their own expense.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

Their sacrifice is accepted by those around them as normal and natural. Their bodies may have been one of the few areas over which women could have had any notable degree of control, but even here they are open to abuse.

The female body, therefore, proves to be a rich source of information regarding Voltaire's attitude towards women and his portrayal of them in the *contes*. In many cases the function of the female body within the text is comical. It is necessary to remember that Voltaire's *contes* are essentially satirical in nature, meaning that they contain biting wit, irony and sarcasm intended to expose and discredit vice and folly. Through many techniques he produces a humorous effect, and although this is the description's primary objective, there are often other underlying aims. The secondary functions of these descriptions may include both character development and social criticism.

There are many cases, however, where social criticism is not a secondary function. By depicting the abuses to which women were subjected, especially physical abuses like prostitution, rape, and mutilation, Voltaire's portrayal of the female body allows it to become more than an object for description. It becomes an essential element to the social criticism and the satire inherent in the *contes*. If Voltaire recounts this type of mistreatment, it is not because he approves of it; rather it is to underscore it as an instance of injustice that is unacceptable. He achieves this through

the use of irony, the negative judgements of behaviour demeaning to women and also through his highly sympathetic portraits of women and the adversity they faced. As Zadig's position proves, it is not women's physical weakness in comparison to men that renders violence against them intolerable, but the fact that no human being should be subjected to brutality. This suggests that Voltaire saw both women and men as being equals, and this is ultimately desirable and progressive for the time.

Conclusion

The full title of Candide ou l'optimisme seemingly outlines rather clearly the major subject of Voltaire's satire. The principle object of the story is a philosophical system dead for nearly two hundred years. It seems, therefore, to be of a questionable utility to the resolution of present day dilemmas. Many of Voltaire's titles create a similar effect. The titles of Zadig ou la destinée, Histoire orientale, L'Ingénu: Histoire véritable, Cosi-Sancta and La Princesse de Babylone would suggest that these *contes* are essentially fanciful tales meant to entertain. Their value to modern society seems questionable. They are, however, extremely deceptive titles. On the surface Voltaire's *contes* succeed extremely well in exposing and detailing the abuses present in his society, but they are considerably more meaningful on a more profound level. If Voltaire's works were relevant only to eighteenth-century France, they would have fallen into oblivion long ago. They would be seen as vignettes of a world that once was. The fact is, nonetheless, that they are still read. This is because Voltaire goes beyond the confines of eighteenth-century French society. His fiction goes to the heart of many fundamental human problems which remain to be solved.

The majority of this thesis has dealt primarily with the roles women played in a select number of Voltaire's *contes*. As much as possible, Voltaire's portrayal of women is kept within its historical context, since it is somewhat anachronistic to judge a work by standards which did not exist at the time of its creation. The divergence between the status of women in the eighteenth century and what Voltaire would have their status be, as revealed by his portrayal of women in the *contes* is striking. His depiction of women shows quite clearly that Voltaire believed women to be the equals of men. A constant concern throughout this thesis has been instances where Voltaire treated women and men in the same manner. It is important to note that this is true in almost all cases. [The equality Voltaire establishes between his male and female characters in his fiction is evident through the similarities of the depiction of men and women, the equal treatment the two receive and the fact that women are not deprived of the first person narrative.] Since Voltaire essentially views men and women first and foremost as human beings, both men and women are prey to their emotions, and both are capable of intelligence and strength.] Men and women also act and react in comparable manners. This equality Voltaire advocates was contrary to the status of women and the laws of not only France, but much of eighteenth-century Europe.

In his portrayal of women, Voltaire raises many questions concerning women's basic human liberties which

were, and to a great degree still are, infringed upon. Women are, before the law, the equals of men: in one sense, then, the ends of Voltaire's philosophy have been served. Throughout the *contes* in question, it is obvious that Voltaire uses the mistreatment of one of the most oppressed groups in absolutist France as a metaphor for the injustice which pervaded his society. Because women were one of the groups with the fewest rights, the abuses to which they were subjected provided an excellent opportunity for Voltaire to contrast the abuse of power on the part of the authorities with the injustices that many individuals suffered in eighteenth-century France. He is highly critical of a closed system of institutions which support one another in their political and philosophical positions in order to maintain their own authority. p. 5

Women today have been inspired to take a much more active role in society, but more importantly also in their own lives. This is a change from the more restricted possibilities presented to the women in Voltaire's *contes*. Voltaire clearly shows the paradox faced by women of his time. There are some women in his fiction who seek the advice of others in order to increase their possibility of escaping some of the undesirable roles society assigned them. The irony is that, depending on the counselor and their personal interests, more often than not these women see any possibility evaporate before their eyes. The women's movement has taught women to be more vocal and to

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independently assess their situation. It is the lack of this necessary assessment which, in effect, leads many of the women in Voltaire's contes to their destruction. Voltaire shows through his writings that this complicity between Church and State is unacceptable to him. He clearly shows that it only leads to abuses which become seen as normal, which is evident through the attitude of the *dévôte* in L'Ingénu.

Many women are still treated like property by their husbands, much like *Cosi-Sancta*, not as equals, as women are portrayed by Voltaire. Much of the mistreatment the women in the contes experience is still present today. *Cunégonde*, *la vieille* and *Missouf* are all physically abused. Although their stories are fictions created over two hundred years ago, they could just as easily have been reported in a modern newspaper. Women's treatment in time of war has changed very little from that depicted by Voltaire in Candide in particular, as the mass rape of Bosnian women attests. *Cunégonde's* experience of war remains timeless: the same abuses continue. Rape and harassment are ever present threats to many women, just as they are for *Formosante*, *Cunégonde*, *la vieille*, *Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves* and many of Voltaire's female characters. *Saint-Pouange's* odious proposition to *Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves* lives on in boardrooms and elsewhere. Thus women's bodies can still be considered as a metaphor for their status. This is true of Voltaire's portrayal in the contes. Although Voltaire may

use his portrayal of women's bodies in the contes as a vehicle for his philosophy, he is aware that it was through their bodies that women were most often, most profoundly and most evidently exploited. There are examples from present day society are not dissimilar to those criticized by Voltaire.

The reason for modern examples of bias is simple. Modern opinion is still very much influenced by the institutions and attitudes which shaped eighteenth-century society. Ideas may have been altered somewhat by ensuing events, but the fundamental basis of society remains the same. This is why Voltaire remains relevant to modern readers and to modern women. The fundamental concern in Voltaire's short prose fiction for both individual liberty and the equality he creates among his characters, as shown through his portrayal of women, is a reasonable explanation for his popularity during the period of the French Revolution. The philosophical principles of the Revolution are also those of Voltaire: liberty, equality and brotherhood. Indeed, in the final garden of Candide it is not a brotherhood, but a community of men and women. Although the subtitle of Candide ou l'optimisme is deceptive, it is not merely a satire of a philosophical system: the true substance of Voltaire's short narrative fiction remains primarily focused on universal human problems. Voltaire is important in order to understand where we came from, what we are, and because his philosophy shows that, although it is

not ideal, it is possible to ameliorate the society we have
been given.

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