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Voltaire, *Siècle de Louis XIV*, sous la direction de Diego Venturino. *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vols. 11A, 11B, 12, 13A, 13B, 13C et 13D. 3,105 pp. £700.00. Notes, illustrations, listes, tables, ouvrages cités, et index. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2015-2019. ISBN 9780729412131.

Review by Reginald McGinnis, University of Arizona.

This edition of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* is part of the Voltaire Foundation's *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*--an immense undertaking begun in 1968 that is now drawing near completion. As with each of the more than 200 volumes of the *Oeuvres complètes*, these volumes contain "Voltaire's own notes and all known authentic variants" as well as "unpublished and unedited texts" with critical introductions and annotation.[1] With these seven substantial tomes, we are far from the "édition commode en deux petits volumes," which, according to Voltaire's original preface, was to be preferred to "une [édition] plus magnifique et plus grande" (11B, p. 205), encompassing, as they do, close to three centuries of editorial history.

First conceived in the 1720s when the reign of the late monarch was still a recent memory and opinion was largely unfavorable, Voltaire's contrarian *Siècle de Louis XIV* would not be published until 1751. In his ample introduction, Diego Venturino traces the path that led Voltaire from Paris to London and from Cirey to Potsdam, and from his beginnings as a playwright and a poet to his appointment as historiographer of Louis XV and the long elaboration of an original and controversial work: original in its "philosophical" approach, emphasizing a search for truth and the progress of the human mind over descriptions of military operations and the lives of members of the royal family; controversial notably in that Voltaire's praise of the magnificence of Louis XIV's reign was implicitly critical of Louis XV.

To emphasize the originality of Voltaire's approach to history is, however, not to ignore his reliance on the work of earlier historians. On the contrary, one of the main innovations of this edition is to show in unprecedented detail Voltaire's use of sources. "Il est désormais acquis," writes Venturino, "que Voltaire puise dans ses sources des informations, ce qui est naturel, mais aussi des expressions, des phrases et des mots à la lettre près, sans oublier nombre d'enchaînements argumentatifs" (11A, p. 179). "Il suffit," he adds, "de parcourir les notes du *Siècle* publiées dans la présente édition pour rencontrer, chapitre après chapitre, ligne après ligne, des emprunts textuels non déclarés" (11A p. 180). But such copying, we are reminded, was very much accepted at this time provided that what was copied was incorporated into an original narration. "Voltaire distille donc ses sources," as Venturino writes, "pour en tirer l'essence philosophique" (11A, p. 156).

In writing a history of the time of Louis XIV, Voltaire sought to offer a model for later centuries, including his own. [2] What was exemplary about Louis XIV, according to Voltaire, was not the man himself but the flowering of the arts and sciences during his reign. The perfection of taste associated with seventeenth-century France was, moreover, favorable, he believed, to the progress of laws and manners. “Le monde social,” Venturino observes, “s’éclaire par le haut, par mimesis, le commun des mortels finit par se faire guider par les sages.” (11A, p. 271). Voltaire’s readers might thus be led to adopt what Venturino calls “le nouveau credo des Lumières: la réforme éclairée de la société” (11A, p. 92).

The mockery of religious superstition familiar to readers of Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance*, *Philosophical Dictionary*, or *Candide* is also prevalent in passages of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, sometimes overtly as in the following lines on the expulsion of Cardinal Mazarin in 1652: “On fit promener dans Paris la châsse de Sainte Geneviève, pour obtenir l’expulsion du cardinal ministre; et la populace ne douta pas que cette sainte n’opérât ce miracle, comme elle donne de la pluie” (13A, p. 85). At other times, the humor is much more subtle, and likely to escape all but the most informed reader, as in Voltaire’s rewriting of sources concerning the murder of the abbé du Chaila: “Voltaire cache un trait ironique,” as Venturino shows, “derrière la solennité du discours direct et reste (à sa façon) proche de sa source. Il fait de l’ironie antireligieuse à l’insu de son lecteur, invisible si l’on ne connaît pas les sources” (11A, p. 197). Similarly, with respect to the work as a whole, the final chapter (“Disputes sur les cérémonies chinoises”) is interpreted by Venturino as suggesting that European superiority in the seventeenth century was artistic and scientific rather than moral or religious.

Venturino’s introduction emphasizes additionally the extent to which Voltaire rewrote not only the work of others but also his own in a relentless pursuit of concision: “Voltaire possède au dernier point l’art de résumer et des formules qui synthétisent. En ce sens, le *Siècle* est un incessant exercice de style” (11A, p. 199). The presentation of the “Catalogue des Écrivains” by Nicholas Cronk and Jean-Alexandre Perras, which follows Venturino’s introduction, similarly considers this catalogue as a literary text with its own style and objectives.

Volume 11B consists of a *dossier* with lists of manuscripts, editions and translations of Voltaire’s *Essai sur le siècle de Louis XIV* and *Siècle de Louis XIV* from 1739 to the 1780s, editorial principles of the Voltaire Foundation edition, and several appendices with textual variants, prefaces, letters, publishers’ forewords and articles. These texts, which are preceded here by brief introductions, variously attest to the ways in which Voltaire continually revised and added to his work. Also included in this volume are annexes on seventeenth-century iconography and books borrowed by Voltaire from the Royal Library, a chronology of subtitles, a recapitulative table of chapters, works cited, an index, and a general index for tomes 12, 13A, 13B, 13C, and 13D.

The various lists that have accompanied the *Siècle de Louis XIV* since its earliest editions form the contents of volume 12: “Liste raisonnée des enfants de Louis XIV,” “Souverains contemporains,” “Gouverneurs de Flandres,” “Maréchaux de France,” “Grands amiraux de France,” “Généraux des galères de France,” “Ministres d’Etat,” “Chanceliers,” “Surintendants des finances,” “Secrétaires d’Etat,” “Artistes célèbres,” and especially the “Catalogue de la plupart des écrivains français qui ont paru dans le siècle de Louis XIV, pour servir à l’histoire littéraire de ce temps.” One of the oddities of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* pertains to Voltaire’s insistence, notably in his introduction, on the arts and sciences and the brevity of the chapters actually devoted to these subjects. Presented as an integral part of the work rather than a marginal document, the

“Catalogue” appears as a complement to the chapters on the arts and sciences both in its content and its style. Entries to the “Catalogue” are compared in notes to Voltaire’s sources, mainly Charles-Jean-François Hénault’s *Nouvel abrégé chronologique*, Jean-Pierre Nicéron’s *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire des hommes illustres*, Louis Moréri’s *Grand Dictionnaire historique*, and Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. Voltaire’s view of specific authors is further elucidated through continual reference to his correspondence.

What particularly sets this edition apart from its predecessors is the extensive commentary on the text of Voltaire’s essay in volumes 13A, 13B, 13C, and 13D. Liminary notes situating each chapter, specifying (when appropriate) the time and conditions of its composition and providing a bibliographical overview, are invariably informative and well written. Venturino’s opening lines on chapter four (“Guerre civile”) are, in this respect, exemplary: “La guerre civile qui secoua la France à partir de 1648 est présentée comme un drame burlesque: drame, car les révoltes parisiennes (et bordelaises) firent vivre à la monarchie une réelle crise d’autorité, d’autant plus inquiétante qu’au même moment les Anglais se préparaient à envoyer Charles I^{er} à l’échafaud; burlesque, car la légèreté française, si elle n’est pas alourdie par le fanatisme religieux, finit aux yeux de Voltaire par tout tourner en dérision” (13A, p. 236).

Unlike nineteenth-century editions, characterized by the invasive presence of an annotator rewriting Voltaire’s interpretations in the light of later discoveries, notes to the present edition seek to illustrate the evolution of the work by including extensive quotations of borrowed, revised, or manipulated passages. These quotations show, for instance, how Voltaire rewrites a passage from Henri Philippe de Limiers’s *Histoire du règne de Louis XIV* replacing a chronological narrative of events with a synthesis of military innovations (13A, p. 319, note 12); how he pieces together lines on the improvement of the French army from two sources, Charles-Jean-François Hénault’s *Nouvel Abrégé chronologique de l’histoire de France* and Gabriel Daniel’s *Histoire de la milice française* (13A, p. 353, note 10); or how fourteen pages of Jacques Basnage’s *Annales des Provinces-Unies* are condensed by Voltaire into a single passage on the French and Dutch navies (13A, p. 353, note 12). Sources of anecdotes from the court of Louis XIV, including that of “l’homme au masque de fer”—aspects of which remain enigmatic as at the time of the last complete critical edition of Voltaire’s works in the 1870s[3]—are similarly well documented (13C, pp. 164–166).

Given the objectives of the Voltaire Foundation, these volumes are exceedingly well executed. The annotations are at once thorough, informative and non-invasive. Venturino and his collaborators are to be applauded for producing this edition that is bound to remain a definitive reference for years to come.

NOTES

[1] <https://www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/our-books/oeuvres-completes-de-voltaire>

[2] See, for instance, Pierre Force, “Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 6, 3 (2009), pp. 457–484 (465).

[3] See *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, éd. Louis Moland et al. 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier (1877–1885), 14, p. 427, note 1.

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