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Nicholas Cronk, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv + 235 pp. Images, notes, bibliography, and index. \$81.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-84973-9; \$29.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-521-61495-5.

Review by James Hanrahan, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

The *Cambridge Companion Series* is designed to appeal to graduate students in the North American market and it is, therefore, primarily as a teaching and study aid that its value should be judged. What should one expect from a *Companion* to Voltaire? For a start, such a work should show the breadth of his *œuvre* and the complexity of his relations with the reading public at a time when judicial, religious and royal censorship authorities vied to prevent pernicious works from entering the emerging public sphere; it should present the fundamental features of his political and social philosophy, and the contradictions in his thought; it should explain and justify his enduring appeal. Such a work should not necessarily provide us with a unified interpretation, as attempts to do so are, arguably, less interesting than the unveiling of the multiple masks that fall away to reveal an author who is continuously forging his own, often contradictory, image in almost every aspect of his work. An edited collection of essays is a suitable medium for the transmission of such a complex picture, and this collection succeeds in introducing many of aforementioned features.

As Director of the Voltaire Foundation, the collection's editor, Professor Nicholas Cronk, is in a good position to give both the more established and most promising Voltaire scholars the opportunity to provide analysis of the *philosophe* based on the most recent research. His own introduction, written in a very clear and approachable style, focuses on how Voltaire came to occupy such a dominant position in his time and exercise such continuing influence in ours. One of the reasons for his longevity is, perhaps, his mastery of so many different genres, which Cronk calls an "insurance policy with posterity." The introduction is an interesting point of departure as it steers clear of the kind of chronological biography (dealt with in broad brush strokes in the first essay by Geoffrey Turnovsky) that charts the intellectual and literary development of the author, explaining instead his legacy and his relevance to today's reader: "Voltaire's targets--stupidity, war, fanaticism, dogmatism--are perennial, and so we (must) continue to read him" (p.10).

As well as translating certain essays--all appear in English--and co-authoring (with David Beeson) a piece on 'Voltaire: philosopher or *philosophe*', Cronk contributes his own essay on 'Voltaire and authorship', which provides an important insight into how Voltaire conceived of his role as an author. Cronk suggests that Voltaire invented the idea of the writer and his place in society, which was a complex status in the eighteenth century. In order to be independent he had to first be rich; in order to control his image, he had to know his market. Voltaire knew his market well, and knew the power of small cheap volumes in attracting a larger readership. He knew how to handle rapacious publishers and how to counteract piracy. Most importantly, perhaps, he knew how to circumvent censorship, and, indeed, how to use it to his advantage. At a time when only the foolhardy would put their names to their writings, Voltaire played with the notion of authorship, adopting humorous pseudonyms, but always in the knowledge that his texts were instantly recognisable as being Voltairean.

Voltaire's practice of adopting pseudonyms is addressed in a number of the essays (Cronk, Goulbourne, Iotti, Mervaud), and this overlap is a feature of the contributions. A number of contributors also mention his relationship with the public sphere (Cronk, Beeson, Volpilhac-Auger, Ferret). This is not a fault, however, but shows the extent to which questions such as authorship and public opinion are, as suggested in the Introduction, inseparable from a proper understanding of Voltaire the poet, Voltaire the historian, Voltaire the polemicist, and Voltaire the *intellectuel engagé*.

Other contributors deal with more specific themes. John Leigh's essay on 'Voltaire and the myth of England' is an excellent example of clear, subtle analysis which does justice to the complexity of Voltaire's thought and the way in which it is influenced by broader circumstances that inflect its development. Voltaire himself admitted that England was a nation that he loved but could never live in. While he admired English government to a certain extent because of his "conviction that intellectual development and liberty form an interdependent and mutually encouraging pair of qualities" (p.85), he did exaggerate English liberty as a foil to the constraints on French subjects. While Voltaire's political thought is not dealt with in a specific essay dedicated to the topic, it is a feature of Leigh's essay, and is central to John Renwick's 'Voltaire and the politics of toleration,' which shows the extent to which Voltaire's calls for civil toleration of Protestants was part of a much larger socio-political programme. It could be argued that the absence of such an essay is problematic, but if one considers that the most comprehensive English-language work of this kind on Voltaire's thought before the publication of this work was David Williams's *Voltaire: Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), the decision to omit it is understandable.

Rather than choosing abstract topics which have been dealt with comprehensively elsewhere, Cronk seems to have focused on the areas of expertise of his contributors (which represent the current research areas in Voltaire Studies). Thus, Renwick, as editor of the *Traité sur la tolérance* for the *Complete Works of Voltaire*, is well placed to deal with the question of toleration—and, therefore, Voltaire's politics—within the broader debate on this question, which was taking place during the 1750s. Similarly, the question of Voltaire's religion, dealt with comprehensively in René Pomeau's seminal *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris: Nizet, 1956), is approached by Graham Gargett—author of *Voltaire and Protestantism* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1980)—through an analysis of Voltaire's critique of the Bible. Gargett shows how Voltaire's critical humour debunked dogmatic orthodox thought with small doses of reason. The *philosophe* had a field day on the early books of the Bible, wondering, for example, why the carnivorous species on Noah's Ark did not devour the rest. Another example is Olivier Ferret, author of an impressive monograph on Voltaire's pamphlets [*La Fureur de nuire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007)] who contributes an article on this very important area of Voltaire studies. The approach of taking specific angles on traditional questions is, perhaps, taken to its limit by Miguel Benítez whose article on 'Voltaire and clandestine manuscripts' is too specific to be of use to most students, and too general in its argument to be of real interest to researchers.

The variety of approaches to Voltaire's abundant activity does not come at the expense of a focus in the five central essays on the key areas of Voltaire's writing: his theatre, fiction, history and correspondence. Catherine Volpilhac-Auger focuses on 'Voltaire and history', and attempts to rehabilitate the *philosophe's* reputation as a historian, showing him to have been quite innovative in "shifting the reader's interest away from events [...] and towards the realm of 'opinion', and judging eyewitness and historical accounts according to the criteria of this critical history of the spirit, rather than adopting or rejecting them all together" (p.142). In a similar vein, Russell Goulbourne looks at Voltaire's long-forgotten reputation as a dramatist, but manages to broaden his argument to show a more general "preoccupation with theatricality" in all his writing (p.93). This essay joins two seemingly unrelated areas showing the relevance of both Voltaire's theatre and his chameleon-like adoption of various roles in his many dialogues.

Goulbourne's essay is followed and complemented by Gianni Iotti's analysis of 'Voltaire as story-teller.' The theatrical masks which Goulbourne saw Voltaire slip on in his dialogues are also present in his

narrative fiction as, according to Iotti, “[w]ith Voltaire, arguments are first and foremost personae or masks” (p.109). Iotti’s contribution is quite a rich exploration of the complexity of what appears on the surface to be quite simple; Voltaire is shown to be “a great parasite” (p.121) as in his narratives he interweaves reason and the unreason of his enemies, and oscillates between irony and enchantment with the targets of this irony. Philip Stewart provides the only article dedicated to a single work—*Candide*. This introduction to Voltaire’s most well-known text strikes a delicate balance between the varying approaches to the text (philosophical, autobiographical, literary); the final section will be particularly useful to students, as it contrasts different interpretations of the text’s ambiguous ending in a succinct manner.

A particularly pleasing contribution to this collection is Christiane Mervaud’s essay on ‘Voltaire’s correspondence,’ first because the topic could have easily been ignored. This would have been an oversight because, as Mervaud explains, “Voltaire’s correspondence is arguably his masterpiece” (p.153). Second, the letters are the only true autobiographical source and the foundation for much of the current research on Voltaire. Mervaud outlines the various strategies involved in Voltaire’s letter-writing and her article is an excellent warning to students about the pitfalls that await the *Voltaireiste*, one which those who cherry-pick quotes from the correspondence in order to prove a particular point about Voltaire would do well to heed. Recognising the literary value of Voltaire’s letters, Mervaud concludes judiciously that “each letter affords us the immediate pleasure unique to great writing” (p.164).

This pleasure is certainly one of the reasons why we still read him, but the final essay—Daniel Brewer’s ‘The Voltaire effect’—proposes another interpretation for his longevity. For Brewer, the ‘Voltaire effect’ “resides in the relation between his texts and the cultural practices that gave meaning to them” (p.207). In less abstract terms, a feature of this effect is “the act of cultural appropriation in which Voltaire becomes a text referred to more often than read” (p.210), a feature that is summed up in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* by the pretentious and incompetent M. Homais, who exhorts others to “Read Voltaire!”. In concluding, Brewer sounds Jean-Marie Goulemot’s note of caution, that “commemorative memory should not erase the antagonisms that define the cultural field producing the illusory image of a unified cultural past” (p.217). This final essay is a very fitting conclusion to a work on Voltaire—an infinitely quotable omnibus figure in Western history and culture—as it shows an awareness that it, and, indeed, the collection which it concludes, is propagating the “effect” it has sought to define, and therefore it does so cautiously, and critically.

Whether this *Companion to Voltaire* will get students to read the author rather than simply quote him is another matter, but it certainly provides a comprehensive introduction to the many facets of a complex and hugely influential literary figure.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Nicholas Cronk, “Introduction”

Geoffrey Turnovsky, “The Making of a Name: a Life of Voltaire”

Nicholas Cronk, “Voltaire and Authorship”

David Beeson and Nicholas Cronk, “Voltaire: Philosopher or *Philosophe*?”

Miguel Benítez, “Voltaire and Clandestine Manuscripts”

John Leigh, “Voltaire and the Myth of England”

Russell Goulbourne, “Voltaire’s Masks: Theatre and Theatricality”

Gianni Iotti, "Voltaire as Story-teller"

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Christiane Mervaud, "Voltaire's Correspondence"

Olivier Ferret, "Voltaire: Pamphlets and Polemic"

John Renwick, "Voltaire and the Politics of Toleration"

Graham Gargett, "Voltaire and the Bible"

Daniel Brewer, "The Voltaire Effect"

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