

British women novelists influenced by the theater knew that to act like a lady was, in a sense, to perform a role; consequently they incorporated theatrical images and practices into their fiction and, in doing so, called into question the ideals of femininity that their novels seem to support. Some novelists, like Inchbald, use theatrical practices to dramatize the abuses of masculine forms of authority; others, like Burney, call attention to the performative aspects of female experience and, in doing so denaturalize conduct-book equations between the countenance and character of the feminine ideal; some resemble Austen and Edgeworth; in different ways, both remind their readers that novels, like plays, are pieces of fiction and are thus to be experienced with a considerable degree of critical detachment” (174–75). Even as she attempts synthesis, however, Nachumi highlights the very different relationships to the theatre of each of the authors she cites and their highly varied agendas. Greater length devoted to argument and a much greater number of novelists examined in each category would be required in order truly to explore the influence of the theatre on the period’s novels by women.

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Alexander J. Nemeth. *Voltaire’s Tormented Soul: A Psychobiographic Inquiry*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses; Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2008. US\$80. 360pp. ISBN 978-0-934223-92-8.

François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, has had more than his fair share of biographies. Twice he attempted short, rather unsatisfactory memoirs of his life. His voluminous works plus thousands of letters, written over a period of more than 80 years, have furnished biographers, critics, and professors in several different disciplines with ample material for these works. Voltaire’s secrecy, evasions, contradictions, and downright lies have confounded biographers and led to different conclusions. He seemed to delight in mystifying his contemporaries and hence posterity. Was he born in November 1694, as his baptismal certificate indicates, or in February as he often claimed? Was his father the lawyer-notary François Arouet or was he the illegitimate son of the librettist Guérin de Rochebrune, as he liked to claim? These are two significant contradictions among many that his biographers face. Now Alexander J. Nemeth, a professional psychoanalyst with a life-long interest in Voltaire’s period, has attempted through his discipline to give a coherent, unified account of Voltaire’s life. His approach is one that his predecessors were not equipped to employ or would not have

dared use. He is careful in two appendices to explain his methodology: “Psychobiography Today” (324–25) and “Behavioral Clues as used in *Depth Psychology*” (326–27). Applying to Voltaire the methods practiced during his career as a forensic, clinical neuropsychologist, he sets out to penetrate the author’s subconscious and “his tormented soul,” where the contradictions of his life can be understood.

The Voltaire of many earlier biographies is present in Nemeth’s work. He gives accurate accounts of Voltaire’s exile in England, the Calas case, his quarrel with Maupertuis at the court of Frederick the Great. Nemeth is familiar with the works of the most reputable scholars—Gustave Lanson, René Pomeau, Norman L. Torrey, Ira O. Wade, Theodore Besterman, Peter J. Gay, J.H. Brumfitt, H.T. Mason—as well as the more popular works of Will and Ariel Durant, Nancy Mitford, and Jean Orioux. He acknowledges his debt to Haydn Mason, with whom he corresponded throughout the composition of this biography (13). It seems, however, that his debt is almost exclusively to works in English, even to translations of Lanson’s biography and Pomeau’s work on Voltaire’s religion. He rarely quotes Voltaire directly and, even then, not the current, critical, still unfinished *Complete Works*, published by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford. This seems not to have been an obstacle. After all, he is writing in English, and he draws on insightful hints from his predecessors and goes far beyond them in presenting Voltaire.

The most daring and unexpected idea to Voltaire scholars, which is central to Nemeth’s thesis, is the importance of the early years of Voltaire’s life: his bonding with his mother, the role she must have played in his early life, and her untimely death when he was only seven years old. Her death is, for Nemeth, “easily the most traumatic experience of his entire life” (76). It has been skipped over and ignored by the biographers largely because Voltaire himself revealed almost nothing about it; she is not even mentioned in his memoirs. It is the very omission of references to his mother that becomes so significant. What is known of her suggests she must have had “a fundamental influence on his intellectual development” (326), because of the intellectuals she attracted to the household, such as Voltaire’s godfather, the worldly Abbé de Châteauneuf. Was it there that the precocious Voltaire developed and showed off the wit for which he became famous? His father is equally absent from any account of his early years, but becomes a hostile force during Voltaire’s late adolescence. The author sees a strong bond with the mother and a weak or absent father. The absence of a strong “masculine identification model” in those early years can “jeopardize sound identify formation.” Nemeth believes this led to “difficulties in intimate relations with women” (75), which he explores at some length in this biography. The father tried to force the developing poet into a career as a lawyer.

His severe Jansenism, which Voltaire's brother Armand emulated, had little or no influence on Voltaire, especially after he entered the Jesuit Collège Louis le Grand, where, in contrast to the more bourgeois world of his father, Voltaire encountered some of the sons of the great noble families of France as well as a liberal education that was free of Jansenist severity. Nemeth attributes the psychosexual block from which Voltaire suffered, which amounted to impotence or at least a failure to satisfy women or himself sexually, to a fixation on his mother, "a defect in the normal developmental process of transitioning from attachment to mother to a loving involvement with another woman" (137).

The conflict of the two worlds, the bourgeois and the aristocratic, led Voltaire to become what Nemeth calls a "marginal man" (104), not completely at home in either world. How else could he spend fifteen years with the worldly, aristocratic, intellectual Emilie Du Châtelet, cultivate the friendship of the two sisters of Frederick the Great, and others of the nobility, and then take as his mistress, even while living with his "divine" Émilie, his niece Mme Denis, who then dominates his final 25 years? By all accounts she was fat, homely, vulgar, domineering, and truly ordinary in contrast to the extraordinary Mme Du Châtelet (249). Yet, Voltaire endowed her with qualities she did not possess. She "became a substitute for the loss sustained with the premature demise of his mother" (309). A similar contrast exists between his many aristocratic friends and the mediocre, ungrateful men whom he befriended and encouraged—Thiériot, Linant, La Harpe—although Nemeth dismisses the claim of homosexuality that some have made. Instead, Voltaire was trying to play the role of a beneficent father, encouraging men who turned out to be of doubtful moral character.

Nemeth examines Voltaire's temperament, his narcissistic personality, his need to be the centre of his world, which explains his bitter rivalry with his former friend Maupertuis for the king's attention, and his general lack of common sense at the court of Frederick the Great. Finally, emotional repression may account for Voltaire's constant ill health, for example his real suffering on the anniversary of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre.

This new biography presents a Voltaire that scholars will have to consider carefully, a new Voltaire that only a trained psychoanalyst could present. In that sense, Nemeth has performed a service and widened the field of Voltaire scholarship.

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