Voltaire (1694–1778)

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French writer. He is the embodiment of the 18th-century Enlightenment. He wrote histories, books of political analysis and philosophy, essays on science and literature, plays, poetry, and the satirical fable Candide (1759), his best-known work. A trenchant satirist of social and political evils, he was often forced to flee from his enemies and was twice imprisoned. His works include Lettres philosophiques sur les Anglais/Philosophical Letters on the English (1733) (essays in favour of English ways, thought, and political practice), Le Siècle de Louis XIV/The Age of Louis XIV (1751), and Dictionnaire philosophique/Philosophical Dictionary (1764).

Voltaire was born in Paris, the son of a notary, and used his pen-name from 1718. He was twice imprisoned in the Bastille and exiled from Paris 1716–26 for libellous political verse. Oedipe/Oedipus, his first essay in tragedy, was staged in 1718. While in England 1726–29 he dedicated an epic poem on Henry IV, La Henriade/The Henriade, to Queen Caroline, and on returning to France published the successful Histoire de Charles XII/History of Charles XII in 1731, and produced the play Zaïre in 1732.

He took refuge with his lover, the Marquise de Châtelet, at Cirey in Champagne, where he wrote the play Mérope (1743) and much of Le Siècle de Louis XIV. Among his other works are histories of Peter the Great, Louis XV, and India; the satirical tale Zadig (1748); La Pucelle/The Maid (1755), on Joan of Arc; and the tragedy Irène (1778). From 1751 to 1753 he stayed at the court of Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia, who had long been an admirer, but the association ended in deep enmity. From 1754 he established himself near Geneva, and after 1758 at Ferney, just across the French border.

His remains were transferred 1791 to the Panthéon in Paris.
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