

Book Reviews

Voltaire. *Poésies attribuées à Voltaire*, éd. Simon Davies. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2021 (*Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*), Vol. 146. 618p.

One of the many challenges in preparing the complete works of a writer resides in determining the extent of the corpus of texts. In the case of Voltaire, the task is frustratingly complex. Not only did he write more than practically anyone else; he often did not publish under his own name, hiding instead behind over 175 pseudonyms! To make matters worse, he frequently disavowed his own works. In every single edition of Voltaire's collected writings (even those published in his lifetime), there are pieces he did not write. Contemporary booksellers and printers were aware that the great man had a name that 'sold'. Printing spurious works was their way of cashing in on his success.

Beginning with the Kehl edition (1785) generations of scholars, have wrestled with the thorny problem of attribution. Their efforts resulted in a catalogue compiled by the Bibliothèque nationale which forms the basis for the verse presented in this volume. The editor, Simon Davies, has gathered up 170 poems attributed to Voltaire during his lifetime or shortly thereafter. These range from epigrams, short odes to longer narrative pieces, arranged alphabetically by their incipit. The first poem presented, for instance, is an 'énigme' whose first line reads "À la ville ainsi qu'en province". And so, we slowly work our way through the alphabet. It is not an uninteresting *parcours*. Each poem is preceded by a historical note which gives the circumstances surrounding its publication, and the argument linking it to Voltaire. Stylistic and thematic considerations are also brought to bear. Often the traditional attribution is tenuous or downright false and, as one might expect, two-thirds of the of the poems presented were not written by Voltaire at all. Davies makes this clear. Extremely fascinating are the previously unpublished poems that he argues convincingly were written by Voltaire, some recorded informally in his correspondence, and never intended for publication. One of these was a charming occasional piece written to celebrate the birth of a neighbour's son (p. 126). Another, equally charming bauble, was sent to the Countess Bentinck (p. 123).

Voltaire liked to refer to himself as 'le poète de *La Henriade*' and he was widely considered the period's greatest versifier, as well as an incomparable master of French prosody. But he was no poet in the sense that the word is understood since the Romantic period. Nowadays, his verse is little read except, on occasion, by specialists. So why publish an imposing volume of poems, most of which he did not write? Part of the reason lies in the Voltaire Foundation's aim to provide a modern scientific edition of Voltaire's complete works. Another reason is the renewed interest that scholars have shown in Voltaire's image as it evolved over his lifetime. Voltaire himself was fascinated by the idea of the apocryphal, and, oddly, the works attributed to him were an integral part of his ever-changing image as a writer. Reading the poems in this volume, we gain insight into the reception afforded his works by contemporary readers, some of whom set out to imitate Voltaire's style. We also catch a glimpse of a long-vanished society that placed great store in repartee, wit, invective, vivacity, eloquence, and diction.

Finally, allow me to add that the volumes produced by the Voltaire Foundation are of the highest quality, both materially and intellectually. Simon Davies and his editorial team are to be commended most heartily.

E. M. Langille

St. Francis Xavier University
