

Voltaire and Racine

Literature



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Voltaire's novel *Candide* is a satirical look on the concepts and beliefs that enveloped society during his days. On the one hand, it maintains Enlightenment claims about the futility of blind fate and disruptive passion, but on the other hand, it also calls for caution against too much philosophizing and incorrect logic brought about by the misuse of reason. The novel is evocative of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man." In this regard, one can claim that in looking into Racine's *Phaedra*, Voltaire will react both with pride and indignation, pride because the play illustrates the dangers he himself believes if passion and reason are not in check, and indignation because the main character, *Phaedra*, succumbed to the torment of fate as symbolized by the constant characterization of Greek gods and goddesses. Voltaire's *Candide* tackles three important themes: man's search for happiness and the means that he uses to achieve it; the folly of blind faith and the belief in destiny; and the nature of man - his passion and reason. According to Pope, "Safe in the hand of one disposing Pow'r / / One truth is clear, whatever is, is right." This passage is reminiscent of Pangloss' main philosophy in *Candide* - that "everything necessarily serves the best end" and that we live in the "best of all possible worlds." Through Pangloss, Voltaire attacks Pope's "Essay on Man" by illustrating the futility of blind fate and pure optimism. Voltaire disagrees with what Pope calls "the ruling mind of nature," as he illustrated through Pangloss, justifying events based on preconceived notions that are neither supported by concrete evidence nor past experience will only lead to false reasoning and absurd beliefs. Pope also makes a point about the relationship between reason and passion. He argues, "Two Principles in human nature reign; / Self-love, to urge, and Reason, to restrain; / / Self-love still stronger, as its objects nigh; / Reason's

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at distance, and in prospect lie." In this regard, Voltaire uses Candide's blind passion towards Cunegonde to illustrate how love, although noble and true, is foolish without reason. After being betrayed by, and questioning his love for Cunegonde, Candide still marries her only to realize afterwards that his journey to be reunited with her did not bring him happiness or contentment, but only misfortune. This brings us to Pope's argument about happiness. According to Pope, " Self-love and Reason to one end aspire," and this aspiration is the desire for pleasure or happiness. Voltaire questions this in his novel, as well. As Candide and his friends realize, it wasn't their reason or their passions that lead them to contentment. Instead, it was the simplicity of work.

Based on these, Racine's Phaedra would have been a source both of pride and indignation for Voltaire. There are three important themes in Phaedra, first, the destructive effect of unrestrained passion, which is the main character's tragic flaw. Phaedra is a character whose destruction was brought about by her passionate love for her stepson Hippolytus. With her reason overwhelmed by the feelings she harbors for Hippolytus, and undermined by the urgings of her confidante and supposed conscience, Oenone, her downfall was imminent. Second, is the folly of excessive virtue and reasoning. In contrast to Phaedra, Theseus and Hippolytus both fell prey to wrong reasoning. While Hippolytus reasoned that his innocence should be enough to keep him safe, Theseus failed to consider evidence that should lead him to doubt Oenone's lies. As a result, both father and son reached their own tragedies - for Hippolytus, it was his death; for Theseus losing his family. All three characters illustrate Voltaire's belief that neither reason nor passion can bring about happiness.

An aspect of the play that Voltaire will disagree with, however, is the focus on fate and the Greek god's providence. Throughout the play, the character's reliance on fate and divine intervention echoed in the background. Racine himself, notes in his preface that, " She [Phaedra] is forced by her destiny by the anger of the gods into an illegitimate passion, She strives to overcome it her crime is more a punishment of the gods than an expression of her will." Hence, while the play represents themes that Voltaire might agree with, the Greek tradition, which places gods as the main perpetrators of human events, is an idea that Voltaire will disagree with.

Voltaire, in his satire *Candide*, therefore uses a number of topics present in Alexander Pope's novel " *Essay on Man*" as main targets in his attack. Given his attitude towards fate and destiny, happiness, and passion and reason, it is possible that while he may agree with the tragic flaws present in the main characters of Racine's *Phaedra*, he may find the general theme that these characters fall prey to the whims of Greek gods unacceptable.