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The Eighteenth-Century Luxury Debate: The Case of Voltaire

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
September 2010**

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SHORT ABSTRACT

Voltaire's role in the luxury debate, the controversy about civilisation, capitalism, and progress which accompanied the birth of modern consumer society in the eighteenth century, is generally limited to his *Mondain* and its *Défense*, and reduced to a hedonist apology for luxury. The thesis sets out to re-examine and refute this.

It analyses Voltaire's discovery of commercial societies in Holland and England, and, focussing on the latter, it finds that the apology for commerce became a centralising theme in the *Lettres philosophiques*, explaining its purpose and coherence.

The thesis then turns to Voltaire's apology for luxury in the 1730s, analysing how du Châtelet and Voltaire, having recourse to classic Epicureanism and deist voluntarism, transformed Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* into a justification of commercial societies. Close readings of the *Mondain* and its companion pieces provide further proof that Voltaire's position on luxury was more nuanced than previously assumed.

The *Siècle de Louis XIV* and the *Essai sur les mœurs* demonstrate the importance of luxury in Voltaire's view of civilisation, which in turn serves to explain the shift in Voltaire's appreciation of Montesquieu.

The thesis opposes the claim that in later life Voltaire adopted a Rousseauian view of luxury. Examining Voltaire's later poetry on luxury in light of the analyses offered in the previous chapters, it concludes that his position remained consistent and showed no Rousseauian influence.

Concluding with Voltaire's last defence of luxury, his entries 'Luxe' in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, the thesis explains, with the help of the *Fragments sur l'Inde*, why and how his attitude to luxury seemed ambiguous in the latter work.

The thesis thus proves that Voltaire's contribution to the debate was not only sustained, independent, and carefully nuanced, but that the debate itself played a crucial role in Voltaire's thought and writing.

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**THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LUXURY DEBATE: THE CASE OF
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LONG ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown great interest in the eighteenth-century luxury debate, the controversy that accompanied the rise of the modern capitalist consumer society. Scholars have explored many of its aspects: the role of civic humanist versus natural jurist positions; of Stoic versus Neo-Epicurean or Augustinian views; of manners and politeness; gender; the arts and sciences; class interest; and, of course, of commercialism, the expansion of trade, and the availability of consumer goods. Whilst the contributions of certain eighteenth-century authors, such as Hume, Mandeville, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Adam Smith in particular, have been analysed in great detail, Voltaire has been more or less marginalised in this respect. Although he is generally given credit for having popularised the debate in France with the publication of his poem *Le Mondain* in 1736, his role is seen as limited. Three assumptions about his position have become commonplace: firstly, Voltaire's intervention is considered as limited to the 1730s, namely to the *Mondain* and its companion pieces; secondly, his stance is seen as mainly based on his prevailing mood and good humour at the time, and as a facile and hedonist apology for the unfettered pursuit of luxury; and he is then, thirdly, purported to have abandoned this position in later life in favour of an almost Rousseauian rejection of urbanity and luxury. This thesis re-examines and refutes all three assumptions.

In terms of methodology this study broadly situates itself in the tradition of history of ideas as promoted by the Cambridge school, which focusses on discourse analysis. In this case, however, it is particularly important to emphasise literary analysis in order to assess the rhetorical strategies Voltaire employed to convey his arguments. The thesis hence begins with an overview of the terminology and language current in the debate, to allow for a more pertinent evaluation of Voltaire's contribution, which in turn is based on the close reading of carefully selected source texts. To allow for sufficient attention to each individual work, the thesis observes strict limits concerning the choice of texts. Voltaire's theatrical or fictional works are not included and the focus is instead on Voltaire's non-fiction. Whilst the non-fictional works are still strongly informed by Voltaire's ever-present rhetorical and strategic awareness, they are written in a less polyvocal style and thus provide a less ambiguous base of evidence.

Two overarching arguments prove that Voltaire's intervention was not limited to the *Mondain*. Firstly, his *Lettres philosophiques* (1733), a coherent statement in favour of commercial societies, were written before the *Mondain* and before the publication of Melon's *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734), which has so far been considered as Voltaire's main source when it came to luxury and commercial societies. Secondly, the concept of luxury was prevalent in his thought and writing throughout his life. The topic

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still featured importantly in later works such as the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770-1772) and the *Fragments sur l'Inde et sur le général Lalli* (1773), and hence cannot have been a mere fleeting interest based on a momentary impulse.

Before any other popular text in France, the *Lettres philosophiques* provide a coherent defence of commercial society, represented by Voltaire's highly idealised depiction of England. Thematically at least, commerce is at the centre of the work, which serves to explain the internal cohesion of the work, in particular the addition of the letter on Pascal, which has puzzled many a scholar. Certainly not influenced by Melon and not showing any evidence of Mandevillian arguments, the *Lettres* depict the kind of bourgeois meritocratic society that would in later years become a commonplace amongst the advocates of luxury. Luxury, through its corollary, commerce, is attributed the function of increasing independence, meritocracy, and reason, and as such is linked not only to economic prosperity, to personal and national liberty, and political moderation, but also to the blossoming of the arts and sciences, and, in a peculiar Voltairian vein, to religious toleration. The positioning of the letter on commerce, placed after those on religious groups and government – which commerce is considered to moderate – and before those on the arts, specifically literature, and the sciences – which commerce is considered to promote – emphasises its importance in the work overall.

In Voltaire's later writings, long after the 1730s, luxury maintained and added to these connotations. It figured prominently in his great histories, the *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1752) and the *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), and played an important role in the later poetry designed to impose the image of Voltaire as the patriarch of Ferney, most notably the *Épître de l'auteur, en arrivant dans sa terre près du lac de Genève* (1755) the *Épître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture* (1761), and the 1772 *Épître à Horace*, which in many ways was designed as a poetical testament.

The thesis also opposes the assertion that Voltaire's stance was facile and superficial, or indeed that he advocated an unfettered, hedonist pursuit of luxury. From the very beginning Voltaire's position was consistent and well thought-out; in his first published statement on the topic, the *Lettres philosophiques*, he underpins his economic, religious, political, and cultural case in favour of commercial societies with a philosophical argument, namely by opposing to Pascal a brand of deist and empirical Lockean voluntarism heavily tinged with commercial optimism. As his views evolve they did so in a dialogue with Mandeville, Fénelon, and Montesquieu, and they were based on a coherent theory of social development, first expounded in the *Traité de métaphysique*.

In the 1730s, with the aid of Mme du Châtelet's transformation of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, Voltaire developed a conception of social development that served as a basis for the defence of commercial societies throughout his life. Having recourse to voluntarist arguments and to classical Epicureanism, notably to book V of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, du Châtelet adapted Mandeville's depiction of mankind, to allow not only for a degree of natural sociability and the ability to moderate the passions and desires, but also to postulate a universal natural law determining vice and virtue. This resulted in her much more positive portrayal of civilisation as opposed to any state of nature.

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Voltaire adopted her assertions and expanded them to elaborate on commercial societies in his *Traité de métaphysique* of the same period. Voltaire's argument relies on a benign voluntarism, which postulates that society and thus sociability and virtue are willed by God, as are the passions, and thus luxury and the arts and sciences. Voltaire differentiates between two types of human communities: small and primitive societies, and advanced and commercial ones. Luxury and the passions exist in different degrees in both kinds of society, but man's natural sociability and the control of the passions are of less importance in modern societies which are characterised by a different kind of self-interested 'commercial sociability'. According to Voltaire, as both types of society are willed and foreseen by God, the new commercial culture, characterised by luxury, self-interest, the arts and sciences as well as the passions, is also willed by God and as such neither a corruption nor sinful. On the contrary, advanced societies of this kind have the benefit of allowing man to develop his full potential, a point Voltaire made more even strongly in his historiographical works.

In his historiography, the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, and the *Essai sur les mœurs* in particular, Voltaire develops a social and historical model of luxury. He distinguishes between two, historically, socially, and functionally distinct types of luxury. The first type has almost solely negative connotations. It is linked to feudal societies and characterised by ostentation, inequality, and the preference for veneer over substance. It is elaborated in the histories and analysed in more detail in the article 'Faste', which Voltaire contributed to Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. In these same historiographical works, however, we encounter a second type of luxury which is depicted as a markedly positive development. It is linked to bourgeois societies and characterised by comfort, general abundance, and the preference for private enjoyment over spectacle. This commercial type of luxury is morally justified as it is the reward for work rather than the result of inherited social class, and as it serves to spread wealth, comfort, and polite manners. It is linked to progress, moderate government, and greater equality. Voltaire thus emerges as one of the first, if not the first, historian of the middle orders, of the rise of commercial bourgeois societies, in which luxury played a crucial part.

If his defence of luxury is thus intellectually coherent, it is also nuanced and by no means uncritical. The view of Voltaire as an advocate of hedonist and unfettered luxury is based solely on a superficial reading of the *Mondain*. Due to its close parallels with the neo-Epicurean poetry of the Parisian *Temple* circle, which Voltaire had frequented in his younger years in Paris, the *Mondain* can, at first reading, indeed appear a hymn to hedonist luxury. This aspect becomes even more pronounced due to the polemical nature of the work which opposes Fénelon's condemnation of luxury by using Fénelonian terminology and imagery, reversing its value connotations in order to take control of the luxury discourse. However, the *moi* and the *mondain* in the poem are by no means identical, and whilst the narrator figure endorses several aspects of luxury, most notably arts, artefacts, peaceful trade, comfort, sophisticated sociability, and material enjoyment, he remains an outside observer when it comes to the hectic race after the fleeting pleasures of Paris, a lifestyle condemned not only in Voltaire's later poetry but already in his correspondence of the time (see for instance letter D2082 to Mme de Champonin dated September 1739). Indeed, several elements that made scholars perceive a 'Rousseauian turn' in his later poetry, are already present in the

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Mondain: the alienating pursuit of constant stimuli, as well as the preference for veneer over substance. Yet even at this point this lifestyle is implicitly rejected partially as evidenced in the change of the poem's last line from 'Le paradis terrestre est à Paris' to 'Le paradis terrestre est où je suis', that is Cirey, rather than Paris.

The *Mondain's* companion pieces emphasise the nuance in Voltaire's position. Whilst he continues to emphasise the economic, social, and cultural benefits of luxury in the *Défense du Mondain*, he sets clear limits to an overly avid pursuit of luxurious pleasures in *Sur l'usage de la vie*. The work criticises precisely the kind of lifestyle depicted in the *Mondain*, instead adopting traditional Epicurean arguments on the nature and use of sensual pleasures. This exhortation to Epicurean moderation in the enjoyment of luxury is repeated in a letter and poem to the comte de Saxe of the same period (D1256, dated January 1737), and became one of the characteristics of Voltaire's writing on luxury.

It is for this reason that this thesis strongly opposes the view of a purported 'Rousseauian turn' in Voltaire's view of luxury in later life. The poetry on luxury in the 1730s already displays a very differentiated and nuanced attitude towards luxury and the Parisian life of pleasure. This critical attitude does indeed come to the fore more strongly in some of his later poetry, in *La vie de Paris et de Versailles. Epître à Mme Denis, nièce de l'auteur* (1749) and in the 1761 *Epître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture* especially. However, not only is this critique consistent with his earlier statements, it also does not detract from his continued advocacy of luxury in other works of the same and of later periods. It is illogical to claim that Voltaire came to adopt a more negative attitude to luxury from the late 1740s onwards, since works such as the 1750 *Dialogue entre un philosophe et un contrôleur-général des finances*, the *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1752), the *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), and the entries 'Luxe' in both the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770-1772) all strongly speak out in support of luxury.

Voltaire's position on luxury was in fact too integral to his entire thought and *oeuvre* to be altered at a whim. It was an essential constituent of his socio-political thought, his understanding of historical development, and his eudaimonistic philosophy. His concept of 'civilisation' was heavily reliant on luxury, and the great civilising figures depicted in his works – Louis XIV and Colbert in the histories, and Solomon in the *Défense du Mondain* – all share a strong link to luxury. They encourage not only forward thinking, but also the arts and sciences, artisanship, manufacture, trade, commerce, and the development of the type of bourgeois commercial societies associated with the rise of luxury. The *Siècle de Louis XIV* and the *Essai sur les mœurs* are the best source for the analysis of Voltaire's concept of 'civilisation'. The term itself is rarely used by Voltaire, who instead represents it as a complex cluster of interconnected conditions, almost all of which are however linked to the notion of luxury. A civilised culture has a strong element of material welfare, usually achieved through trade and commerce. It is defined by a strong degree of religious tolerance and the trend to relegate religious matters to the private realm, to make faith but another commodity on the marketplace. The characteristics of such a culture are instead *bon goût*, and reason, *police* or *politesse*, *mœurs douces*, flourishing arts and sciences, pleasure, and sociability, all terms associated with the notion of luxury. Luxury is in fact at the core of what constitutes

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civilisation and humanity, which are defined by the transcendence of the necessary, and the emergence of man from an animal-like state of mere subsistence to a situation which permits him or her to develop their full potential.

It thus becomes clear that luxury is identified with the entirety of Voltaire's 'Enlightenment project'. It is seen as integral to the progress of reason, religious tolerance, moderate government, justice, politeness, increased sociability, and the arts and sciences. It is in fact the visible proof of the ideal of human community: the development of human potential and human happiness or pleasure. Hence Voltaire's own persona became strongly bound up with luxury. When he sought to impose the image of himself as the patriarch of Ferney, he modelled this posture on Colbert, Louis XIV, and Salomon, the great civilising figures he had extolled previously. He sought to combine the promotion of the material aspects of luxury and commercial civilisation, the furthering of the economic wellbeing of his tenants, the encouragement of agriculture and artisanship, and the fight against illiberal trade measures, with its 'non-material' aspects: his engagement in the arts and philosophical movement in Paris, his patronage of young writers and intellectuals, and polite sociability in the form of his entertainment of innumerable visitors to Ferney. The figure of the patriarch is also almost identical with that of the Epicurean sage he adopted in his earlier poetry on luxury. The ideal of a moderate, independent, in short Epicurean, enjoyment of luxury continued throughout his life. Luxury thus became so inseparable from Voltaire's public persona that when contemporary caricaturists sought to find a strong counter image to Rousseau's critique of civilisation, they would chose Voltaire (this, as well as other eighteenth-century depictions of the Voltaire-Rousseau opposition, are reprinted and analysed in Samuel S. B. Taylor, 'Public awareness of the Voltaire-Rousseau quarrel: the iconographical and bibliographical evidence' in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: essays in memory of R. A. Leigh*, ed. by Marian Hobson, John T. A. Leigh, Robert Wokler (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1992) pp. 209-223).

Overall, the thesis thus demonstrates that Voltaire's contribution to the debate was not only sustained, independent, and carefully nuanced, but that the debate itself played a crucial role in Voltaire's thought and writing throughout his life. It is due to the very nature of his contribution and the fact that it is usually implicit – either underlying a different argument (for example the development of civilisations in the historiography and the characterisation of England in the *Lettres philosophiques*), or written with the intent to persuade rather than to convince – that it can easily be misconstrued. That amongst not only many of his contemporaries, but also most modern scholars, the opinion prevails that Voltaire adopted a facile pro-luxury stance, indicates an almost unique aberration in his usually adept management of his public image.

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ABBREVIATIONS, FORMATS, AND EDITIONS

Abbreviations:

Cramer:

Collection complete des oeuvres de M. de Voltaire, 30 vols (Geneva: [Cramer], Paris: Panckoucke, 1768-1777)

Kehl:

Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat marquis de Condorcet, et al., 92 vols ([Kehl:] Société littéraire typographique, 1784-1785)

Moland:

Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. by Louis Moland, 52 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885)

OCV:

Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire / Complete works of Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1970-)

Correspondence:

Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents*, ed. by Theodore Besterman, Definitive edition, *OCV*, vols 85-135

Encyclopédie:

Encyclopédie, ou, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres ; mis en ordre & publié par M. Diderot ... & quant à la partie mathématique, par M. d'Alembert, 28 vols (Geneve, Paris, Neufchastel: Chez Briasson and others, 1754-1772)

Format of references

For convenience sake, all references to volumes of the above will be made in Arabic rather than Roman numerals.

All references to Voltaire's correspondence will be made in the format D (definitive edition), followed by the document number of the above edition.

Editions used

I will, whenever possible, refer to the latest scholarly editions of the original texts. Concerning Voltaire this will be the Oxford edition of the *Complete Works*. When a text is not yet available in this edition, I will refer to the most widely available modern scholarly edition, and only as a last resort refer to the Kehl and Moland editions, only using the Cramer edition when texts are printed abridged or changed in the later two, as is the case with the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.

INTRODUCTION

The Eighteenth-Century Luxury Debate

Over the last few decades work by social and economic historians has firmly established that the eighteenth century in Britain and France experienced what they often call a 'consumer revolution'. 'Luxury items', consumer goods not serving any immediate purpose for survival or everyday life, became available to large sections of society, reaching far beyond the upper and middle classes.¹ Leading in this field are the studies edited by John Brewer, Roy Porter, and the publications originating in the University of Warwick's 'Luxury Project', directed by Maxine Berg.² These works also devote space to what was one of the immediate consequences of this shift in patterns of consumption: the so-called 'luxury debate'. Up to this point in time, Christian teachings and classic, mostly Stoic, thought had merged to condemn luxury as both morally corrupting and sinful.³ Now this began to be challenged, and the challenge to be attacked in turn. The debate was one of the most enduring and extensive of the century.⁴ The term 'luxury

¹ Traditionally this 'birth of the consumer society' was considered to have occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For a concise summary of the back-dating of this development to the early modern period, to the eighteenth century in particular, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, 'Coming up for air: consumer culture in a historical perspective', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 19-39. For a particularly relevant case study see Cissie Fairchild, 'The production and marketing of populuxe goods in eighteenth-century Paris' (ibid., pp. 228-248), which concluded that 'urban France *did* experience a consumer revolution in the eighteenth century and [...] its salient characteristic was the penchant of the lower classes for what I term 'popoluxe' goods, that is, cheap copies of aristocratic luxury items' (p. 228).

² See especially John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods*; John Brewer and Ann Bermingham, (eds.), *The Consumption of culture 1600-1800: image, object, text* (London: Routledge, 1995); Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); and Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

³ For a succinct account of the classic rejection of luxury see especially: Christopher J. Berry, *The idea of luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 45-98.

⁴ Estimates to its precise extent vary. Jeremy Jennings follows Daniel Roche who counts over one hundred publications between 1736 and 1786 in France alone: Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: Naissance de la consommation XVIIe-XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), p. 88, and Jeremy Jennings, 'The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought', *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), 79-105 (82-83). Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger

debate', though appropriate due to its contemporary usage, lends itself to confusion, as it was by no means a debate about luxury goods. In fact Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford find it 'notable that there was little discussion by the key players in the luxury debates of actual objects';⁵ or as Joyce Appleby succinctly puts it, consumption 'figured in the political discourse [...] under the rubric of luxury. Luxury was not a thing but a concept.'⁶

Because of this conceptual nature of the term, the debate involved issues much wider than simple consumption, issues such as progress, virtue, rural versus urban life, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the role of the old aristocracy, the arts and sciences, commerce, the human passions, and politeness or civilisation at large. It is therefore also known under different names, as the debate about the arts and sciences for instance, about commercial societies, the 'effeminate nation', or 'the passions and the interests'. These aspects are already visible in the two poles of the nascent debate, Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699) and Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714).⁷ Mandeville ostensibly agrees with the former when he emphasises

the impossibility of enjoying all the most elegant Comforts of Life that are to be met with in an industrious, wealthy and powerful Nation, and at the same time be bless'd with all the Virtue and Innocence that can be wish'd for in a Golden Age.⁸

estimate that several hundred writers contributed to the debate on all levels, from pamphleteers to *Encyclopédistes*: 'The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates' in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 7-27.

⁵ Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, 'Introduction', in *Consumers and Luxury*, pp. 1-16 (p. 5).

⁶ Joyce Appleby, 'Consumption in early modern social thought', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, pp. 162-176 (p. 165).

⁷ Traditionally Mandeville is cited as the father of the debate, but, as Istvan Hont has pointed out, he is in many ways replying to Fénelon's *Télémaque*, which played an important role in the debate on both sides of the Channel throughout the eighteenth century. See Istvan Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. by Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 379-418 (pp. 382-383). On the continued importance of Fénelon's work, see Lucia Bergamesco, 'Présence de Fénelon dans la culture anglo-saxonne', in *Nouvel État Présent des Travaux sur Fénelon*, ed. by Henk Hillenaar (Amsterdam: Éditions Rodolphi, 2000), pp. 153-163. On the depiction of luxury in *Télémaque* more generally, see Philippe Bonolas, 'Fénelon et le luxe dans le *Télémaque*', *SVEC*, 249 (1986), 81-90.

⁸ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 2 vols, With a Commentary Critical, Historical, and Explanatory by F.B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988) [the edition is a reprint of the 1924 Oxford Edition], I, 6-7.

The 'Golden Age' was depicted by Fénelon in the form of Béthique, a country young Télémaque encounters in his travels. Its inhabitants' views are summarised as follows:

Pour tous les autres arts estimés chez les Grecs, chez les Egyptiens et chez tous les autres peuples bien policés, ils les détestent, comme des inventions de la vanité et de la mollesse. Quand on leur parle des peuples qui ont l'art de faire des bâtiments superbes, des meubles d' or et d' argent, des étoffes ornées de broderies et de pierres précieuses, des parfums exquis, des mets délicieux, des instruments dont l'harmonie charme, ils répondent en ces termes: "Ces peuples sont bien malheureux d'avoir employé tant de travail et d' industrie à se corrompre eux-mêmes! Ce superflu amollit, enivre, tourmente ceux qui le possèdent. Il tente ceux qui en sont privés de vouloir l' acquérir par l' injustice et par la violence."⁹

These two quotations already contain most of the terminology and concepts that would become characteristic of the eighteenth-century discourse on luxury which merged the realms of economy, ethics, and politics. The type of society Mandeville opposes to Fénelon's ideal of Béthique, the 'industrious, wealthy and powerful Nation', is at the heart of the debate. What was at stake in this controversy were material improvement, progress, in fact civilisation and modern bourgeois society at large. Due to this, modern scholars sometimes refer it as the debate about commercial society. Even though the term is commonly used only later in the eighteenth century, most notably in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), it is still appropriate over all, as the notion of a 'nation commerçante' is frequently employed by Voltaire, for the first time in the *Histoire de Charles XII* (1732) and the *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), whilst, even earlier than this, Mandeville often speaks of a 'trading Country' or a 'trading Nation' in his *Fable*.¹⁰

Strongly emphasised in the excerpt from Fénelon above is the role of the arts. In the debate 'luxury' was frequently used synonymously with 'the arts and sciences', both

⁹ François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. by Jacques Le Brun, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), II, 3-326 (book VII, pp. 107-108).

¹⁰ The term is used frequently by Hont and Ignatieff for instance and Berry also comments on it: 'The eighteenth-century debate over luxury was [...] both a debate about the character of contemporary society, and itself a characteristic of that society. The contemporary description of this society was that it was 'commercial'.' Christopher J. Berry, *The idea of luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 142.

being prime examples of what Fénelon calls the 'superflu', another significant term in the debate. At least in France, the luxury debate is therefore better known as the debate about the arts and sciences, not least because Rousseau's first discourse, the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), was one of its best-known contributions. In a similar vein Hume tellingly renamed his 1752 essay 'Of Luxury', publishing it under the title 'Of refinement in the arts' after 1758.¹¹ This points to another crucial aspect of the debate: 'refinement'; or as the adversaries of luxury and refinement would call it, 'corruption and effeminacy'.

In the quotation from *Télémaque* above, the effeminating nature of luxury and the arts and sciences is contained in the key term 'mollesse', repeated as 'amollir', terms that characterise the debate throughout the century. The feminine character of luxury and its perceived links to sensuality, sexuality, and depravity are particularly emphasised in the form of Cypriot culture, depicted in book IV of the novel. The female connotations of luxury were of long standing, found for centuries in both Greek, Roman, and Christian thought. 'Luxe' as well as the English 'luxury' maintained the original connotations of the Latin 'luxuria', of both material extravagance and sensual or sexual indulgence. It was a vice in classical thought and a sin in the Christian worldview.¹² By the eighteenth century, the traditional, civic humanist and Christian consensus on luxury was that it was softening, corrupting, and emasculating, replacing virile martial virtues with softer manners, masks, and effeminate politeness; 'politesse' and 'police', or as Fénelon puts it here, 'peuples bien policés' also remained important ingredients to the debate. The link between luxury and the female was maintained by the new advocates of luxury, but given positive values. The case was made most

¹¹ See David Hume, 'Of Luxury', in *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, 4 vols (London and Edinburgh: Millar and Kincaid, 1753-1756), IV, 20-35 (23-24). This is the edition Voltaire owned and read. On this, see chapter IV.

¹² On the etymology, connotations and usage of the term, see Berry, *The idea of luxury*, pp. 84-89.

strongly in Hume's 'Of Luxury':

The more these refin'd arts advance, the more sociable do men become; [...] They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture. [...] Particular clubs and societies are every where form'd: Both sexes meet in an easy and sociable manner; and the tempers of men, as well as their behaviour, refine apace. So that, beside the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts, 'tis impossible but they must feel an increase of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment.¹³

The gendered aspect of the imagery and terminology has been explored by Tjitske Akkerman, Jennifer M. Jones, E. J. Clery, and Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace especially.¹⁴ What detractors of luxury perceived as 'effeminacy' was hailed by its defenders as increased sociability, refinement and politeness, or, as it was most commonly called in the French context, 'douceur'. The rallying cry of 'doux commerce' is generally attributed to Montesquieu, who depicted luxury and commerce as civilising forces, writing in the *De l'Esprit des Lois*:

Le commerce guérit des préjugés destructeurs ; et c'est presque une règle générale, que partout où il y a des mœurs douces, il y a du commerce ; et que partout où il y a du commerce, il y a des mœurs douces.
[...] On peut dire que les lois du commerce perfectionnent les mœurs, par la même raison que ces mêmes lois perdent les mœurs. Le commerce corrompt les mœurs pures: c'était le sujet des plaintes de Platon: il polit et adoucit les mœurs barbares, comme nous le voyons tous les jours.¹⁵

For this and other similar statements, Albert O. Hirschman names Montesquieu as the most influential exponent of the *doux commerce* thesis.¹⁶ In his seminal work, *The Passions and the Interests*, Hirschman devotes a chapter to Montesquieu making him out as one of the foremost advocates of commerce, which is seen as promoting peace

¹³ David Hume, 'Of Luxury', in *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, IV, 20-35 (23-24).

¹⁴ Tjitske Akkerman, *Women's Vices, Public Benefits: Women and Commerce in the French Enlightenment* (Amsterdam: Spinhuis, 1992); and Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2004). With the notable exception of these two, most studies focus on Britain. On this see particularly: Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) and E. J. Clery, *The Feminization debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁵ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, ed. by Robert Derathé, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1973), II, 2 (book XX, chapter 2).

¹⁶ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, Twentieth Anniversary Edition), p. 60.

amongst nations and politeness in societies, by pitting men's self interest (for instance profit through commerce) against their passions (for instance their impulse to act aggressively) and ensuring that the interests would inhibit the passions (pp. 70-81). This gave rise to the term 'Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine' which is discussed in similar terms by Pierre Force and Christopher Berry.¹⁷

Hirschman's account remains important, as it focusses on a final important aspect of the debate, the attempted rehabilitation of human passions and the opposition this encountered. Already in the excerpt from Fénelon cited above, it is clear that luxury is both caused by the human passions (luxury objects and the arts are 'inventions de la vanité et de la mollesse') and encourages and inflames these ('Ce superflu amollit, enivre, tourmente ceux qui le possèdent. Il tente ceux qui en sont privés de vouloir l'acquérir par l'injustice et par la violence.'). Mandeville in turn agrees with this but praises the economic effects of man's vanity, greed, and envy. The link between luxury or commerce and the human passions remained a constant characteristic of the debate. Hirschman argues that by the eighteenth century social philosophers and moralists had come to the conclusion that man's destructive passions were best held in check by a counterbalancing passion, namely self-interest, which was considered more rational and predictable than other passions. The notion of self-interest then came to be seen as not only socially useful but as a quasi-virtue, linked to representations of commerce as softening and civilising, the Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine of 'doux commerce'. The process of rehabilitating certain passions, most notably self-interest was, according to Hirschman, central to the legitimisation of emerging bourgeois capitalism.¹⁸ Due to the

¹⁷ Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: a genealogy of economic science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 150-152; and Berry, *The idea of luxury*, pp. 146-147.

¹⁸ This is perhaps best summarised by John Shovlin who agrees with Hirschman's assertion of the debate's importance as an apology for bourgeois ascendancy, material progress, the human passions and self-interest: 'The Enlightenment effort to redefine luxury was simultaneously an attack on the negative view of the passions that undergirded Christian asceticism, an assault on prejudices holding

continuing influence of Hirschman's study, the luxury controversy is sometimes also referred to as 'the debate about the passions and the interests'.

Whether one chooses to call it the debate about the arts and sciences, about commercial society, the effeminate nation, the passions and interests, or whether one settles on the most commonly-used term, 'luxury debate', the controversy was central to the very notion of 'Enlightenment'. Scholars have recognised this. In one of the best and most concise accounts of the early stages of the debate, Istvan Hont finds that 'luxury was not merely an economic phenomenon, but the central moral and political issue of modernity'.¹⁹ Numerous other distinguished scholars have come to the same conclusion. Anthony Pagden explores the links between the political economy of luxury and visions of politeness, refinement of manners, and 'civilisation' at large;²⁰ Pierre Rétat finds a strong link between eighteenth-century French theories of happiness and the debate on luxury, which 'parcourt le 18^e siècle. De Voltaire à Delille les poètes s'y engagent; moralistes, philosophes, politiques, théologiens, tous ou presque, si peu que ce soit, en disent leur sentiment.²¹ As Jennings puts it rather succinctly, what was at stake in the debate 'was a new vision of human beings and the purposes of society.'²² When Henry C.

that aristocrats were superior to people of middle rank, and a strike against the civic humanist view that economic modernity heralded a process of political, cultural, and moral degradation' (John Shovlin, 'Hume's *Political Discourses* and the French Luxury Debate', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, ed. by Carl Wennerlin and Margaret Schabas (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 203-222 (p. 204)). However, Shovlin disagrees with some of Hirschman's conclusions concerning the degree to which interest as a notion was rehabilitated. On this see John Shovlin, 'Emulation in Eighteenth-Century French Economic Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36 (2003), 224-230.

¹⁹ Istvan Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', p. 379. The account only covers the early stages of the debate, stopping before the publications of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois*. However, several of the essays published in *Jealousy of Trade: international competition and the nation state in historical perspective* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) cover these issues more widely. See especially 'The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the "Four-Stages" Theory' (pp. 159-184), 'Free Trade and the Economic Limits to National Politics: Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy Reconsidered' (pp. 185-266), and 'The Rhapsody of Public Debt: David Hume and Voluntary State Bankruptcy' (pp. 325-353).

²⁰ Anthony Pagden, 'The 'defence of civilisation' in eighteenth-century social theory', *History of the Human Sciences*, 1 (1988), 33-45.

²¹ Pierre Rétat, 'Luxe', *Dix-Huitième Siècle* 26 (1994), 79-88 (79).

²² Jennings, 'The Debate about Luxury', p. 81.

Clark comes to a similar conclusion, namely that the 'exchange over luxury, in any event, implicates the entire anthropology of the moderate Enlightenment and its critics', he is also led to conclude as to the vast implications of the controversy: 'Ultimately, the different anthropologies always lurking beneath the surface of the luxury debate concern not only economic or social or political questions but moral ones.'²³ Thus, as 'luxury became an increasingly centrifugal constellation of ideas',²⁴ it touched the very heart of the Enlightenment project. In his *The Case for the Enlightenment* John Robertson argues that 'the intellectual coherence of the Enlightenment may still be found [...] in the commitment to understanding and hence to advancing, the causes and conditions of human betterment in this world.'²⁵ He identifies three strands in this endeavour, firstly the attempt to understand and define human nature, what Hume calls 'the science of man', or what Clark calls 'Enlightenment anthropologies'; secondly, questions of material betterment and political economy, so much so in fact that 'political economy was the key to what the Enlightenment explicitly thought of as 'the progress of society"; and thirdly the study of the progress and development of societies, the process of civilisation (p. 29). All three aspects are so inextricably bound up with what constituted the luxury debate, that it is easily understandable how it became one of the most central concerns of eighteenth-century writers, Voltaire prominently among them.

The debate has by now elicited much original scholarship. Besides the studies already discussed, it is worth mentioning Philippe Perrot's *Le luxe*, which gives a

²³ Henry C. Clark, 'Commerce, Sociability, and the Public Sphere: Morellet vs. Pluquet on Luxury', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22 (1998), 83-103 (90 and 93). In the article he links 'the entire Enlightenment project' to the luxury-debate: 'Especially striking is the variety of domains in which the role of luxury came to be debated – including its effects on religious belief, social relations, economic progress, moral integrity, and political stability. Indeed, the entire Enlightenment project came to be implicated under a single time-honored rubric' (p. 83).

²⁴ John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollet* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 76.

²⁵ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 28.

detailed account of changing perceptions and terminologies;²⁶ and Daniel Roche's work which has contributed significantly to the field, dwelling on the debate in *La France des Lumières*, and especially in the shape of the 1997 *Histoire des choses banales: Naissance de la consommation XVII^e – XIX^e siècle*, a study complementing the 1989 *Culture des Apparences*. Other studies focus on particular elements and aspects of the debate, such as its gendered dimensions mentioned above. In his *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, Pierre Force explores the role of Augustinian-Epicureanism versus Stoicism in the depiction of self-interested behaviour, which characterises the debate. Michael Cardy finds that the antithesis of the necessary and the superfluous underlies much of eighteenth-century literature and thought,²⁷ whilst Hans Kortum analyses the overlap between the debate and the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.²⁸ Historians have recently also used the debate to account for certain political and social developments. In his neo-Tocquevillian *Compass of society: commerce and absolutism in old-regime France*, Henry C. Clark analyses how the development of modern commercialism in France could account for the ultimate failure of the *Ancient Régime*. John Shovlin follows a similar line, but emphasises perhaps even more than Clark the importance of the *discourse* on luxury in the build-up to the French Revolution.²⁹

Perhaps the most popular and best-known work on the topic remains Albert O. Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*. Though not the most scholarly account available, the work has the merit of great clarity and argumentative force, and above all, of demonstrating the enduring modernity of the debate. Hirschman clearly depicts it as

²⁶ Philippe Perrot, *Le luxe: une richesse entre faste et confort, XVIIIe-XIXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

²⁷ Michael Cardy, 'Le nécessaire et le superflu: antithèse des Lumières', *SVEC*, 205 (1982), 183-190.

²⁸ Hans Kortum, 'Frugalité et luxe à travers la querelle des anciens et des modernes', *SVEC*, 56 (1967), 765-75.

²⁹ See Henry C. Clark, *Compass of society: commerce and absolutism in old-regime France* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2007) and John Shovlin *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). On Shovlin's analysis of French discourse on luxury up to, during, and after the Revolution see also his 'Emulation in Eighteenth-Century French Economic Thought'.

the struggle of emerging capitalism which sought to impose a new ideal of human nature, rehabilitating human passions, particularly those of self-interest, acquisitiveness and hedonism.³⁰ It was the controversy surrounding the birth of the bourgeois, individualist, consumerist, liberal, capitalist society we now live in. It remains supremely relevant today. Economic growth and material well-being continue to be one of our main aspirations and their self-interested pursuit is still considered as an antidote to violence and extremism: the European Economic Community was founded after the Second World War to prevent further conflict through shared interests, and programmes of wealth-creation and economic opportunity are still launched to combat religious extremism, both at home and abroad. 'Civilisation' continues to be measured by polite manners, the development of the arts and sciences, and living standards. Nevertheless, now as then, doubts are never quelled. The enslavement to consumerism, the creation of self-image through the ceaseless pursuit of 'luxury goods' designed to raise the purchaser in the opinion of others, were considered problems then, just as they are now; and the recent banking crisis once again revealed the possible tension between the public good and the self-interested pursuit of personal gain. For these reasons alone the luxury debate is of enduring significance.

Voltaire and the luxury debate

In his own time, Voltaire was considered not only an outstanding writer and dramatist but also one of the leading intellectuals and thinkers.³¹ These days, Voltaire has become

³⁰ Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, pp. 14-20.

³¹ He was clearly recognised as sometime leader of the *philosophe* movement, a fact celebrated and stressed in Condorcet's *Vie de Voltaire*. On this see also Charles Coutel, 'La Vie de Voltaire de Condorcet', in *Les Vies de Voltaire: discours et représentations biographiques, XVIIIe-XXIe siècles*, ed. by Christophe Cave and Simon Davies, *SVEC* 2008:04, 337-344. Even *philosophes* more critical of him acknowledged this. Diderot for instance calls him their 'maître' not only when directly addressing him (see for instance D3945, 11 June 1749; D7641, 19 February 1758; D7756 14 June 1758; D9430, 28 November 1760; D9652, 26 February 1761; and D18267, 28 March 1773), which could be considered mere flattery, but also does so when referring to him in his other correspondence

unfashionable in the study of the history of ideas. Apart perhaps from René Pomeau's *La Religion de Voltaire*, the last study that took Voltaire seriously as a thinker, intellectual, and *philosophe* was Peter Gay's *Voltaire's Politics: the poet as realist*, first published in 1959. It was perhaps Peter Gay's contentious definition of 'Enlightenment' that led other scholars to abandon one of his prime exemplars, Voltaire.³² It is to his credit that Jonathan Israel, whose definition is at least as contentious as Gay's, devotes some space to Voltaire in his *Radical Enlightenment*, but this of course does not greatly touch on the question of luxury.

If Voltaire's importance as a thinker differs in the eyes of contemporaries and modern scholars, both seem to agree on his stance on luxury. Most scholarly accounts of the debate give some credit to Voltaire, most usually for launching the controversy in France. However, with the notable exception of Istvan Hont who also examines the *Traité de métaphysique*, Voltaire's role is limited to the single poem of the *Mondain* and its *Défense* dating from 1736 and 1737 respectively. Since André Morize published his *L'apologie du luxe au XVIIIe siècle et "Le mondain" de Voltaire : Etude critique sur Le Mondain et ses sources* in 1909 this has not changed. In this respect there is little difference between literary scholars and historians; both, if they mention Voltaire's contribution to the luxury debate at all, limit it to the mid-1730s. The same holds true for many of his contemporaries. Rousseau of course clearly ranges Voltaire in the camp

(see for example D15753 to Grimm from July 1769). On Voltaire's contemporary reputation, see also Nicholas Cronk's Introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1-15 (pp. 5-6); his 'Voltaire and the 1760s: the rule of the patriarch', in *Voltaire and the 1760s: Essays for John Renwick*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk, *SVEC* 2008:10, pp. 9-21; as well as David Beeson and Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire: philosopher or *philosophe*?', in *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, pp. 47-64.

³² Nicholas Cronk advances two further explanations: 'The sheer range and quantity of Voltaire's writing can, paradoxically, do him a disservice. There is the suggestion that Voltaire is a Jack-of-all-trades – clever certainly, but perhaps superficial.' Comparing him to Rousseau and Montesquieu, he also notes: 'A writer famous for one great work is easier to grasp than a writer who seems bewilderingly active on so many fronts' ('Introduction' to the *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, p. 4).

of unfettered luxury proponents.³³ Perhaps more surprisingly, Diderot does the same. In the section on luxury in his *Mémoires pour Catherine II* he writes:

Voltaire [...] fait en vers l'apologie de notre luxe; ces vers sont charmants, mais sa pièce est l'apologie de la fièvre d'un agonisant, fièvre que je ne prendrai jamais pour une bonne chose, quoique peut-être la fièvre de ce malade venant à cesser, il mourra.³⁴

The link to feverishness or drunkenness is also made with an oblique reference to Voltaire's poetry on luxury in Saint-Lambert's *Encyclopédie* entry 'Luxe', and remains symptomatic of much of the perception of Voltaire's stance.³⁵ This study sets out to question this view of Voltaire's thought on the topic, demonstrating that he did not only start the luxury debate in France, but continued to contribute to it throughout his life. His contribution was carefully nuanced, nourished by constant reflection and much richer than a reductive reading of the *Mondain* might suggest.

Moreover, Voltaire was not only important in the debate: the debate was important for Voltaire. The controversy itself and the topos of luxury played a constant and important role in almost the entirety of Voltaire's work, before and long after the period of the *Mondain* and its companion pieces. Commerce and luxury, with their links to politeness and the arts and sciences became key ingredients in his philosophy of the progress of 'civilisation' as expressed first in the *Lettres philosophiques* and later more strongly in his historiography, particularly in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* and the *Essai sur les mœurs*. They remained fundamental and formed a prominent part of his identity as the 'patriarch'. An analysis of Voltaire's thought on luxury therefore serves the double

³³ Testimony to the importance of Voltaire in the debate, he is the only living contemporary named in the first discourse: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes and Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, ed. by Jacques Roger (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pp. 23-68 (p. 45).

³⁴ Denis Diderot, 'Du luxe', in *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, X, 529-807 (668-681: p. 668).

³⁵ See Jean François de Saint-Lambert, 'Luxe', *Encyclopédie*, IX, 763-771 (769). The precise reference reads: 'Si quelque poète chante quelquefois la mollesse & la volupté, ses vers deviennent les expressions dont se sert un peuple heureux dans les momens d'une ivresse passagère'.

purpose of furthering our understanding of the eighteenth-century debate as well as of elucidating a largely neglected aspect of Voltaire's *oeuvre*.

Scope and methodology of this study

Any analysis of Voltaire's contribution to the luxury debate immediately faces two challenges: the great number of interventions in the debate on the one hand, and on the other the sheer size of Voltaire's *oeuvre*, which will eventually encompass over two hundred volumes in the Oxford edition, including his vast correspondence of over 15,000 letters he wrote and another 3,000 he received. The study will thus need to observe strict limits in the selection of both contextual materials and Voltaire's work.

In terms of context, this study will refer to contemporary publications on the luxury debate only in so far as Voltaire read and reacted to them. Similarly it will not take into account contemporaries' reactions to his stance unless they prompted a reaction by Voltaire himself.

Another limitation will be necessary in the choice of Voltaire's own writing. Whilst the influence of the debate on Voltaire's work is an important strand in this study, it will be taken into account only in so far as the text in question is also a comment on, or contribution to, the debate in itself. To allow for sufficient attention to individual works, strict limits will be imposed as to which texts will provide the focus. Whilst it is hoped that this study may contribute to new interpretations of Voltaire's theatrical or fictional works, which, apart from one sketchy attempt by John Robert Vignery, have rarely been considered as offering insights into Voltaire's social and economic thought,³⁶

³⁶ See J. Robert Vignery, 'Voltaire's Economic Ideas as Revealed in the "Romans" and "Contes"', *The French Review*, 33 (1960), 257-263, which offers a few over-simplified and under-evidenced readings.

these will not be included in the thesis. The focus will instead be on Voltaire's non-fiction. Whilst the non-fictional works are still strongly informed by Voltaire's ever-present rhetorical and strategic awareness, they are written in a less polyvocal style and thus provide a less ambiguous base of evidence.

In terms of methodology, it is clear that any convincing analysis of Voltaire's writing will have to pay attention to his ceaseless use of personas. Thus, whilst this study is largely situated within the field of intellectual history, it will take into account not only historical and intellectual context, but also Voltaire's literary and rhetorical strategies. In this the tools of the literary scholar prove a useful addition to the methodology of the intellectual historian, which, especially under the influence of the Cambridge School, has taken account of the linguistic turn in philosophy and tended much towards what Pocock terms 'history of discourse'.³⁷ The historian's task, according to Pocock is to understand 'how a speech act is performed within a language context, and in particular how it is performed and innovates upon it'; his ideal historian does so by looking 'for ways in which it [a given author's intervention] may have rearranged, or sought to rearrange, the possibilities of language open to the author and his co-users of language' (p. 15). In Voltaire's case these rearrangements are frequently implicit, embedded in literary and rhetorical strategies that mask their importance under a light, playful, and terse style. A sensitivity to literary strategy, style, and imagery is therefore indispensable to the fruitful analysis of any of Voltaire's writings.

As this thesis sets out to analyse Voltaire's thought, there will be no attempt to discern the 'real' Voltaire, the man behind the mask of pseudonymity. It is clear both

³⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, 'The state of the art', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1-34 (p. 34)

from his correspondence and studies of his lifestyle, such as Christiane Mervaud's *Voltaire à table*, that on a personal level Voltaire had a decided predilection for luxurious living. However this cannot be taken into account when analysing his thought on the matter. For the purpose of the analysis it is immaterial *why* he adopted a certain stance or argument, only *how* and *that* he did so. To understand what his position on luxury was, how it evolved and was represented in his work, it is unnecessary, even distracting to try to discern any personal experience, state of mind, or mood, which might have influenced his arguments. On the contrary, to claim as Mauzi does that 'les sentiments souvent contradictoires de Voltaire sur la vie et sur l'homme sont à mettre, en grande partie, au compte de l'humeur et de l'accident. Lorsqu'il écrit son poème du *Mondain* (1736), il est un homme heureux',³⁸ serves only to diminish the intellectual weight and seriousness of his arguments.

³⁸ Robert Mauzi, *L'Idée du Bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1960), p. 57.

I THE DISCOVERY OF COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

I.i The early development of Voltaire's thought on luxury and commercial society

Perhaps one of the most over-quoted comments on Voltaire is that he went to England a poet and returned a philosopher.¹ Modern scholars refute this, stressing Voltaire's previous philosophical interests, most notably his study of English philosophers inspired by Bolingbroke.² And yet if we take seriously John Robertson's assertion that it was the thought on political economy or commercial sociability that unified the Enlightenment as a European movement,³ one could indeed make this claim anew – for it was only his time in England that allowed Voltaire to begin to formulate a coherent view and defence of modern commercial society. Before this time there is little evidence of any serious engagement on Voltaire's part with questions of political economy, commercial culture, and luxury. Nevertheless certain developments during the 1710s and early 1720s are of consequence to his later thought and writings on the topic and will therefore need to be briefly summarised. The first of these are his early experiences of, and experiments with, Epicureanism, which will be important in the development of the apology of luxury in the 1730s in the form of the *Traité de métaphysique*, the *Mondain* and its

¹ The original remark is probably John Morley's 'Voltaire left France a poet, he returned to it a sage' (John Morley, *Voltaire* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p. 58); but Adolph Meyer might have had an influence on the more common phrasing when he wrote: 'Voltaire had left France a promising poet; he returned a philosopher.' (Adolph E. Meyer, *Voltaire: Man of Justice* (New York: Howell, Soskin, 1945), p. 112).

² See for instance André Michel Rousseau, *L'Angleterre et Voltaire*, 3 vols, *SVEC*, 1976, I, 54-69; and Charles Dédéyan, *Le Retour de Salente ou Voltaire et l'Angleterre* (Paris: Nizet, 1988), pp. 24-26. For a very good and brief summary see Haydn T. Mason, 'Voltaire Européen naissant et l'Angleterre' in *Voltaire en Europe – Hommage à Christiane Mervaud*, ed. by Michel Delon and Catriona Seth (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), pp. 23-31 (pp. 25-27).

³ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 28-31.

companion pieces. The second is his discovery of Dutch culture which prefigures some of the English experience of commercial culture and its social impact.

Early Epicureanism

Most scholars who discussed the question of Voltaire's relationship to Epicureanism have so far tended to focus on his later works,⁴ Nicholas Cronk being one of the very few who has taken an interest in Voltaire's early poetry and his association with the epicurean *Société du Temple*.⁵ Cronk places some of the early poetry, such as the two *Epîtres en prose et en vers* squarely into the tradition of the 'épicurisme mondain',⁶ arguing that the *Epître à Mme de G**** prefigures the Epicureanism expressed in the *Mondain* and certain aspects of the *Traité de Métaphysique*.⁷ Cronk's analysis is insightful and convincing. Hence a brief summary of the most relevant aspects of these poems will suffice. The two *Epîtres en prose et en vers*, published in the *Nouveau Mercure galant* in October 1716, contain many elements that were to become stock-in-trade parts of Voltaire's image of luxury. The first, *à monsieur le Grand Prieur*, is addressed to Philippe de Vendôme who presided over the *Société du Temple*, and the second to the abbé de Chaulieu, the main poet of the society. Hence it is of little surprise that both form and content of the epistles reflect the epicurean literary traditions of the *Temple*.⁸ They evoke the atmosphere of epicurean pleasure and sociability later to be found as essential ingredients to Voltaire's appreciation of the luxury lifestyle. Some of the similarities with the later *Mondain* are indeed striking: not only the depiction of

⁴ See for instance: Adrienne M. Redshaw, 'Voltaire and Lucretius', *SVEC*, 189 (1980), 19-43; Dennis Fletcher, 'Candide and the philosophy of the garden', *Trivium*, (1978), 18-30.

⁵ Nicholas Cronk, 'Arouet, poète épicurien: les voix de l'épicurisme dans la poésie de jeunesse de Voltaire', *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, 35 (2003), 157-170, cf. his introductions in vol. 1B of the *OCV*. However, see also Catriona Seth's introductions to several of Voltaire's early *Epîtres* in *OCV*, vol. 1B.

⁶ Cronk, 'Arouet, poète épicurien', p. 161.

⁷ Cronk, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 1B, 278-279 (279).

⁸ On this see Cronk's 'Introduction', *ibid.*, pp. 284-286.

dinner parties, sophisticated food, sensual and cheerful sociability, but even the defence of poetry and the evocation of champagne are already present in the Epistle to the *Grand Prieur*.⁹

We can take it that apart from obviously appreciating what he would later define as the pleasures linked to luxury, Voltaire showed a sound knowledge and even appreciation of, or affinity with, Epicureanism in this period.¹⁰ It is widely known that he likens himself to Lucretius in the *Épître à Uranie*, which dates back in its original version to 1722.¹¹ And as Catriona Seth argues, the 1714 *Épître à monsieur l'abbé Servien*, contains an echo, or even paraphrase of Lucretius.¹² Although not mentioning Epicureanism by name, the most radically Epicurean work of the time is the *Épître à Mme de G****. As Cronk argues, the poem goes far beyond the gallant and libertine but ultimately not subversive Epicureanism of the usual poetry of the *Temple* to assert the radical arguments of classic Epicureanism.¹³ This is another development that Voltaire would return to when developing a coherent defence of luxury in the 1730s. As in the *Épître à Uranie*, Epicurean arguments are employed here to convince a supposed female interlocutor of the permissibility and importance of - sensual and sexual - pleasure as opposed to religious superstition and anxiety. Epicureanism seems to have appealed to Voltaire in this instance because it permitted him to mount a convincing argument in defence of sensual pleasure, opposing Christian asceticism; a defence that could potentially be employed for the pleasures of luxury as well.

⁹ Voltaire, *Lettre de monsieur Arouet à monsieur le Grand Prieur*, *OCV*, vol. 1B, 288-294 (292). Like the 'vin d'aï' mentioned in the *Mondain*, the tocané which is evoked in this poem was a new wine from the Champagne region, mainly from around Ay.

¹⁰ Cf his correspondence, for instance D4 of June 1711 to Claude Philippe Fyot de La Marche.

¹¹ On the dating of the poem, see Haydn Mason's 'Introduction' in the *OCV*, vol. 1B, 465-484 (465-467).

¹² In her introduction to the poem as well as in an editorial footnote, Seth argues for a parallel with the opening of book two of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (*OCV*, 1B, 305 and 309).

¹³ Cronk, 'Arouet, poète épicurien', pp. 167-169. Cf his 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 1B, 280-281.

These aspects of Voltaire's early poetry deserve mention as he would make use of them later. However, it has to be borne in mind that at this stage Voltaire did not link his defence of luxury written in the context of the *Temple* to any socio-economic, eudemonistic or ethical theory. In many ways these poems present early attempts at self-positioning. By writing in the style of the *Temple* Voltaire was testing a new voice and posture, trying out a literary persona, which he was happy to dismiss in favour of another posture when the occasion arose.¹⁴ Thus in his *Ode sur les malheurs du temps* which appeared in the *Nouveau Mercure galant* of July 1716, Voltaire, this time in a more Fénelonian, Christian-Stoic guise, attacks luxury by linking it in time-honoured fashion with 'Mollesse', falsity, politeness, and artifice and by depicting it as effeminating and corrupting 'de nos mœurs l'austère dureté'.¹⁵ Luxury was consequently not an important concept for Voltaire at this time. He was happy to defend or to criticise it when the occasion arose, but even when he did praise the epicurean pleasures of luxury, he did not yet place them in a context of wider social utility, of bourgeois or commercial society. This is what his visits to Holland and England would change.

The Dutch Experience

The importance of Dutch society in the development of Voltaire's thought has largely been overshadowed by the impact of his English experience. This is understandable, since both societies had similar characteristics in Voltaire's view and since it was only England that elicited a major work such as the *Lettres philosophiques*. Most biographers and scholars pay tribute to the impact that the discovery of a bourgeois commercial society in Holland made on Voltaire,¹⁶ but Vercruyse's *Voltaire et la Hollande* is one of

¹⁴ On the notion of 'posture' see also chapter IV, especially note 27.

¹⁵ Voltaire, *Sur les malheurs du temps. Ode*, *OCV*, vol. 2B, 329-335.

¹⁶ See for instance: Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), pp. 94-95; René Pomeau, *D'Arrouet à Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985), pp. 150-158; Roger Pearson, *Voltaire*

the few works solely focussing on this experience.¹⁷ Vercruyssen stresses the importance of Voltaire's discovery of Dutch liberty, Dutch commerce, and the inherent link he detected between the two. It was this discovery that would make Holland what he calls a 'nation modèle' in Voltaire's thought (p. 181).

There is no work explicitly inspired by, or dedicated to, Dutch culture and society, so the best testimony of Voltaire's reaction to it is to be found in his correspondence. Voltaire visited, or indeed fled to, Holland several times, in 1713, 1722, 1736-37, 1740 and in 1743. Of these visits, the stay in September and October 1722 is perhaps the most important. In 1713 the young Voltaire was too preoccupied with his love for 'Pimpette', the young Olympe Dunoyer; and even should he have been impressed with the encounter of a different culture, the evidence has not come down to us – the only letters we have from the period of September to December 1713 are twelve letters to Olympe; and as it is to be expected they expressed his grand love of her rather than any insights into cultural analysis. In 1722 however Voltaire was more mature, more open to experience the culture surrounding him. That for once he was healthy and well could only have improved matters.¹⁸ The famous letter to Mme de Bernières, written from The Hague in October 1722 has often been quoted as a precursor to the later *Lettres philosophiques*.¹⁹ It reveals an early fascination with, and appreciation of, the kind of advanced commercial society he would extol in the later *Lettres*. It also presents an important milestone in the development of his thought on luxury and commerce. In the letter he writes:

Almighty – A Life in Pursuit of Freedom (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), pp. 60-6; Haydn T. Mason, 'Voltaire Européen naissant et l'Angleterre', p. 24.

¹⁷ Jean Vercruyssen, *Voltaire et la Hollande*, SVEC, 46 (1966). See also K. den Hartogh, *Voltaire en Hollande* (Nijmegen: Thiemen, 1924).

¹⁸ D125 (2 October 1722) to Thieriot from the Netherlands describes his life there in glowing tones: 'Je monte icy tous les jours à cheval, je joue à la paume, je bois du vin de tocai, je me porte si bien que j'en suis étonné.' – note again his predilection for the tocan or 'tocai' as he puts it here.

¹⁹ See for instance Mason, 'Voltaire Européen naissant', p. 24; Pomeau, *D'Arouet à Voltaire*, p. 155.

Il n'y a rien de plus agréable que la Haye quand le soleil daigne s'y montrer. On ne voit ici que des prairies, des canaux, et des arbres vers; c'est un paradis terrestre depuis la Haie à Amsterdam; j'ai vu avec respect cette ville qui est le magasin de l'univer. Il y avoit plus de mille vaisaux dans le port. De cinq cens mille hommes qui habitent Amsterdam, il n'y en a pas un d'oisif, pas un pauvre, pas un petit maitre, pas un homme insolent. Nous rencontrâmes le pensionnaire à pied sans laquais au milieu de la populace. On ne voit la personne qui ait de cour à faire, on ne se met point en haie pour voir passer un prince, on ne conoit que le travail et la modestie. [...] Nous avons ici un opéra détestable mais en revanche je voi des ministres calvinistes, des arminiens, des sociniens, des rabbins, des anabaptistes qui parlent tous à merveille et qui en vérité ont tous raison. (D128)

The letter deserves citation as it contains four notions that will recur and form persistent themes in the later apology of luxury and commercial society. To begin with, this is the first instance we can find Voltaire use the phrase 'paradis terrestre'. It is significant that in the *Mondain*, his first open defence of luxury, Voltaire should choose to take up an expression he had first used more than ten years previously to describe his impressions of an advanced commercial society.²⁰ Whilst Voltaire is not yet defending 'luxury' as a concept – it is hardly mentioned by him until the 1730s – it is thus clear that when he does, he links it to this experience of commercially developed, bourgeois societies. The second notion of consequence in the letter is that of the 'magasin de l'univer'. Almost the same expression, that of the warehouse of the world, is to be found referring to *London* a few years later in the *Henriade*, and then much later in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, now again referring to Amsterdam.²¹ In both of these later instances the warehouse and with it commerce in general has gained an extra connotation: in this letter it is already linked to prosperous activity, creating both wealth and employment. It is not yet however connected to the flourishing of the arts, a notion that would become central in the eventual defence of luxury and that is spelled out clearly in the two later occurrences in the *Henriade* and the *Siècle*. What trade causes even now, according to the Voltaire of

²⁰ This is the first use of the phrase in the correspondence and it will only reoccur during the Cirey period from 1734 onwards.

²¹ 'Ils sont craints sur la terre, ils sont rois sur les eaux. / Leur flotte impérieuse asservissant Neptune, / Des bouts de l'univers appelle la fortune. / Londres, jadis barbare, est le centre des arts, / Le magasin du monde, et le temple de Mars.' Voltaire, *Henriade*, I.308-312, *OCV* vol. 2, pp. 381-382. 'Amsterdam, l'entrepôt et le magasin de l'Europe, où deux cent mille hommes cultivent le commerce et les arts': Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, ed. by Jacqueline Hellegouarc'h and Sylvain Menant (Paris: Librairie générale Française, 2005), ch. ix, p. 279.

the 1720s, is a work ethic he seems to prize, especially since he discovers a link between commercial society and a new kind of bourgeois society, where men are no longer admired simply for their lineage, and where there is no need for subservience and patronage: 'On ne voit la personne qui ait de cour à faire, on ne se met point en haie pour voir passer un prince'. So far it is simply an absence that Voltaire discovers and values, namely the absence of a culture of forced servility. It is only later, in his idealised account of English society that he goes further and puts in place the proper alternative to *ancien régime* aristocratic culture. His ideal of a meritocratic commercial society was only to be fleshed out in the *Lettres philosophiques* and the Epistles to Fawkenner. A similar development was yet to take place with the fourth notion that we find in the letter to Mme de Bernières: religious toleration – in the commercial society of Holland, all kinds of Christian sects live together and are all permitted to sell their different truths. The link between religious toleration and commerce would also become a cornerstone of the *Lettres philosophiques*. Here, we find the first indication of this.

Holland continued to stand as an example of a liberal, tolerant, commercial society in Voltaire's writings. Decades later, when he chooses a spokesperson for the defence of luxury in the article 'Luxe' of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, he appoints a Dutch merchant as the representative of the advanced, liberal society which luxury and its corollary, trade, could establish.²² The liberty he experienced in Holland left a lifelong impression on him. In a letter to Thieriot from 1736 he still writes: 'celuy qui veut écrire librement et vivre pour la postérité doit aller à Londres ou à la Haye' (D990). This letter also gives an indication of how closely Holland and England were linked in his mind. His thought on commercial society and its corollary, luxury, which first developed when he came into contact with Dutch society, received a major impetus

²² Voltaire, 'Luxe', *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, Cramer, vol. 24, 99-100.

from his stay in England.

The English experience

It has become commonplace to point out that the decision to visit England in May 1726 was not sudden and prompted solely by the need to escape the humiliation of the Rohan affair but that he had planned the visit several years previously. The sojourn in England was crucial for Voltaire in several respects, and scholarly literature on the topic abounds.

²³ What is of consequence in this context are his contacts with merchants and the exposure to what he perceived to be a culture of meritocracy, the public recognition of social utility in all realms. As Charles Dédéyan argues, it was the English experience that led Voltaire to 'constater une liaison du politique et du social, du politique et de l'économique, du social et de l'économique.'²⁴ The period presents a milestone in the development of his thought on commerce and luxury and fortunately it is more fully documented than the previous years. The correspondence is much less patchy than in his youth and we have the notebooks he kept as well as the works he wrote and published during the period.

One of the reasons for wishing to come to England was Voltaire's plan to publish the *Henriade* there. Designed as a modern day *Aeneid*,²⁵ the work was too classicizing and epic in character to provide a context for any extensive defence of modern commercial society or indeed luxury. Despite extensive reworking during his stay in

²³ On the impact on his prose writing see Cronk, 'Voltaire rencontre Monsieur le Spectateur. Addison et la genèse des *Lettres anglaises*' in *Voltaire en Europe*, pp. 13-21; on the development of his cosmopolitanism: Mason, 'Voltaire Européen naissant'; on Voltaire's relationship with English Literature: Ahmad Gunny, *Voltaire and English Literature*, *SVEC*, 177 (1979). For comprehensive accounts, see André Michel Rousseau, *L'Angleterre et Voltaire*, and Charles Dédéyan, *Le Retour de Salente*.

²⁴ *Le Retour de Salente*, p. 129.

²⁵ On the conscious imitation and parallels, see Pomeau, *D'Arouet à Voltaire*, pp. 175-176, and Taylor's extensive introduction to the work in *OCV*, vol. 2, 17-233.

England,²⁶ the classic tone and style of the work are reflected in its classicizing condemnation of luxury: its connotations remain 'mollesse', effeminacy, and corruption, and a link is established between luxury, despotic power and the misery of the masses.²⁷ Despite some interesting occurrences, such as the metaphor of the storehouse of the universe mentioned above and a general defence of commerce as an important means to enrich and empower a country,²⁸ the fact that the work was written in a conscious attempt to place Voltaire in the grand tradition of the European epos, excludes it from any socio-economic theorizing on contemporary commercial culture and does hence not provide a very relevant source for our enquiry.

More useful in tracing the emergence of Voltaire's thought on commercial society are the correspondence and notebooks, together with the so called *English Essays*, *An essay upon the civil wars of France* and *An Essay on Epick Poetry*, the first works Voltaire wrote and published after his arrival in England. All these reveal a consistent preoccupation with four themes: liberty, religion, commerce, and the arts. These are frequently interlinked, though the precise nature of their interconnection is more often than not left to conjecture. Three instances, one each from the *Essays*, the notebooks, and the correspondence, provide an insight into these preoccupations.

Even though they were mainly conceived as an introduction to, and advertisement of, the *Henriade* as the great epic work of modern day Europe, the *English Essays* offer, as David Williams has pointed out, 'an early glimpse of the

²⁶ For a good summary of the changes see Taylor's Introduction to the work in *OCV*, vol. 2, 17-253, especially 68-72.

²⁷ See VI.27-28 (p. 491) on luxury, despotism, and public misery. On the moral connotation of luxury, see also I.25-38 (pp. 367-368), which establishes a contrast between virility and 'gloire' rhyming on 'victoire' with effeminacy ('effëminë' is indeed used), corruption, cowardliness and 'mollesse' rhyming on 'faiblesse'.

²⁸ Commerce is depicted as unequivocally positive in the *Henriade*: it is the source of the British rise to power and glory (I.308-312, pp. 381-382), and it is what Saint Louis counsels France to pursue in order to restore its happiness and grandeur (VII.429-436, p. 533).

material, ideas and attitudes that Voltaire was absorbing and recording for use in more celebrated works such as the *Lettres philosophiques*.²⁹ One instance is particularly intriguing, when, concluding the *Essay on Epick Poetry*, Voltaire writes:

I will own, that an Epick Poem is a harder Task in France, than in any other Country whatever; not purely because we *Rhime*, but because our Rhimes, as well as the other Parts of our Versification, are ty'd down to the most insupportable and insignificant Rules; not because our Language wants Loftiness, but because it wants Freedom. For it is with our Heroick Poetry, as with our Trade, we come up to the English in neither, for want of being a free Nation.³⁰

Almost as an afterthought he adds: 'Slavery is generally an Obstacle to Abundance' (p. 394). It is unusual to say the least that he should chose to bring the topic of trade into a discussion of the genre of epic poetry. It certainly shows a marked preoccupation with the matter, but it does not necessarily yet point to his later argument that liberty, commerce, and the flourishing of the arts and sciences are interconnected. It could simply be a metaphor designed to please his projected audience, an audience of traders, but also of politicians and aristocrats, who might appreciate his praise of English liberty and commercial success.³¹ The fact remains that both commerce and the arts share a common link in their dependence on liberty. A more substantial and reciprocal link between commerce and liberty is made in the notebooks and in two letters sent to Thieriot in 1726 and 1728. He defines love of liberty as the predominant characteristic of the English. A few months after his arrival in May 1726, he writes to Thieriot: 'C'est un pays où on pense librement et noblement sans être retenu par aucune crainte servile' (D299). A similar observation is made in the notebooks:

An English man is full of taughts [sic], French all in miens, compliments, sweet words and curious of engaging outside, overflowing in words, obsequious with pride, and very much self concerned under the appearance of a pleasant modesty. The English is sparing of words, openly proud and unconcerned.³²

²⁹ David Williams, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 3B, 121-302 (121).

³⁰ Voltaire, *An Essay on Epick Poetry*, in *The English Essays of 1727*, pp. 393-394.

³¹ This is supposing that his projected readership coincides with the list of the subscribers to the *Henriade*. On this, and on Voltaire's English acquaintances, see Rousseau, *L'Angleterre et Voltaire*, I, 88-89 (on the subscribers' list) and 90-136 for his British contacts.

³² *The small Leningrad notebook*, *OCV*, vol. 81, 51-69 (54). Besterman traces this comment to the *Spectator* of August 1711 (*ibid.*, p. 54, note 4). On the impact of the *Spectator* on Voltaire see also Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire rencontre Monsieur le Spectateur'.

Two years after the letter to Thieriot, another letter gives an indication of Voltaire's views on the origin of this lack of obsequiousness, of any 'crainte servile'. The reason is that engaging in commercial activity makes a man his own master and thus gives him independence from patronage networks and the subservience these require:

Je me flatte que vous êtes pour le présent avec votre frère. Je ne croy pas que vous suiviez le commerce comme luy. Mais si vous le pouviez faire j'en serois fort aise car il vaut mieux être maître d'une boutique que dépendant dans une grande maison. (D341, August 1728)

The point is crucial. The growth of commerce leads to greater independence in a society. Which also explains how Voltaire came to align commerce and liberty in a more mutual relationship: on the one hand, a certain degree of liberty was necessary for commerce to flourish, as he had pointed out in the *Essay*. On the other, commerce would bring liberty in turn, as it allowed men to establish an independent fortune and because of that be 'openly proud and unconcerned.' Again, a topos we find announced in the earlier 'Dutch' letter to Madame de Bernières.

A further similarity with the Dutch letter is another connection that Voltaire begins to emphasise, the connection between liberty of commerce and liberty of conscience, between trade and tolerance. The letter to Madame de Bernières has been considered a predecessor to the scene of the Royal Exchange in the *Lettres philosophiques*. A passage from the notebooks seems to provide an intermediary stage between the two, one that nevertheless makes the later point as strongly:

Where there is no liberty of conscience, there is seldom liberty of trade, the same tyranny encroaching upon the commerce as upon Religion. In the Commonwealths and other free contrys one may see in a see port, as many religions as shippes. The same god is there differently whorship'd by jews, mahometans, heathens, catholiques, quackers, anabaptistes, which write strenuously one against another, but deal together freely and with trust and peace; like good players who after having humour's their parts and fought one against another upon the stage, spend the rest of their time in drinking together. [sic]³³

³³ *Small Leningrad notebook*, p. 65.

The link between religious toleration and trade seems to be reciprocal, much like the link between social independence and commerce. Trade needs freedom from persecution to flourish but it also seems to lead to toleration in turn: different religions are united in peaceful negotiations. The *Sottise des deux parts*, written in 1728,³⁴ makes this more explicit. In this short prose text, an ex-jansenist has relinquished his youthful desire to be a martyr for his faith in favour of establishing a fortune.³⁵ At least for those less enlightened and more feeble, commerce and money-making can provide a substitute for religious fervour and fanaticism, one that is much more 'raisonnable' (p. 229). The idea that money-making can provide a much more innocuous alternative to religious fundamentalism is one of the key notions of the *Lettres philosophiques* which Voltaire began during his stay in England but only published in 1733 and 1734. Here we also find the first indications of the notion that trade not only replaces religious preoccupations, but that participating in it contributes to the common good and can even lead to more rational and 'enlightened' behaviour overall.

³⁴ On the composition of the text see Jean Dagen's Introduction to it: *OCV*, vol. 3A, 203-216.

³⁵ Voltaire, *Sottise des deux parts*, *OCV*, vol. 3A, 197-234.

I.ii The *Lettres philosophiques*

Though begun in England, the *Lettres* were abandoned for a while after Voltaire's return to France, then reworked, and eventually published in 1733 (in the English translation) and 1734 (in the French original, which in the London edition did not include the 25th letter only added in the Rouen edition of the same year, published by Jore).³⁶ They immediately caused a huge scandal and have remained one of the most commented upon works of Voltaire to this day. One of the most frequently put questions in this context is that of their internal cohesion or subject matter, or to put it differently, what makes them 'philosophiques' and what links them to the final letter, only added in the Jore edition, on Pascal's *Pensées*. Paying closer attention to the theme of trade and commercial culture can provide answers to both. I propose to look at the text in two stages, first to examine the earlier version, not including the letter on Pascal, and then to analyse how these *English letters* fit with the last letter.

The *English Letters*

Several scholars have underlined the importance of commerce in the *Lettres*,³⁷ but

³⁶ On the genesis of the work, see René Pomeau, 'Les *Lettres philosophiques* le projet de Voltaire', *SVEC*, 179 (1979) 11-24; André Rousseau, 'Naissance d'un livre et d'un texte: les *Letters concerning the English nation*', *SVEC*, 179 (1979), 25-46.

Specifically on the question of translation and original: Nicholas Cronk, 'The *Letters concerning the English nation* as an English work: reconsidering the Harcourt Brown thesis', *SVEC* 2002:10, 226-239; and most importantly J. Patrick Lee, 'The unexamined premise: Voltaire, John Lockman and the myth of the *English letters*', *ibid.*, 240-259. When it comes to commercial culture and socio-economic issues, the two versions show no important differences, the only real variation being that for the examples of successful businessmen at the close of letter 24 on Academies. The English version gives three Englishmen, whilst the French version gives two Frenchmen along with the same Englishman Peter Delmé, Fawkeners brother-in-law and director as well as governor of the Bank of England. Cf.: Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. by Frédéric Deloffre (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 154 and Voltaire, *Lettres concerning the English Nation*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 120. On the importance of these figures in the text, see below.

³⁷ Most notably Peter Gay who characterises the *Lettres* as a 'mature political essay, informed by his new awareness that political freedom is closely related to intellectual freedom and commercial prosperity.' (Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: the poet as a realist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 48); and Christiane Mervaud who views it as an 'ouvrage qui a tenté une telle apologie du commerce.'

hardly any have sought to analyse how this contributes to the overall coherence of the work. Roland Desné is a notable exception, and we shall return to him in the context of Voltaire's Pascalian critique. Of course the *Lettres* are not a monologic work with a single proposition or 'message', and numerous themes interlink to underscore its internal cohesion. In his edition of the work Frédéric Deloffre makes a convincing case for religious tolerance as the overarching theme, even though he concedes that this poses some difficulties in accounting for the presence of the letters on the arts and sciences. He nevertheless argues that these can be seen as 'l'exemple de ce que peut une pensée dégagée de toute "superstition"', and points to the very free translations included in the letters on literature, which re-introduce the anti-clerical element, as in the rather idiosyncratic rendering of Hamlet's soliloquy.³⁸ Such an interpretation is undoubtedly true, but it overlooks another central element which occurs throughout the work and contributes both to its cohesion and coherence: the culture of commerce.

It is notoriously difficult to establish the structure of the earlier versions of the *Lettres*; the disproved Harcourt Brown thesis of the original being written largely in English, is an illustration of this. Several scholars have nevertheless ventured certain conjectures. Nicholas Cronk believes that only letters 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 18, 19, 20, and 22 formed part of the early project begun in England, whilst Christiane Mervaud thinks the original project included all but the letters on Newton (14-17) and Pascal (25).³⁹ Following Mervaud's hypothesis leads to an interesting case for the importance of commerce in the *Lettres*: it would quite literally be at the centre of the work. It would leave the work containing nine letters on religion and government, then one letter on commerce, and ten further letters on the arts and sciences (now letters 11-13 and 18-24).

(Christiane Mervaud, 'Voltaire négociant en idées ou "merchant of a nobler kind" dans les *Lettres philosophiques*', *L'Information littéraire*, 40 (1988), 29-35, (30)).

³⁸ Frédéric Deloffre, 'Préface' in Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, pp. 7-34 (pp. 8-10).

³⁹ Cronk, 'Voltaire rencontre Monsieur le Spectateur', p. 17; Mervaud, 'Voltaire négociant', pp. 31-32.

Ultimately this remains speculation however, since there is little evidence from the correspondence as to the precise genesis of the work and no surviving early manuscripts, rough work, or plans.⁴⁰ However, whether or not commerce was physically at the centre of any early versions of the work, it remains the middle point of its four major topics: it comes after the letters on religion and on politics, and before those on the sciences and on the arts. Thematically if not arithmetically, commerce is at the centre.

Commercial culture is also central in that it can account for the overall structure and cohesion of the work, which can be read in its four themes as depicting the consequences and workings of commercial culture. These then make for the internal development of the *Lettres*: firstly the relationship between commerce and religion, secondly that between commerce and (political) liberty, and thirdly the utilitarian or meritocratic culture that Voltaire views as arising from commerce and which leads to the encouragement of the arts and sciences as depicted in the second part of the work. These three aspects thus deserve further analysis.

The first seven letters set out the relationship between commerce and religion. The former being characterised as the polar opposite of, and clear alternative to, religious fanaticism. This relationship is at its most complex in the first four letters on the Quakers. Jean Sareil has offered a good analysis of these, concluding that Voltaire's 'real' opinion on the sect never shows, the portrayal being strategic rather than conveying neutral 'facts'.⁴¹ The depiction of the Quakers remains ambiguous. Sareil's view is that it is broadly positive in the first letter, opposing a more ridiculous narrator

⁴⁰ On this difficulty, see René Pomeau, 'Les *Lettres philosophiques*', pp. 17-18.

⁴¹ Jean Sareil, 'Les quatre premières *Lettres philosophiques* ou les complications du jeu satirique', *Romanic Review*, 76 (1985), 277-286 (278-279).

figure to a classic 'sage'; much less favourable in the second letter, where the Quaker assembly is described; even more openly critical in the third letter on Fox, and once again a mixture of admiration and ridicule in the fourth and last letter on Penn and Pennsylvania (ibid., p. 279-285). What Sareil does not comment on is that the Quaker's relationship to commerce precisely mirrors this development. When they are portrayed as moderate, virtuous, and tolerant as in the first and fourth letter, a link with commerce is established, whilst in their more 'fanatic' guise they are set in opposition to commerce, as in the second and third letters. In the initial portrait of the Quaker as a 'sage', as noble, temperate, open, and humane, his involvement with commerce is clearly set out, indeed it is the first fact we learn about him, before any other qualities or traits are mentioned: 'j'allai trouver un des plus célèbres quakers d'Angleterre, qui, après avoir été trente ans dans le commerce [...] s'était retiré dans une campagne auprès de Londres.'⁴² The admirable and moderate Quaker has thus a direct link to commerce. However, the same character suddenly opposes commercialism, when he appears in his more ridiculous, 'fanatical' guise in the following letter, where he defends the Quakers' religious assembly that bears an uncanny resemblance to the delusional ramblings of a religiously inspired madman, or indeed to the contemporary convulsionists in Paris. His precise words are:

Pourquoi abandonnerions-nous notre enfant à des nourrices mercenaires, quand nous avons du lait à lui donner? [...] Dieu a dit: *Vous avez reçu gratis, donnez gratis*. Irons-nous, après cette parole, marchander l'Évangile, vendre l'Esprit-Saint, et faire d'une assemblée de chrétiens une boutique de marchands? Nous ne donnons point d'argent à des hommes vêtus de noir pour assister nos pauvres, pour enterrer nos morts, pour prêcher les fidèles. (Letter II, p. 43)

The opposition between religion and trade is double: on the one hand it opposes unreasonable sectarianism in general – which is what the Quakers suddenly appear accused of after their ridiculous assembly – to trade, as quite clearly 'vendre', 'boutique',

⁴² Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques* ed. by Deloffre, letter I, p. 37. A note on the edition: like the usually used Lanson-Rousseau edition, Deloffre follows the Jore edition albeit with modernised spelling. It is a good scholarly edition and has the advantage over the Lanson-Rousseau one that it is readily available.

'argent', 'marchands' and 'marchander' are used in a negative context here. On the other hand, their objections in and of themselves seem rather reasonable: why should a community 'sell' the care of those that ought to be most dear to them? Thus at the same time the clergy appear as self-interested merchants, who could be bought. This in turn however, could already imply that religion could potentially become one trade or merchandise amongst others, and become subservient to the demands of the market. This aspect amongst others is explored in the following letters.

The third letter continues the opposition of fanatic Quakers to commerce: Fox, illiterate and 'saintement fou', and his followers who have caught the 'maladie' of enthusiasm to the point of convulsion (III, pp. 45-47), are also supremely uninterested in money and refuse all of Cromwell's offers (III, p. 47). Fanatics do not do trade or money. Moderate people however do; and the earthly Eden of Pennsylvania illustrates precisely this. Pennsylvania under Penn is as close as it gets to the ideal society: it sees a 'véritable âge d'or' (IV, p. 52). It is characterised by complete peace and (religious) tolerance, equitable laws, and material prosperity: by commercial culture. This latter aspect is highlighted twice: not only is Penn's final return to England motivated solely by the desire to 'solliciter à Londres des avantages nouveaux en faveur du commerce des Pennsylvains' (IV, p. 53), which underlines the importance of commerce in this new society, but also its very first settlers are merchants: 'A peine eut-il établi son gouvernement que plusieurs marchands de l'Amérique vinrent peupler cette colonie. (IV, p. 51). The relationship between religious tolerance and commerce is thus mutual: on the one hand reasonable, i.e. non-fanatical people would seek to encourage commerce which in turn leads to prosperity; and on the other those involved in commerce prefer religious tolerance. Hence this 'véritable âge d'or', is golden in the double sense: not only does it hark back to the perfect state of mankind the 'golden age' represented in

Greek and Roman mythology, it is also directly related to gold the metal, being characterised by material prosperity and trade. The first four letters thus set out an opposition between fanaticism and sectarianism on the one hand, and tolerance, wisdom, and commerce on the other. This is part of the wider picture of the first seven letters on religion which contrast a commercial age or society to a religious age or society.

Another aspect of the opposition between trade and sectarianism is that, not only naturally occurring with and through religious tolerance, commerce actively combats fanaticism, or, perhaps more accurately, dissuades from it by providing a superior alternative. That commerce and luxury – which remains unnamed but is represented through fashion, pleasure-seeking, and money – provide an incentive to renounce sectarianism is already spelt out at the end of the fourth letter, which claims that the numbers of the Quakers are declining as most young people prefer 'luxuries', or as it is put here, the wish to 'jouir, avoir des honneurs, des boutons et des manchettes', in short the wish to 'être à la mode', makes them renounce their sect in favour of the more mainstream Anglican Church (IV, p. 54). This is underscored in the following letter. Commerce relies on a reasonable calculation of self interest. In a commercial culture this spirit prevails and it is diametrically opposed to that of religious fanaticism. And in this spirit, most conversions to the mainstream, and in Voltaire's view, state-controlled Anglican Church are motivated by self-interest and the hope for social and financial gain.⁴³ Commercial gain has given people a different incentive, and one that is much more beneficial than religious fervour. Whilst the latter has led to bloody civil wars, the former enriches the entire nation, a merchant contributing to the 'bonheur du monde', as

⁴³ 'On ne peut avoir d'emploi, ni en Angleterre ni en Irlande, sans être du nombre des fidèles anglicans; cette raison, qui est une excellente preuve, a converti tant de non-conformistes, qu'aujourd'hui il n'y a pas la vingtième partie de la nation qui soit hors du giron de l'Église dominante.' (V, p. 55).

Voltaire famously puts it in the letter on Commerce (X, p. 76). This is best illustrated in the equally famous and often cited Royal Exchange scene which deserves quoting at full:

Entrez dans la Bourse de Londres, cette place plus respectable que bien des cours, vous y voyez rassemblés les députés de toutes les nations pour l'utilité des hommes. Là le juif, le mahométan et le chrétien traitent l'un avec l'autre comme s'ils étaient de la même religion, et ne donnent le nom d'infidèles qu'à ceux qui font banqueroute ; là le presbytérien se fie à l'anabaptiste, et l'anglican reçoit la promesse du quaker. Au sortir de ces pacifiques et libres assemblées, les uns vont à la synagogue, les autres vont boire ; celui-ci va se faire baptiser dans une grande cuve au nom du Père, par le Fils, au Saint-Esprit ; celui-là fait couper le prépuce de son fils et fait marmotter sur l'enfant des paroles hébraïques qu'il n'entend point ; ces autres vont dans leur église attendre l'inspiration de Dieu, leur chapeau sur la tête, et tous sont contents. (VI, pp. 60-61)

Perhaps most clearly so far, this section sets out commercial activity as an alternative to religious fanaticism. There are clear parallels. The notion of 'infidels' for instance still persists, but has been removed from the spiritual to the material realm; and the consequences of substituting trade for religion are clearly benign. The preceding paragraph set out the divisive nature of established religions, illustrating it with the quarrels between Presbyterians and Episcopalians, or between Jansenists and Jesuits. Trade however unites; the lexicon of trust and mutuality, 'se fier à', 'traiter l'un avec l'autre', 'recevoir la promesse de', emphasises this. Religion has become a perfectly private matter, everybody following his preferred cult in their spare time. Linked to this is the unification not only of religions but also of 'toutes les nations': Trade promotes internal as well as international peace and cooperation. But commercial activity not only makes these gatherings 'pacifiques' but also 'libres', hinting at the interconnection between liberty and trade that forms the subject of the following three letters. Self-interested behaviour, i.e. profit-making through trade, thus increases general happiness, since it is for the benefit of mankind at large, 'pour l'utilité des hommes': it leads to tolerance, liberty, and peace, and it improves the general well-being – at the end of the day, 'tous sont contents'.

The Royal Exchange scene concludes the sixth letter on religion and so far each of these letters have contained references to, or discussions of, commerce. Together with the Exchange, the most striking example for this occurs in the seventh and last letter on religion, which boldly states: 'Si Cromwell renaissait, lui qui a fait couper la tête à son roi et s'est fait souverain, serait un simple marchand de Londres.' (VII, p. 64) This is symptomatic of Voltaire's stated belief that this is 'un âge où le monde est rassasié de disputes et de sectes.' Instead of an age of religion, this is a commercial age – or at least England is a commercial nation. Even a 'simple' merchant now has greater status and greater incentives than an autocratic religious ruler, commerce is replacing religion. In line with this, though less blatantly stated, is the idea that in this idealised land, religion itself has become a private commodity. The traders of the Royal Exchange treat religion as something to be done in private. A commercial society seems by definition to be a secular one. The plethora of sects and religions also lends itself to another comparison: to the abundance of choice in the market-place which allows the consumer the freedom to choose: 'C'est ici le pays des sectes. Un Anglais, comme homme libre, va au Ciel par le chemin qui lui plaît.' (V, p. 55) The idea of free choice or a free market works in another way, too: 'S'il n'y avait en Angleterre qu'une religion, le despotisme serait à craindre; s'il y en avait deux, elles se couperaient la gorge; mais il y en a trente, et elles vivent en paix et heureuses.' (VI, p. 61). It is thus with religion as it is with economic players: a monopoly is harmful, two major competitors contending for dominance on the market will cause instability, but free trade allows for the perfect balance bourgeois economists of the eighteenth-century predicted and defended.

If commerce leads to religious tolerance and religious tolerance attracts commerce in turn, a similar logic applies to political liberty and commerce, the subject

of the following letters which present a vindication of the commercial bourgeoisie. The eighth letter, 'Sur le parlement', is largely based on a comparison between Britain and ancient Rome, in which Britain, apart from their seventeenth-century religious wars, comes out the clear winner, due to its great love of liberty. This liberty is reflected in their ideal – and it cannot be stressed often enough, highly *idealised* – form of government, in which the prince, the aristocracy, and the people share power. Rome instead was marked by oppression of the majority and thus, to keep the people happy, under the obligation to wage war constantly. The difference lies in the presence or absence of a strong bourgeoisie, or as it is called here, the 'pouvoir mitoyen', that would be the mediating factor between 'les grands et le peuple' (VIII, p. 66). The bourgeoisie, or commercial class, is not only the one that has through its activities contributed to make this age less fanatical in religious terms, as illustrated in the preceding letters, it also contributes to the stability of the state – and to the prevailing spirit of liberty. The link between commerce and liberty is most strongly made in letter ten, but preceding this is further praise of the middle orders. In the ninth letter, on government, the feudal and religious past of England is painted and roundly condemned. Against vicious feudal lords and priestly rulers, the bourgeoisie is set as a virtuous counter-example. Whilst the former laid waste to the land out of self-seeking motives, the latter contributed to the slow development of prosperity and liberty. When Voltaire speaks of 'le peuple' in this context, he is clearly referring to the bourgeoisie, not the working classes or 'bas peuple', as he sometimes calls them:

Le peuple, la plus nombreuse, la plus vertueuse même et par conséquent la plus respectable partie des hommes, composée de ceux qui étudient les lois et les sciences, des négociants, des artisans, en un mot de tout ce qui n'était point tyran.
(IX, p. 71)

Not only are they not tyrannical, through their professions they contribute to the good of society, furthering knowledge ('sciences'), justice ('lois'), and general prosperity and

employment ('négociants' and 'artisans'). By consequence, the fact that Voltaire's England is now just, free, and prosperous, a point he illustrates with the English tax system and the situation of its peasants, is due to the bourgeoisie: through their honest work they have acquired wealth whilst the feudal lords have ruined themselves through warfare, thus lands and thereby power have changed hands, which was mirrored by the decline in the power of the House of Lords and the rise of the Commons (IX, p. 72). The consequences are liberty, equality before the law and before tax, which in turn encourage general prosperity and the willingness to invest and improve (IX, pp. 72-73).

That the grandeur of Britain is due to its commercial culture is made most explicit in the following letter, 'Sur le Commerce'. It establishes a clear link between commerce, liberty, power, and prosperity: 'Le commerce, qui a enrichi les citoyens en Angleterre, a contribué à les rendre libres, et cette liberté a étendu le commerce à son tour; de là s'est formée la grandeur de l'Etat' (X, p. 75). What ought to be noted is that the relationship is not only mutually reinforcing, but also that it works both on an individual level and on the national one. The potentially self-interested behaviour of merchants – extending their commerce to enrich themselves – has not only led to greater liberty for the people at large, it has also contributed to the greatness of the state. This greatness is reflected in its military prowess, which Voltaire stresses also relies on the merchants' financial and naval power (X, pp. 75-76). This, according to Voltaire, 'donne un juste orgueil à un marchand anglais, et fait qu'il ose se comparer, non sans quelque raison, à un citoyen romain.' (X, p. 76) The second part of this quotation is interesting, as he had clearly rejected any comparison of Britain with ancient Rome in letter eight. The difference lies in the terms of comparison: England and Rome are different in social and political terms, but the *status* of merchants resembles that of Roman citizens, who were traditionally associated with both liberty and, due to their nearly mythical status,

grandeur. This reverses traditional views of the trader, as base, calculating, and avaricious, to accord him instead a quasi-heroic status. His heroism lies in his contribution to the general good and the liberty and power of the nation, his *utility*. This is reinforced by a strongly anti-aristocratic comparison:

Je ne sais pourtant lequel est le plus utile à un Etat, ou un seigneur bien poudré qui sait précisément à quelle heure le Roi se lève, à quelle heure il se couche, et qui se donne des airs de grandeur en jouant le rôle d'esclave dans l'antichambre d'un ministre, ou un négociant qui enrichit son pays, donne de son cabinet des ordres à Surate et au Caire, et contribue au bonheur du monde. (X, p. 76)

The continental nobleman in question is an anti-merchant, characterised by all Voltaire was so pleased to have found lacking in British society: dependence, servility, class snobbishness. He is France, the trader is England, representing independence (unlike the nobleman who insinuates himself into a space that is not his own but his master's, the merchant is in '*son cabinet*'), power ('*donne des ordres*') and perhaps most importantly contribution to the common good, a fact that is stressed by being illustrated twice (he not only enriches his country, but also benefits the entire world).

The English nobleman – at least in Voltaire's England – is different from his continental or indeed French counterpart. England has become so much of a commercial culture that the spirit of feudalism has been replaced with an enlightened understanding of national and personal self-interest. Thus, in Britain, even the aristocracy pursues trade and commercial activities – and takes pride in this (X, p. 76). The spirit of enlightened self-interest engendered by commerce directly translates into a culture of meritocracy. This explains how the letters on the arts and sciences can follow on seamlessly from the letter on commerce. The letter immediately following, makes this explicit: '*Une nation commerçante est toujours fort alerte sur ses intérêts*' (XI, p. 78). Commerce teaches the importance of a rational self-interest calculation. A commercial society will thus be constantly aware of its self-interest, and as a consequence of this

will do its utmost to encourage all who contribute to it. Such a society will hence automatically avoid dogma, and instead recompense merit in all its forms.⁴⁴

The following letters then set out to demonstrate the achievements of this meritocratic culture in the realm of the arts and sciences. In these letters, Voltaire always stresses the encouragements and recompenses these *grands hommes* of Britain received, quite deliberately comparing this to the situation in France. Descartes was persecuted and miserable, whilst Newton 'a vécu honoré de ses compatriotes, et a été enterré comme un roi qui aurait fait du bien à ses sujets.' (XIV, p. 97). In the British meritocratic culture, Addison became secretary of state – in France he would not even have received a state pension if it were not for the intervention of 'quelque femme'; and in all likelihood he would have been attacked and persecuted, too (XXIII, p. 146); idem for Swift, for Congreve, and Prior, who became plenipotentiary in France, a post of which Voltaire with his unceasing diplomatic ambitions could only dream (XXIII, p. 147). Rather disingenuously Voltaire underplays the religious discrimination of Catholics in Britain – it would after all, mar his image of the exemplary religious tolerance in commercial nations – by claiming that, even if, because of his religion, Pope was not given any high office, he did make a vast fortune through the sale of his works (XXIII, p. 147). What follows is the strongest illustration of this meritocratic

⁴⁴ 'Meritocracy' is not a word Voltaire would use. However, he strongly stresses the idea of merit, recompense, and less so, that of talent. See for example letter twenty-three: 'Le mérite trouve à la vérité d'autres récompenses plus honorables pour la nation; tel est le respect que ce peuple a pour les talents, qu'un homme de mérite fait toujours fortune' (p. 146). This point is stressed in the *Epîtres à Fawkenner*. The title alone is programmatic: *Epître dédicatoire à m. Fakener, marchand anglais, depuis Ambassadeur à Constantinople*. Such dedications were usually made to royalty or the high aristocracy – i.e. to patrons – not to merchants, which already emphasises Voltaire's alignment with what he perceived as the British commercial culture. The second part, 'depuis Ambassadeur à Constantinople', stresses the ideal of recompensing merit: a man of any station or class who contributes to the good of the nation, and be it through trade, may be rewarded with high office. These notions are reinforced in the *Epître* itself. It opens on a eulogy of merchants and their role in society. In the epistle he again drives home the message that an ideal society rewards all actions that contribute to the common good. And this reward was in line with what Voltaire perceived as a culture of liberty: 'Vous n'avez pas besoin des regards du maître pour honorer et récompenser les grands talents en tout genre'. Voltaire, *Epître dédicatoire à m. Fakener, marchand anglais, depuis Ambassadeur à Constantinople*, *OCV*, vol. 8, 392-405 (401).

culture yet: Voltaire presents Westminster, where the nation buries all those who contributed to its greatness, be those a Newton, or a Miss Oldfield (XXIII, p. 147).⁴⁵ What is intriguing about the passage is its reminiscence of the earlier set-piece scene of the Royal Exchange, both opening with a direct address to the reader: 'Entrez dans la Bourse de Londres' or respectively 'Entrez à Westminster'. The allusion is easily overlooked, but is nevertheless a subtle reminder of the link between commerce and this culture of merit.

As with trading activities, Voltaire likes to stress that the *entirety* of the nation has embraced this attitude of national self-interest, illustrated once again by the participation of the high nobility, this time in literary activities (XI, pp. 140-141). And it is clear that the arts and sciences are esteemed because of this enlightened national interest, because of their *utility*. The usefulness of scientific investigation has already been proven by the practice of inoculation, but even literature is distinctly useful in Britain, thanks to its unique political system, whose consequence is that 'tout le monde est dans la nécessité de s'instruire' (XX, p. 134). The *moi* of the *Lettres* embraces this culture of proto-utilitarianism, admonishing scientists to make their research applicable and *useful*, and castigating the *Académie française* for publishing pointless *Eloges* rather than contributing to the national glory by, for instance, publishing the works of famous French authors (XXIV, pp. 154-155). The first of these two examples is particularly intriguing, as what he opposes to the algebraist, who spends his life 'à chercher dans les nombres des rapports et des propriétés étonnantes, mais sans usage', is

⁴⁵ This allows Voltaire to point to the shameful situation in France, where an actress of similar status, Mlle Lecouvreur, had been refused a Christian funeral, due to her profession. On the impact of her death on Voltaire, see Pomeau's, 'Les *Lettres philosophiques*'. Pomeau sees this event as the trigger for the publication of the *Lettres*, a thesis that is supported by the many similarities which the 1731 poem *La Mort de mademoiselle Lecouvreur Fameuse actrice* bears with the admiration for English meritocracy and the condemnation of the French view of actors expressed in the *Lettres*.

'un grand négociant, un Jacques Coeur, un Delmet, un Bernard' (XXIV, p. 154).⁴⁶ In the ideal society that Voltaire's England represents, everybody ought to contribute to the common good.

Any discussion of commerce, self-interest, and the common good in the eighteenth century, especially one set in 1720s Britain, begs the question of Mandevillian influence. It is not clear if Voltaire had read the *Fable of Bees* at this stage, though it is perhaps likely that he was familiar with its contents: Rousseau identifies Voltaire's mentioning of a conversation with a 'Mr. Bluet' (*Small Leningrad notebook*, p. 65) as a reference to the author of the pamphlet *An Enquiry whether a general Practice of Virtue tends to the Wealth or Poverty, Benefit or Disadvantage of a People? In which the Pleas offered by the Author of the Fable of the Bees, or private Vices publick Benefits, for the Usefulness of Vice and Roguery are considered*, which appeared in London in 1725. He concludes that Voltaire must have been familiar with the controversy surrounding the *Fable of the Bees*.⁴⁷ The tract seems to have been viewed as important enough to merit a pamphlet from Mandeville in response,⁴⁸ and a review of it which appeared in the *Journal des Sçavans* of the same year (pp. 664-667). Little is known about the author himself, the pamphlet does not give his name and in various library catalogues he is listed as either a Thomas Bluett or Blewitt. The sole reference to a 'Mr. Bluet' in the Notebook, especially since it occurs in a totally unrelated context,⁴⁹

⁴⁶ 'Delmet' undoubtedly refers to the Peter Delmé, brother-in-law to Fawkener, mentioned above. The examples in the English version are 'a Sir Peter Delmé, a Sir Richard Hopkins, a Sir Gilbert Heathcot' (Voltaire, *Letters concerning the English Nation*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk, p. 120). Jacques Coeur was an early fourteenth-century French merchant, one of the founders of French trade with the Levant and later master of the mint and ennobled ambassador. Samuel Bernard was a famous seventeenth and eighteenth-century financier who met Louis XIV at Mably when financing his participation in the war of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) and was later made Count of Coubert.

⁴⁷ Rousseau, *L'Angleterre et Voltaire*, p. 125.

⁴⁸ Mandeville's response was published the following year: *The true meaning of The fable of the bees: in a letter to the author of a book entitled An enquiry whether a general Practice of Virtue tends to the Wealth or Poverty, Benefit or Disadvantage of a People? Shewing that he has manifestly mistaken the true meaning of the Fable of the Bees, in his Reflections on that Book* (London: William & John Innys, 1726).

⁴⁹ The remark simply states: 'Mr. Bluet told me this day 20 July that he was married to fortunes daughter,

is thus a rather thin basis for concluding Voltaire had read the *Fable*. Nor do we know if he read either Bluett's tract, Mandeville's response, or if he was a reader of the *Journal des Sçavans* at the time. However, McKenna aligns himself with Rousseau at this point, citing his evidence of the Bluett mention and adding that four other people who were mentioned in Voltaire's writings or who subscribed to the *Henriade* were in some way implicated in the Mandeville quarrel.⁵⁰ This evidence is again open to interpretation, and in the *Lettres philosophiques* nothing proves that he had read the *Fable* at this stage. What is clear is that his argument is not Mandevillian. The latter's thesis was that of unintended consequences. Commercial society relied on, and fostered, man's selfish passions, the irony was that their vices had unintended benefits for society at large. This was not Voltaire's point. Commercial culture did indeed rely on a self-interest calculation, but this seemed to make men more rational and overall *improved* them rather than worsen their passionate selfishness. According to Voltaire, in such a society man would be more moderate rather than less so, the best examples of this were the moderation in social structure, the power and influence of the middle-classes who guaranteed a free government, and the decline in religious sectarianism and fanaticism. Mandeville does not appear his inspiration here. However, nor is he his adversary as he would be just a few years later. Instead, Voltaire chooses Pascal.

The Letter on Pascal

The presence of an apparently 'un-English' letter on Pascal amongst the *Lettres philosophiques*, has preoccupied scholars for many generations. Some have questioned the coherence of the work in general and seen this last letter as added simply, as Alain

who is misfortune' (*OCV*, vol. 81, 65).

⁵⁰ Anthony McKenna, *De Pascal à Voltaire: le rôle des Pensées de Pascal dans l'histoire des idées entre 1670-1734*, 2 vols, *SVEC*, 276-277 (1990), II, 842 and 842 note 32.

Tichoux puts it, 'pour les besoins du moment'.⁵¹ Such a purely contextual explanation is usually in line with McKenna's detailed analysis which points to three contemporary trends as triggering this inclusion. These are the convulsionist movement and particularly its defence by Colbert, in the 1727 *Troisième lettre à Monsieur l'évêque de Soissons*, which uses Pascal in support of its justification; the polemic on Pascal and against Voltaire in the press of the time; and lastly, Pope's *Essay on Man*.⁵² The first certainly explains why Pascal was of particular relevance at the time, and McKenna also points out that he was widely read and discussed in England during Voltaire's stay there.

⁵³ The second however, which is also Tichoux's main argument, is more problematic: there undoubtedly was a tendency at the time to combat irreligious thought, and in particular Voltaire's *Épître à Uranie*, with reference to Pascal and Deschamps had made great use of the *Pensées* in his *La Religion défendue*.⁵⁴ However, it seems overly simplistic to depict Voltaire as a man impassioned by this to such an extent that he would randomly affix a letter on Pascal to his *Lettres anglaises*, destroying their logic and cohesion, just to give his point of view in the debate, which he could easily have expressed by other means, in pamphlets or journal articles. The argument is further undermined by the fact that Voltaire kept the letter as part of later editions of the *Lettres* many years after the contemporary quarrel had abated and added further remarks to it in 1739 and 1742.⁵⁵ The Pope argument is even more problematic given that Voltaire most probably only received and read the *Essay on Man* after he had finished writing his comments on Pascal,⁵⁶ though at the very least it has the merit of establishing a link

⁵¹ Alain Tichoux, 'Sur les origines de l'Anti-Pascal de Voltaire', *SVEC*, 256 (1988), 21-47 (46).

⁵² McKenna, *De Pascal à Voltaire*, II, 860-881.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, II, 843-848, 881.

⁵⁴ Tichoux, 'Sur les origines', 30-34 and 39-46. Cf. McKenna, II, 881.

⁵⁵ These *Nouvelles remarques sur Pascal* are included in most modern editions as an appendix. Cf. Deloffre's edition pp. 216-220.

⁵⁶ Straudo, despite finding a 'singulière parenté d'esprit' in those two works, is aware of this: Arnoux Straudo, *La Fortune de Pascal en France au XVIIIe siècle*, *SVEC*, 351 (1997), p. 85. McKenna agrees that the correspondence seems to suggest that Voltaire received the work in May (McKenna, II, 857) and that Voltaire had probably finished his Anti-Pascal at this stage (II, 889) – citing Voltaire himself who in D915 claims that the *Essay on Man*, read like 'la paraphrase de mes petites remarques sur les

between the twenty-fifth letter and England. All in all however, the purely contextual explanation leaves much room for doubt.

Other scholars have made a different case, arguing for the coherence of the work. Deloffre, who sees religious toleration as the overarching theme of the work, concludes that 'dans la perspective d'une lutte pour l'indifférence en matière de religion [...] la XXVe lettre [...] ne se trouve pas seulement justifiée, elle apporte, de façon géniale, à la fois une clé de l'ouvrage et son indispensable couronnement.' ('Préface', p. 10). Again, a convincing argument, and again one that is taken further by Desné, to my knowledge the only scholar to link the refutation of Pascal to the defence of bourgeois commercial society in the preceding letters. He argues that Voltaire opposes 'the active mode' to Pascal's 'contemplative mode' with reference to a new idea of happiness on earth that is characterised by well-being and prosperity. 'And the determining social force of this prosperity', he writes, 'was, to Voltaire's mind, the middle class merchants'.⁵⁷ His analysis of this 'bourgeois optimism' (p. 56), though, is rather short and deserves a more extensive elucidation.

If the first twenty-four letters offer practical examples in favour of commercial society, this last letter defends its philosophical and theological basis. It involves more than Voltaire daring to 'prendre le parti de l'humanité contre ce misanthrope sublime', as the oft-quoted statement in the introduction to the remarks suggests (XXV, p. 156). Pascal's *Pensées* as chosen by Voltaire put into question the very basis of the new kind of bourgeois society depicted in the preceding letters. To establish the legitimacy of such a social model, Voltaire sets out to disprove Pascal's claims that Christianity is the

pensées de Pascal'.

⁵⁷ Roland Desné, 'The Role of England in Voltaire's polemic against Pascal', in *Eighteenth century studies: presented to Arthur M. Wilson*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York: Russell & Russell, 1975), pp. 43-57 (53-54).

only possible basis for society, that self-interest and the passions, which underlie commercial culture, are vicious, and that human behaviour preoccupied with the future, with exteriority, action and *divertissement*, all necessary ingredients to this type of society, is inherently bad. These are the three main themes of Voltaire's response to Pascal and they result in another apology of the happiness to be found in bourgeois commercial culture.

Commercial society as depicted by Voltaire, is not a religious one, religion has in fact been relegated to a secondary, private realm. So one of the main aspects of Voltaire's refutation of Pascal is the *philosophe's* refusal of Christianity as the foundation of society. He employs a double tactic in this,⁵⁸ arguing that Christianity is not necessary, either to explain human nature, or to provide a moral framework, and calling into question the value of both Pascal and Christianity in general. The attacks on the legitimacy of Christianity (Remarks VII-X), particularly on Pascal's account of it, together with criticism of Pascal as a writer, be it of his obscure style, his apparently nonsensical and self-contradicting arguments, or of factual errors (Remarks XII-XXI), serve to weaken the adversary, a move further strengthened by building up an opposition between 'fanatical' religious men and sober philosophers, such as Montaigne.

⁵⁹ This allows Voltaire to make a stronger case against the need for Christianity in society. First he sets out to disprove Pascal's notion that Christianity is vital to understanding human nature. According to Voltaire, human nature is not contradictory, paradoxical, or a mystery. Hence it does not need any doctrine of original sin to explain it (I, III, and IV). He then proceeds to prove that Christian religion is not crucial to

⁵⁸ On Voltaire's rhetorical strategies in the letter more generally, see Jean-Manuel Warnet, 'La vingt-cinquième *Lettre philosophique* de Voltaire 'Sur les *Pensées* de M. Pascal': une réfutation en règle', *SVEC*, 292 (1991), 201-216.

⁵⁹ See Remark II on the opposition between religion and philosophy; XXX and XL on Pascal versus Montaigne; and XXXIII on religious believers as 'fanatiques'.

morality either. Voltaire's Pascal argues that there is no fixed point in morality, so that only religion can provide guidance. Voltaire argues that there is, invoking the age-old *quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris* (XLII). Religion is thus not necessary to provide man with a moral compass, especially so as, unlike his adversary, Voltaire does not believe that the sentiments and passions overrule reason. Reason can regulate both and thus moral behaviour is perfectly possible without religious intervention (XLVIII).

If Voltaire can thus defend a type of society that is fundamentally secular, he also has to face a perhaps more serious charge made by Pascal and most Augustinian moralists: the inherent viciousness of self-interest and the passions. This poses a problem in defending a commercial culture that is grounded in a rational self-interest calculation. So Voltaire sets out to disprove Pascal on this point as well. His main argument is voluntarist and anti-lapsarian:⁶⁰ man is not vicious and fallen, he is 'ce qu'il doit être', willed and designed by God; and God has created him 'pourvu des passions pour agir' (III). If God has provided man with passions, than these cannot possibly be evil in themselves. Moreover, according to Voltaire, the passions are not only God-given and necessary to permit human activity, they are also the basis for society. The passion of self-love, for instance, is not only crucial to man's self-preservation (III), it is also the basis for the love of others and at the origin of all societies:

Il est aussi impossible qu'une société puisse se former et subsister sans amour-propre, qu'il serait impossible de faire des enfants sans concupiscence, de songer à se nourrir sans appétit. C'est l'amour de nous-mêmes qui assiste l'amour des autres; c'est par nos besoins mutuels que nous sommes utiles au genre humain; c'est le fondement de tout commerce; c'est l'éternel lien des hommes. Sans lui il n'y aurait pas eu un art inventé, ni une société de dix personnes formée; c'est cet amour-propre que chaque animal a reçu de la nature, qui nous avertit de respecter celui des autres. (XI, p. 165)

⁶⁰ The strong voluntarism could be another proof of the Lockean influence. Scholars tend to limit this influence to the use of empiricist arguments in the Letter, but it is worth noting that Voltaire's voluntarist argument in defending modern commercial society bears a strong resemblance to the voluntarism employed by Locke in defending private property and capitalist accumulation in the *Second Treatise of Government*. On Voltaire's voluntarism in defending luxury, see also chapter II.

God or nature have provided man with passions for a purpose, thus they cannot be vices. They are on the contrary necessary: man needs self-love and appetites to survive both as an individual and a species; and the latter point is crucial. Self-love is not only a selfish passion, it is the basis of sociability, not only because it drives man into society on the basis of shared needs and better protection, i.e. on the basis of 'selfish' reasons, but also because it allows him to understand and respect the rights and wishes of others, i.e. be 'unselfish' or other-regarding. Self-interest, and this is once again made clear in this passage, is at the origin of commercial societies, it is the basis of both commerce and the arts. Implicit in this point is perhaps that bourgeois society, characterised as it is by commerce and the blossoming of the arts and sciences, must be willed by God, too: if He has instilled self-love and the passions into men to form societies, He must have willed such a development, too. This however, is not yet spelt out clearly by Voltaire at this point. Nevertheless, the voluntarist and utilitarian argument has permitted him to mount a coherent defence of the passions and self-interest, and thus of the very basis of the commercial social model he had been extolling in the previous letters.

One strand of Pascal's thinking remained which also posed a problem to the justification of bourgeois society: Pascal's critique of man's constant exteriority to himself, his constant preoccupation with action and the future – a type of mental or psychological escapism which Pascal saw most strongly symbolised in man's obsession with *divertissement*. Voltaire builds three distinct lines of attack: Lockean empiricism, voluntarism, and a brand of optimism closely linked to commercial society. The fact that man lived 'hors de soi' was not a problem according to Voltaire, since man received all his ideas through exterior sense impression, the alternative simply was 'hors de soi ou imbécile' (XXIII). Exterior stimuli were to the mind what food was to the body – so pleasure and happiness – Voltaire conflates the two here – do quite naturally come from

the outside (XXXV). Once again, this was not the sign of any deficiency but willed by God and both necessary and socially useful: paraphrasing the Rochester poem he had cited before (Letter XXI, p. 138), he claims that 'l'homme est né pour l'action' (XXIII). This was part of a utilitarian design: God had imbued man with an instinct that made him or her contemplate their future, which not only gave them hope without any detriment to present enjoyments, it was also crucial to human survival and to the flourishing of societies: 'Si les hommes étaient assez malheureux pour ne s'occuper jamais que du présent, on ne sèmerait point, on ne bâtirait point, on ne planterait point, on ne pourvoit à rien: on manquerait de tout' (XXII). This criterion of social usefulness of man's constant preoccupation with action is stressed also in remark XXVI, again with the important addition of the voluntarist argument: we should be grateful to God, the Voltaire figure argues, that 'il a attaché l'ennui à l'inaction, afin de nous forcer par là à être utiles au prochain et à nous-même.' The conclusion is optimistic, man's drive towards progress contributes to his happiness, be it in diverting him from his sorrows (XXVII) or in improving his condition (XXIV).⁶¹

This optimism is that of the bourgeois commercial culture Voltaire had been extolling, which leads us back to Desné's less detailed argument. One of his main points is that in refuting Pascal, by demonstrating that happiness is possible, Voltaire evokes Fawcener, citing one of his letters, another strong indication that the world-view Voltaire sets against Pascal's is that of a prosperous commercial society (Remark VI; cf. Desné, 'The Role of England', p. 55). And, almost as a foreshadowing of his works in the 1730s in which he would defend the urban life-style of luxury and commerce, Voltaire adds:

⁶¹ Remarks XXIV and LIV relate this to knowledge and the sciences. Here also Voltaire maintains that a certain degree of knowledge and hence improvement is possible – very much in line with the preceding letters which depict this very progress with its practical applications.

Pour moi, quand je regarde Paris ou Londres, je ne vois aucune raison pour entrer dans ce désespoir dont parle M. Pascal: je vois une ville qui ne ressemble en rien à une île déserte, mais peuplée, opulente, policée, et où les hommes sont heureux autant que la nature humaine le comporte. (Remark VI)

Population growth, opulence or prosperity, greater policing and politeness: these are all terms Voltaire would use only a few years later in defence of luxury, a term, albeit closely linked to commerce, we do not yet find here. What is already present is the admonition to moderation that would characterise most of his later writings on the subject. In the same remark he states that the position of the 'sage' was one maintaining the balance between the enjoyment-hating 'fanatique' and the overindulgent 'sybarite', just as a wise man would neither overindulge in the passions nor seek to destroy them completely, but regulate them (LII).⁶² The framework for the proper enjoyment of all that commercial culture had to offer was thus set, and bourgeois society justified also on a philosophical and theological basis through the threefold voluntarist argument of the inessentiality of Christianity to society, through a vindication of the passions and self-love, as well as of man's preoccupation with exteriority.

The *Lettres philosophiques* thus present a milestone not only in Voltaire's developing thought on commercial society, but also in the luxury debate in general. Unfortunately, they are rarely considered in this context, despite Voltaire's having established most of the essential elements of a pro-luxury position in the work: he set out the links between commerce, religion, liberty (both personal, political, and religious), and a meritocratic society in which the arts and sciences would flourish. Instead it is usually Melon who is given credit for introducing the luxury debate in France, even though his *Essai politique sur le commerce* was published only in 1734, later than the English version of Voltaire's *Lettres* and in the same year as the French

⁶² The idea of the 'juste milieu' is also discussed in remark XXXVI.

one. Voltaire was thus not, as he is usually perceived, a populariser of Melon or Mandeville, his thought on commercial societies, first coherently expressed in the *Lettres*, was independent of both.⁶³ His analysis of the workings of commercialism was also highly original: whilst to some degree it corresponds with Hirschman's analysis of 'How the Interests were Called Upon to Counteract the Passions' (Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, pp. 7-66), Voltaire did not, as in the usual course of things outlined by Hirschman substitute the calm and more rational interest in money-making for violent passions such as lust for glory, power, and honour: he substitutes it for religious fervour. This remains an important aspect in his thought on luxury and is a notion which, whilst still popular today, is peculiar to Voltaire

Having defended commercial culture on a practical and theological or philosophical level, what is yet lacking are two aspects: the contentious term of 'luxury' and a more substantial argument for the morality of acquisitiveness, an issue in which Mandeville is perhaps a more forceful adversary than Pascal. So far, the refutation of Pascal has led Voltaire to engage up to a certain point with the ethics of luxury and consumerism, but the actual word 'luxury' only occurs once in the *Lettres*, in the same letter as the Royal Exchange scene:

Comme les prêtres de cette secte [the Presbyterians] ne reçoivent de leurs églises que des gages très médiocres, et que par conséquent, ils ne peuvent vivre dans le même luxe que les évêques, ils ont pris le parti naturel de crier contre des honneurs où ils ne peuvent atteindre. (VI, p. 59)

This one mention omits any clear value judgements still to be found in earlier works

⁶³ For accounts of Voltaire as a follower of Mandeville or Melon see André Morize, *L'apologie du luxe au XVIIIe siècle et "Le mondain" de Voltaire : Etude critique sur Le Mondain et ses sources* (Paris: H. Didier, 1909); Marie Rose de Labriolle-Rutherford, 'L'Evolution de la notion du luxe depuis Mandeville jusqu'à la Révolution', *SVEC*, 26 (1965), 1025-1036; Renato Galliani, 'Le Débat en France sur le luxe: Voltaire ou Rousseau?', *SVEC*, 161 (1976), 205-217; Ellen Ross, 'Mandeville, Melon, and Voltaire: the origins of the luxury controversy in France', *SVEC*, 155 (1976) 1897-1912; Daniel Roche, *La France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), pp. 513-514; and Jeremy Jennings, 'The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought', *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007) 79-105.

such as the *Henriade*, and appears to imply that the only grievance people have with luxury is jealousy; much like Aesop's fox and the sour grapes. It seems we have reached a position mid-way between the traditional condemnation of luxury as corrupting and its celebration in works such as the *Mondain*: currently, luxury itself, though useful in ridiculing Christian sects, appears free of any connotation, positive or negative.

Voltaire was to cover these two aspects in the years immediately following the publication of the *Lettres*. With the help of Emilie Du Châtelet he would address the moral aspects of luxury in a direct dialogue with Mandeville that would result in the concluding chapters of the *Traité de Métaphysique*. In this same period he would introduce and strongly defend the term 'luxury' in the *Mondain* and its companion pieces.

II THE APOLOGY FOR LUXURY IN THE 1730S

II.i The Question of Morality and the Commercial Society: Du Châtelet's Mandeville translation and Voltaire's *Traité de métaphysique*

Throughout the scandal that ensued after the publication of the *Lettres philosophiques* and which led to his escape to the remote residence of Cirey, Voltaire continued to work on the same intellectual issues treated in the *Lettres*: the philosophy of Locke, Clarke, Berkeley, and the English Deists on the one hand, and the problem of moral philosophy in the justification of the new commercial lifestyle, partly attempted in Letter 25 on Pascal, on the other. He addressed both of these areas in his *Traité de métaphysique*, a 'sort of clandestine corollary to those very Letters', as Temple Patterson calls it.¹ Thanks to W. H. Barber's meticulous analysis, we can identify the genesis of the work. He concludes that the predominantly 'philosophical material', on Locke, Berkeley, and Clarke as contained in chapters 2 – 7 was mainly written in 1734, whilst the chapters on ethics and social theory (8 and 9) came into being in cooperation with Madame Du Châtelet between the end of 1735 and 1736.² As Wade has shown on publishing Du Châtelet's translation of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, Voltaire's chapters 8 and 9, 'De l'homme considéré comme un être sociable' and 'De la vertu et du vice', draw on Du Châtelet's translation and comments, so much in fact that Wade identified sixteen passages taken almost verbatim from the work.³

¹ H. Temple Patterson, 'Voltaire's "Traité de Métaphysique"', *The Modern Language Review*, 33 (1938), 261-266 (262).

² W. H. Barber, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 14, 359-414 (402-411). This corresponds to Wade's analysis of the development of the work: Ira O. Wade, *Studies on Voltaire with some unpublished papers of Mme Du Châtelet* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1967), pp. 60-62 and 108-114.

³ Wade, *Studies on Voltaire*, pp. 70-73. In his critical edition of the *Traité*, Barber points these out and finds one more parallel, not noted by Wade: *OCV*, vol. 14, p. 476 note 95.

Voltaire had managed to establish a social and cultural justification of the new commercial society based on luxury in the *Lettres philosophiques*. The more troubling aspect of the luxury debate, and indeed the one that would prove most contentious throughout the century, was its moral and psychological dimension. The new culture of ubiquitous commerce and the pursuit of luxury were intimately linked to the role of the passions and thereby to the problem of man's sociability and morality, thus also posing the question of what constituted moral behaviour and how this was linked to the passions and the interests.⁴ Voltaire was well aware of this. The attack on Pascal in letter 25 constituted a first engagement with the matter and he returned to this more fully in chapters 8 and 9 of the *Traité*. Since these chapters rely so heavily on Madame Du Châtelet's translation and comments, an analysis of her work will prove very pertinent for our understanding of Voltaire's position.

Emilie Du Châtelet's work on Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*

Though recognised in her own time as an important physicist and mathematician,⁵ Emilie Du Châtelet was ignored or dismissed in the following centuries.⁶ Lately, her achievements have been reevaluated, particularly thanks to the work of Elisabeth Badinter, Robert Mauzi, and Judith Zinsser.⁷ In recent scholarship the emphasis has

⁴ For the classic account of this, see Albert O. Hirschman's, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially pp. 7-66. See also Christopher J. Berry, *The idea of luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 112-153; and Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: a genealogy of economic science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially pp. 7-169 and 205-255.

⁵ In the *Encyclopédie*, she is for instance mentioned for her achievements in the articles 'Newtonianisme', 'Mouvement', 'Feu', and 'Espace', and referred to as 'l'illustre marquise Du Châtelet' in the article 'Epicurisme'.

⁶ For example in his review of her papers as published by Wade, Charles Frankel of Columbia University roundly dismisses all her philosophical and intellectual abilities: 'Review: *Studies on Voltaire. With Some Unpublished Papers of Mme. Du Châtelet*, Ira O. Wade', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 45 (1948), 105-107.

⁷ See: Elisabeth Badinter, *Emilie, Emilie : l'ambition féminine au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion,

been placed on her contribution to science and the understanding of Newton, but her *Discourse on Happiness*, her translation work, and her Bible exegesis have also elicited some research.⁸ Yet, even though her rendering of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1705, 1714, 1723), which she transformed until it became very much her own work, has been commented upon in terms of translation technique and as a source for biographical details, its thematic importance has been ignored.⁹ However, her contribution to the luxury debate, in particular the attempted reconciliation of commercial society and the passions with morality, is of real significance.

Her Mandeville project probably began in 1735, the date given on her preface, and lasted most probably until 1736, at the very latest until 1738 when she showed the preface to the visiting Mme de Graffigny who praised it in a letter to Devaux from

1983); Elisabeth Badinter and Danielle Muzerelle, (eds.), *Madame Du Châtelet: la femme des Lumières* (Paris: BNF, 2006). Robert Mauzi comments on Mme Du Châtelet in his *L'idée du Bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1960) and in the introduction and notes to his edition of Du Châtelet's *Discours sur le Bonheur* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1961). See also Judith P. Zinsser, *La dame d'esprit: a biography of the Marquise Du Châtelet* (New York: Viking, 2006); Zinsser, 'Entrepreneur of the "Republic of Letters": Emilie de Breteuil, Marquise Du Châtelet, and Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*', *French Historical Studies*, 25 (2002), 595-624; Zinsser, and Julie Candler Hayes (eds.), *Emilie Du Châtelet: rewriting Enlightenment philosophy and science* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006); as well as René Vaillot, *Madame Du Châtelet* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1978), and Esther Ehrman, *Madame Du Châtelet* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986).

⁸ On her scientific work see for instance: Linda Gardiner Janik, 'Searching for the Metaphysics of Science: the Structure and Composition of Madame Du Châtelet's *Institutions de physique, 1737-1740*', *SVEC*, 201 (1982), 85-113; Bernard Joly, 'Les Théories du feu de Voltaire et de Mme Du Châtelet' *SVEC* 2001:11, 212-37; Sarah Hutton, 'Emilie Du Châtelet's *Institutions de Physique* as a Document in the History of French Newtonianism' *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, 35 (2004), 515-31; Carolyn Merchant Iltis, 'Madame Du Châtelet's Metaphysics and Mechanics', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, 8 (1977), 28-48.

On the *Discours sur le bonheur* see Mauzi above, as well as Barbara Whitehead, 'The singularity of Mme Du Châtelet: an analysis of the *Discours sur le bonheur*', in Zinsser, Hayes (eds.), *Emilie Du Châtelet*, pp. 255-76.

On her translations see: Zinsser, 'Entrepreneur' above, as well as Adrienne Mason, "'L'air du climat et le goût du terroir": translation as cultural capital in the writings of Mme Du Châtelet', in Zinsser, Hayes (eds.), *Emilie Du Châtelet*, pp. 124-41, and Marie-Pascale Pieretti, 'Women Writers and translation in Eighteenth-Century France', *The French Review*, 75 (2002), 474-88.

On her work on the Bible see particularly Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach, 'Mme Du Châtelet's *Examens de la Bible* and Voltaire's *La Bible enfin expliquée*', in Zinsser, Hayes (eds.), *Emilie Du Châtelet*, pp.142-64.

⁹ The main articles commenting on the work are Zinsser, 'Entrepreneur' and Mason, 'translation as cultural capital', above.

December 1738.¹⁰ Four drafts of the preface exist,¹¹ I shall refer to the one published by Wade. The preface establishes a clear link between the Mandeville project and Voltaire's previous and current work, with which Du Châtelet aligns herself. As Voltaire did in his preface to the *English Essays*, she states that in undertaking this particular translation she wishes to be useful to her country, by 'importing' foreign knowledge. In fact, just as Voltaire had described himself as a 'merchant of a nobler kind', she describes herself and the work of translators in general – and in her case without the pejorative comparative Voltaire had used – as 'les négocians de la republique des lettres'.¹² The metaphor of the usefulness of commerce and trade as an image for the utility of the writer's work in the intellectual realm is extended with a reference to the 'great service' that van Robais, or 'Van Robés' as she spells it, has rendered to the nation – the same reference that Voltaire had previously made in his first *Epître* to Fawkenner (p. 132). And indeed, she praises British culture in almost the same terms as Voltaire had done, calling it a 'people philosophe' with a 'façon libre et masle de penser' (p. 137).

Having identified herself strongly with Voltaire's praise of the British culture of liberty and commerce, she also makes clear that she is nobody's meek follower. Despite praising Mandeville as the English Montaigne and the *Fable* as the best work on morality thanks to its unwavering realism, she criticises it for its untrue and possibly even dangerous precepts and its unsophisticated style and longueurs (p. 137). Therefore, she states, she will adapt his style, add her own views and comments and translate the

¹⁰ Françoise de Graffigny, *Correspondance*, ed. by J. A. Dainard, E. Showalter et al. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985-), I, 245 (#67 to Devaux, 25 December 1738). On the chronology and genesis of her translation see also Zinsser's 'Entrepreneur', p. 604 and her *La dame d'esprit*, pp. 142-144. Zinsser concludes based on evidence from the correspondence that the translation project was concluded by late October 1736. On the same, but concerning the end date more vague, chronology see also: Vaillot, *Madame Du Châtelet*, pp. 120-122; and Barber's Introduction to the *Traité*, pp. 378-381.

¹¹ See Zinsser, 'Entrepreneur', p. 606 note 36.

¹² Du Châtelet [*Translation of the Fable of the Bees*] in Wade, *Studies on Voltaire*, pp. 131-187 (p. 133); henceforth referred to as "Wade". I will maintain her original – and highly idiosyncratic – spelling throughout.

work in such a way as to make it palatable to a French audience. She also introduces an element of feminism in the preface, criticising the abysmal standard of, and attitudes to, women's education, and stressing the positive role women had to play in society by advancing politeness and civilisation.¹³ This would be taken up by Voltaire in this period, both in his Second *Epître* to Fawkener and his *Epître dédicatoire* to her which opened the printed edition of *Alzire*, and constitutes another example of the marked link, both in Du Châtelet's and Voltaire's minds and in the luxury debate in general, between women and luxury.¹⁴

Mandeville is a curious case in that he depicts the pursuit of pleasure as beneficial to society but adhering, at least ostensibly, to the Epicurean-Augustinian tradition he nevertheless calls it a vice, hence the *Fable's* subtitle *Private Vices, Public Benefits*.¹⁵ Mandeville depicts man as fundamentally selfish and passion-driven and

¹³ Ehrman goes as far as to call it a 'feminist manifesto' (*Madame Du Châtelet*, p. 58).

¹⁴ This link goes back to classical Antiquity and with the revival of civic republicanism in the Renaissance the topos of effeminacy and corruption combined with the Christian critique of female vanity to form an amalgamated concept that linked women, sensuality, corruption, softness, and luxury or luxuriousness and opposed it to men, rationality, firmness, and frugality. With the luxury debate of the eighteenth century, proponents of the concept praised what they perceived to be the softening and civilising influence of women, commerce, and luxury, almost along the line's of Elias' account of the civilising process, whilst opponents condemned all three as corrupting, weakening, and unnatural. Du Châtelet was not the first to praise the potentially positive influence of women in this way: the link between politeness, manners, and female company already occurred in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (see especially Letter XXXVIII). But she is probably the one to influence Voltaire to take a more feminist stance (Cf. for instance the above-mentioned two *Epîtres*, and his later sarcastic *Femmes, soyez soumises à vos maris*) and to emphasise the link between women and improved manners, sociability and politeness, a point that would become a classic topos in the luxury debate (see for instance Hume's *Of Refinement in the Arts*). Some scholarly literature on the gendered dimension of the luxury debate exists, but overall this aspect remains under-explored. See: Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp. 145-150. On the gendered nature of the literary debate, see Maxine Berg, and Elizabeth Eger, 'The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates' in Berg and Eger, (eds), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 7-27; and E. J. Clery, *The Feminization debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1-10. See also Tjitske Akkerman, *Women's Vices, Public Benefits: Women and Commerce in the French Enlightenment* (Amsterdam: Spinhuis, 1992). On the important feminine influence on salon culture, politeness, and on the eighteenth-century notion of sociability, see: Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), especially pp. 73-135. On Voltaire and Fénelon on the question, see below.

¹⁵ On Mandeville as a representative of the neo-Epicurean / Augustinian tradition, see Pierre Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith*, pp. 48-63.

hence as incapable of being truly virtuous – he defines virtue in this tradition as a purely rational and altruistic act – or of forming society of his own accord; but, he claims, it is because of the passionate nature of man, particularly because of his pride, that societies are able to flourish. Du Châtelet might well have been aware of the subversive humour of such a position but throughout her version she consistently cuts Mandeville's sarcasm and finally replaces his central paradox with her own vision of society. Nevertheless she accepted – and translated – most of his arguments, in particular his equalist view of women, the assertion that luxury is a relative concept, and the underlying claim of the entire work, namely that society benefits from luxury and the human passions.

Her preface states that she will use quotation marks to point out her own thoughts (pp. 137-138) and Wade's edition prints these. However, either due to Du Châtelet's mistakes, corruption of the manuscript, or Wade's inattention, some passages thus marked are verbatim translations, whilst certain unmarked passages operate important changes on the original.¹⁶ Any analysis of her alterations must thus be based on a careful comparative reading. Her changes and contributions to Mandeville's *Fable* can be classed in three categories: firstly, her obvious changes, additions, and disagreements, which are clearly marked in quotation marks or presented as footnotes; these can be subdivided into those additions that simply add to the text by emphasising the original argument and those that change or contradict it. Second are those changes not made explicit by any form of quotation marks, parentheses, or placing in a footnote; and again they can be subdivided into the same two classes. Third are paratextual elements that have no bearing on the original as such, these being the preface and those footnotes that solely serve the purpose of explaining points of language or custom that might be unfamiliar to the French reader. Of these there are only three, one explaining

¹⁶ See for instance 'Chapitre 6e' (original Remark E) on gaming, *Wade*, pp. 168-172.

an English proverb, one a point of customary legal practice in Britain, and another the use of malt, and we can discount them here.

Of the additions that Du Châtelet marked out but which served only to emphasise or illustrate Mandeville's points further, some are lengthy, comprising one or more paragraphs of up to sixteen lines, as her inserted anecdotes about a particularly avaricious old lady, her account of maternal love, and her comments on the commercial and financial gains of prostitution;¹⁷ some are less than a line and serve to express a thought or an example that the original seemed to inspire her with.¹⁸ The additions and changes that she didn't designate as such tend to be brief. Sometimes they are cultural references that she tried to make less offensive to a French readership: when Mandeville writes, 'the *French* call the Monks the Partridges of the Women',¹⁹ Du Châtelet simply moves the example from France to Italy, to keep it comfortably foreign (p. 184). Often she cuts Mandeville's original without mentioning the fact, mainly to suppress sarcasm or Mandeville's apostrophes to his readership.²⁰ Toning down the caustic character of Mandeville's original, does of course to a certain extent change the thrust of the original text, however, since usually Du Châtelet takes pains to maintain the underlying charge of hypocrisy, most of these could still be classed as minor changes – especially since some other of her unmarked alterations do indeed affect the very 'moral' of the *Fable*.

One of the persistent themes we find in the unmarked alterations of Du Châtelet's translation is that she attenuates Mandeville's attacks on society and

¹⁷ 'Chapitre 10e' (the original Remark I), p. 183, 'Chapitre 4e' (Remark C), pp. 163-164, and 'Ch. 9e' (Remark H) p.180.

¹⁸ See for instance the brief additions in 'Ch. 4e (C), p. 157 and 163.

¹⁹ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees, or, Private vices, publick benefits*, ed. by F. B. Kaye, 2 vols (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988- the edition is a reprint of the 1924 Oxford edition), I, 103.

²⁰ See for instance pp. 155, 164, and 168, the latter being an instance where the original address to the reader is cut. Page 164 gives a less sarcastic definition of what Mandeville calls 'manners and good breeding' – on the notion of breeding, see below.

civilisation and instead inserts critical qualifiers on his description of 'nature'. Mandeville echoes a Fenelonian dualism in that he depicts primitive societies as characterised by innocence, honesty, virtue, and poverty; and the modern commercial societies as marked by the passions, politeness, corruption, vice, and luxury. Du Châtelet tones down his attacks on civilisation and at the same time plays down any positive value of a putative State of Nature or primitive society. This occurs, albeit implicitly, already at the outset of the translation. In his Preface, Mandeville writes:

For the main Design of the Fable, [...] is to shew the Impossibility of enjoying all the most elegant Comforts of Life that are to be met with in an industrious, wealthy and powerful Nation, and at the same time be bless'd with all the Virtue and Innocence that can be wish'd for in a Golden Age; from thence to expose the Unreasonableness and Folly of those, that desirous of being an opulent and flourishing People, and wonderfully greedy after all the Benefits they can receive as such, are yet always murmuring at and exclaiming against those Vices and Inconveniences, that from the Beginning of the World to this present Day, have been inseparable from all Kingdoms and States that ever were fam'd for Strength, Riches, and Politeness, at the same time. (I, 6-7)

Du Châtelet translates:

Mon principal but a esté de faire voir combien l'innocence et les vertus du pretendu age d'or, sont incompatibles avec les richesses et la puissance d'un grand etat, et de montrer l'inconsequence de ceux qui iouissant avec un plaisir extreme, des commodités de la vie, et de tous les autres avantages dont on ne peut iouir que dans un état puissant, ne cessent cependant de declamer contre les inconvenients qui en sont inseparables. (p. 139)

The translation is not so free that Du Châtelet saw it necessary to mark it out. And yet it operates subtle changes on the tone of the original. The 'golden age' is most probably fictitious in her version – in Mandeville its existence seemed to be a matter of course.²¹ Putting into question whether any age of purity and virtue ever existed, she also makes existence in the modern state less open to criticism. In Mandeville's version, we can already detect how this kind of society is built on the passions: men there are both 'desirous' and 'wonderfully greedy', the concept of pleasure as such plays a minor role – 'enjoyment' occurs only once. By contrast, Du Châtelet's emphasis is not on the passions

²¹ He discusses such a 'Golden Age' or 'State of Innocence' (for Mandeville this corresponds to the prelapsarian state of mankind) in his 'A Search into the Nature of Society' annexed to the *Fable* (I, 345-347).

but on pleasure. Greed and Desire have no place in her version. Instead the notion of pleasure and enjoyment is considerably strengthened: 'jouissant avec un plaisir extreme' replaces the simple 'enjoyment' of Mandeville and instead of just 'receiving Benefits', in Du Châtelet one takes enjoyment from them. I shall return to the difference between Du Châtelet's and Mandeville's treatment of the passions after looking at the differences in their respective depictions of society and nature.

The next, rather striking example is still in her translation of his preface and once again plays down the contrast between primitive and commercial or modern societies in favour of the latter. Mandeville writes:

If laying aside all worldly Greatness and Vain-Glory, I should be ask'd where I thought it was most probably that Men might enjoy true Happiness, I would prefer a small peaceable Society, in which Men, neither envy'd nor esteem'd by their Neighbours, should be contented to live upon the Natural Product of the Spot they inhabit, to a vast Multitude abounding in Wealth and Power, that should always be conquering others by their Arms Abroad, and debauching themselves by Foreign Luxury at Home. (I, 12-13)

Her version of the section reads:

Si on ne consideroit que l'innocence des mœurs, et les avantages de la vertu, on prefereroit une petite société dans laquelle les hommes seroient sans passions, a une vaste multitude, dont la puissance et la gloire sont fondées sur le vice. (p. 141)

Du Châtelet leaves out all references to happiness. Innocent, virtuous, and lacking passions perhaps, but in her view small and primitive societies were not happier – and, as we shall see in her redefinitions of virtue and sociability, they were not necessarily more ethical either. She does not even mention the charges of military aggressiveness or corruption through luxury. Their differences become even more obvious in her 'translation' of Mandeville's almost proto-Rousseauian discussion of politeness:

'Tis Custom and a general Practice that makes this Modish Deceit familiar to us, without being shock'd at the Absurdity of it; for it People had been used to speak from the Sincerity of their Hearts, and act according to the natural Sentiments they felt within, 'till they were Three or Four and Twenty, it would be impossible for them to assist at this Comedy of Manners without either loud Laughter or Indignation; and yet it is certain, that such Behaviour makes us more tolerable to one another than we could be otherwise. (I, 78-79)

Du Châtelet leaves out the critique of civilisation in this passage:

L'habitude nous a rendu ces supercheries de la politesse presque naturelles. Elle nous en cache le ridicule, et l'absurdité. Mais si un homme élevé dans l'ignorance de toutes ces simagrées, et acoutumé a dire ce qu'il pense, se trouvoit au milieu d'une compagnie des gens qui savent vivre, il ne pourroit assister a cette comédie sans leur marquer son indignation, ou sans leur rire au nez et cependant la politesse toute ridicule quelle est, nous fait vivre ensemble d'une façon plus agreable, que ne feroit la grossiere simplicité de la nature. (p. 166)

She does not disagree that politeness is a façade and a mask, but it makes human life more pleasant: not *tolerable* but *agreeable*. It does not require, as implicit in Mandeville, dishonesty – she suppresses all references to sincerity or the lack of it. And in this context, her general use of 'savoir vivre' for Mandeville's 'Breeding' (not even employed in this context) adds another meaning: in society, men have simply acquired certain skills to make life more agreeable. It is a learning process that does not involve the denial of natural sentiments, just their *refinement*. This topos of improving on the unpleasantness of nature is solely Du Châtelet's addition, her 'gross simplicity of nature' has no equivalent anywhere in Mandeville – only perhaps in Voltaire's *Mondain*.

Du Châtelet can afford to be more appreciative of society because she distances herself from Mandeville's view of the passions. As we shall see when discussing her designated additions below, unlike Mandeville, she does not perceive the passions as harmful in themselves. Nor does she seem to view man as wholly determined by them.

In one of his most famous passages, Mandeville defines man as purely passion driven:

I believe Man (besides Skin, Flesh, Bones, &c. that are obvious to the Eye) to be a compound of various Passions, that all of them, as they are provok'd and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or no. (I, 39)

Du Châtelet subtly alters the passage to limit the determinism of the passions:

Nostre ame est composée de passions différentes, comme nostre corps l'est d'os, de chair de muscles, etc. Ces passions nous gouvernent tour a tour et sont la source de nos vertus et de nos vices. (p. 142)

She operates important changes on the passage, though acknowledging none of them.

Perhaps the most important change is the omission: 'whether he will or no'. She does not seem to subscribe to Mandeville's determinism. Voltaire in his *Traité de métaphysique*, written at the same time and probably in cooperation with Du Châtelet, states that man is sometimes governed by his passions when they turn so violent that they take over his will – just as sometimes an illness takes over the body. That, however, does not imply that he is not normally master of his actions.²² This may well be implied in Du Châtelet's translation, when she reduces the impact of the passions from the entire human being to just one of its composites, the soul. After all, why else would she subscribe to the old-fashioned distinction between body and mind, or more particularly between body and soul? The reference to the soul might imply that there is more than a double distinction or body and mind dualism: that perhaps there is a triple distinction between body, soul, and mind, in which case, even if the soul is wholly determined by the passions, the mind, or rational capacity of man, could potentially intervene. Such an hypothesis would be supported by her translating, in a later passage, 'our reason', very simply as 'nous mesmes', strongly linking man with his or her rational capacity (Wade, p. 157; *Fable*, I, 67).

Given how much some of these unacknowledged alterations and nuances change the thrust of the argument, it is unsurprising that her designated additions almost turn the original *Fable* on its head. Three of these are interlinked and particularly important: they concern the definition of virtue, the extent of man's sociability, and the origin of society.

Her additions on the nature and definition of virtue stand in stark contrast to Mandeville's original. The latter claims implicitly that virtue cannot exist, since he

²² Voltaire, *Traité de métaphysique*, *OCV*, vol. 14, 415-503 (463-464). On this see below.

defines it as the 'Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good' (I, 48-49), of which, according to Mandeville, man is incapable, since he is wholly determined by his passions. In her own, acknowledged addition to Mandeville's original, Du Châtelet defines a virtuous action as contributing to the good of society. The criterion is social utility, and whether or not this coincides with, or contradicts the passions or self-interest is irrelevant. 'Le bien de la société est à la vérité, le seul *criterium* du vice et de la vertu' (p. 145). This notion of virtue, she claims, is universal, 'une loi universelle pour tous les hommes que dieu a luy mesme gravée dans leur coeur' (p. 145). This definition, much wider and based on very different criteria, stands in stark contrast to Mandeville's own claim. which given that Du Châtelet's text is still supposed to be a translation, can be inconvenient.²³

Mandeville and Du Châtelet have diametrically opposed understandings of what constitutes virtue: for the former it is in no way connected with utility, whilst for the latter both are synonymous. By redefining the notion of 'virtue' as based on the common good, Du Châtelet not only solves Mandeville's central paradox, 'private vices, publick benefits' but also allows for the actual feasibility of virtue: not only because virtue no longer excludes passion as a motivating force but also because she has already modified Mandeville's depiction of mankind so that reason can potentially intervene to curb the more destructive passions. She also adds two elements that would intensify man's desire and propensity to contribute to the common good: she endows man with a natural goodwill towards his fellow men and argues against his original associability.

²³ She frequently expresses her annoyance at his definition. See for instance her outrage at his classification of pity as not virtuous (Wade, p. 150), or her anger at his claim that vices and crimes can be useful for society (ibid., p. 173).

Du Châtelet's man is in several respects more sociable than its Mandevillian counterpart, who seems to spring directly from the Hobbesian universe. Mandeville does accord man a natural impulse of pity, but Du Châtelet strengthens this by postulating a 'bienveillance naturelle que nous avons pour nostre espece' (p. 145). According to her this is a 'dictamen de la nature', 'un des traits que le createur a luy mesme imprimé a son ouvrage' (p.150).²⁴ This allows her to endow man with a natural propensity for sociability, a trait that Mandevillian man completely lacks (*Fable*, I, 41).

This natural sociability is what Du Châtelet evokes when she offers an alternative account of the origin of society. In his 'Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue' Mandeville depicts man as incapable of forming society of his own accord. The formation of society takes place only due to the manipulation of man's desire for praise by the cunning of 'skilled politicians'.²⁵ Du Châtelet disagrees and offers her own vision of the origin of society. The beginning of human society in her version lies in the love between a man and a woman that grew to encompass their offspring in due course (p. 142). She elaborates how a man and a woman would have fallen in love, had children, stayed together, 'au dela de leur goût' to preserve their family and children, which would also have led them to team up with other families, who from their mutual needs would have formed society (pp. 142-143). It is only once these basic societies have been formed, on the basis of love and mutual needs springing from the wish to preserve the family unit, that she reverts to Mandeville's account and allows lawgivers to intervene to civilise man further. This account is taken up by Voltaire in his *Traité de métaphysique*. Barber, in his edition of the texts, acknowledges H. T. Mason's tracing

²⁴ She admits that this natural goodwill is often overruled by self-love or self-interest, but it does so, she claims, 'avec raison' - we can only assume that if man loved his neighbour more than himself, he would endanger his self-preservation (ibid., p. 145).

²⁵ See the *Fable*, I, 41-57. Cf. his 'A Search into the Nature of Society' where Mandeville explicitly states that the family unit would be unstable and hence incapable of forming a basic society: I, 323-369 (348).

this to Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, and maintains that this also shows Voltaire's making a concession to the book of Genesis.²⁶ Wade, publishing Du Châtelet's documents, comments vaguely that in this case Voltaire and Du Châtelet were 'probably following Lucretius' (p. 47). The unwillingness of these scholars to take Du Châtelet's own comments seriously is striking.²⁷ She in fact explicitly states that her account of the origin of society, in particular its foundational moment through love and in the family unit is taken from Lucretius. 'Ainsi', she concludes, 'Lucrece avoit raison quand il disoit a Venus: *nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras exoritur*' (p. 143).²⁸

Du Châtelet's account is in fact a close paraphrase of Lucretius' version of the origin of societies, as given in book five of *De Rerum Natura*. Lucretius depicts man as originally wandering isolatedly in a beast-like fashion (book V, lines 925 - 1010). The first step towards society was in the union of man and woman who stayed together to raise their children, settled in permanent abodes and made friends with their neighbours to preserve the peace, stability, and protection necessary to care for their children and women (V.1011-1027). They had a covenant, signified in rudimentary language, 'imbecillorum esse aequum misererier omnis' – that it was just for all to pity the weak (V.1023). This first state of society seemed to have lasted quite some time, enough to develop language (V.1028-1090) and to discover the use of fire and cooking (V.1091-1104). Only then a second stage of developments set in: the rule of kings, which in turn was overthrown in general strife and civil war which lasted until men pre-eminent in mind taught their fellow men to instate magistrates and a rule of law (V.1105-1151). So, as in Mandeville, there is a certain amount of 'persuasion' by lawgivers involved. Du

²⁶ Barber in *OCV*, vol. 14, p. 468, n.80.

²⁷ Zinsser proves once again a notable exception, even though she also only mentions Lucretius' *De Rerum natura* as one of several influences and sources in a footnote (*La Dame d'Esprit*, p. 144, note 76).

²⁸ 'Since without you nothing comes into the glorious regions of light' [my translation]. The quotation is from the opening invocation of Venus of book one of *De Rerum Natura* (I.22).

Châtelet seems to agree with that, too, but, like Lucretius, she sees that only as a second stage, stressing man's social capabilities which do not require persuasion or coercion, but rest on a basic sense of pity and goodwill.

All in all, the images of man and the resulting analyses of the origin and nature of society offered by Du Châtelet and Mandeville respectively, differ markedly. Mandevillian man, completely passion driven, would need a 'countervailing passion', for instance pride, aroused through flattery, to be able to live sociably.²⁹ His rational capacity could have no impact on the passions as the ultimate driving force, and existed only for a Hobbesian benefit calculation. In Du Châtelet's account however, man seems able to moderate his desires and employ his rational ability to determine his course of action. Add to this a degree of natural sociability, a general 'bienveillance', and a divinely instituted sense of morality, man was able to contribute to the greater good of society quite easily. Moreover, due to her redefinition of virtue along utilitarian lines, pleasure and virtue were no longer mutually exclusive as in Mandeville. On the contrary, due to his wish to be well thought of and to his knowledge that he would ultimately benefit from membership in society, man was likely to act virtuously and even take pleasure in such an action.

It is unlikely that Du Châtelet was unaware of how much she had changed Mandeville's original argument. She undoubtedly knew that the early luxury debate was closely linked to the debate about the role and nature of the passions and sociability and fought along neo-Stoic and neo-Epicurean lines. The former would uphold natural sociability and man's ability to act virtuously whilst the latter, heavily influenced by seventeenth-century Jansenist thinking, saw man as wholly determined by his passions

²⁹ On the concept of the 'countervailing passion' see Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: 'The Principle of the Countervailing Passion'*, pp. 20-31.

and his search for pleasure. Hence Neo-Stoics would condemn luxury and modern commercial consumer culture as a source of corruption, whilst neo-Epicureans would consider it a positive outlet for man's passions. The two poles of the early luxury debate, Fénelon and Mandeville, neatly fit in these categories; Du Châtelet and Voltaire however, do not.³⁰ They have identified luxury and the rise of commercial sociability with progress, the flourishing of the arts and sciences, increased tolerance and general peace, greater politeness, and an enhanced role for women in society. The one problem they faced was how to make it morally acceptable. Historically, luxury had been universally condemned, and its very recent defences, most notably by Melon and Mandeville, were on a purely socio-economic basis, either omitting the issue of ethics as Melon did, or depicting it as immoral, as Mandeville had done. In this novel defence, Du Châtelet turned to Epicureanism as more than a label. In several ways, her recourse to classical Epicureanism marks a break with the neo-Epicurean tradition of the seventeenth century. Unlike the latter, the Graeco-Roman version, to which Du Châtelet

³⁰ On the role of Epicurean versus Stoic themes in the luxury debate and the role of Jansenism in this neo-Epicurean philosophy, see Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, especially chapter 2, 'Epicurean vs. Stoic schemes', pp. 48-90. On the Jansenist influence on the 'irony of commerce', the idea of commerce as an outlet for selfish passions contributing to the greater good, see also Henry C. Clark, *Compass of society: commerce and absolutism in old-regime France* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2007), pp. 75-77, and Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: international competition and the nation state in historical perspective* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 47-51. The perceived link between Epicureanism and Augustinianism goes back to Jean Lafond's work on Rochefoucauld and has become a largely accepted tenet in current scholarship. It is opposed to the thought of Cassirer and his translator Peter Gay who considered Enlightenment Epicureanism to be allied to Stoicism in their opposition to Augustinianism.

On the importance of the Mandeville versus Fénelon dualism, see Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury' in: Mark Goldie, and Robert Wokler, (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 379-418 (pp. 382-395); cf. his 2009 Oxford University Carlyle Lectures, in which he stresses the importance of epicurean versus stoic categories in the debate about luxury and commercial society.

On Mandeville's debts or links to Epicureanism, see the classic account of Kaye: 'The Influence of Bernard Mandeville', *Studies in Philology*, 19 (1922), 83-108 (p. 85, n.2). See also Edward J. Hundert, 'Bernard Mandeville and the Enlightenment's Maxims of Modernity', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56 (1995), 577-593 (587-592), arguing that Mandeville's entire social theory is a modernised Epicureanism; and Hundert, 'The Thread of Language and the Web of Dominion: Mandeville to Rousseau and Back', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22 (1987-1988), 169-191 (175-178 especially). Specifically on Lucretius and Mandeville see also Eric Baker, 'Lucretius in the European Enlightenment' in *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 274-288 (pp. 281-282).

On Mandeville's links to Jansenist thought see also Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, pp. 261-80; Hundert, 'Maxims of Modernity', and his *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the discovery of society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, c.1994), pp. 32-35.

referred and seemed to subscribe, allowed for the possibility of controlling the desires as well as for at least a basic degree of sociability in man. It would be wrong to claim however that she fully reverted to classical Epicureanism – she did not agree with their condemnation of luxury; and whilst she did adopt their conflation of justice with utility, her claim that this constituted an inborn divine or natural law, was not in keeping with this tradition.³¹ Like Mandeville and unlike the ancient Epicureans, she regarded luxury as a positive development, but unlike him, she disassociated herself from the Augustinian and Jansenist tradition, and did not consider it immoral. In fact, when she comes to the explicit discussion of luxury, Mandeville's 'Remark L', she cuts his arguments short and instead refers to Melon (pp. 186-187). All in all, this recourse to classic Epicureanism, along the lines of what Neven Leddy and Avi Lifschitz call the strategy of 'selective appropriation',³² allowed her for the first time to construct a social and moral theory that could defend the new commercial culture with all its connotations. All this is the necessary basis for Voltaire's defence of luxury.

Voltaire's *Traité de métaphysique*

Voltaire's *Traité de métaphysique* originally sprang from his interest in English philosophy and free thought.³³ The main focus here will not be on these earlier parts but on the later chapters of the *Traité*, on the chapters VIII and IX, 'De l'homme considéré comme un être sociable' and 'De la vertu et du vice', which contain Du Châtelet's insights. However, since part of their argument is based on the premises established in

³¹ On the Epicurean identification of justice with utility, see Frederick Rosen, *Classic Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London: Routledge, 2003), especially chapter 2, 'Utility and Justice: Epicurus and the Epicurean tradition', pp. 15-28.

³² On this, and also for a good overview of the recent trends in scholarship on Enlightenment Epicureanism, see Neven Leddy and Avi S. Lifschitz (eds.), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment, SVEC 2009:12*, especially the Introduction, pp. 1-11 (p. 5).

³³ On the influences and stimuli leading to the early versions of the *Traité*, see Barber's Introduction to his critical edition of the text in the *OCV*, vol. 14, 359-414, and H. Temple Patterson, 'Voltaire's "Traité de Métaphysique"'.

the preceding chapters, notably on chapter II, 'S'il y a un Dieu', and on chapter VII, 'Si l'homme est libre', a brief overview of these will be necessary.

Chapter II, 'S'il y a un Dieu', sets out the problem and quickly establishes, very much along the lines of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and Bayle's *Pensées*, that the idea of God is not inborn. It then summarises the reasons for believing in God's existence, objections to this, and a reply to these objections, before roundly condemning materialistic conceptions and finally concluding that we have to 'regarder cette proposition y-a-t-il un Dieu comme la chose la plus vraisemblable que les hommes puissent penser' and the contrary proposition as 'une des plus absurdes'.³⁴ In Voltaire's scheme God's existence is crucial, as it is the guarantor of human liberty. In chapter VII, 'Si l'homme est libre', he argues that human beings must indeed be free since they all share the sentiment of their freedom and if this sentiment was in fact incorrect God would have to have set out expressively to deceive his own creation, which was a ludicrous assumption. Once again following Locke and Clarke, he defines liberty as the power to act (p. 460),³⁵ and claims: 'Vouloir et agir c'est précisément la même chose qu'être libre' (p. 462). Liberty is linked to rationality and opposed to the passions. It thus exists in degrees – unlimited in God, partial in man, and limited purely to movement in non-rational creatures like animals and children (pp. 462-463). Being dependent on rationality, freedom can be cancelled out by particularly violent passions. Voltaire compares these to an illness of the mind, which like an illness of the body can cause complete paralysis. However, in normal adults this is not a permanent state, and like an illness of the body, such a state of subjugation serves to demonstrate the contrast

³⁴ Voltaire, *Traité de métaphysique*, *OCV*, vol. 14, 415-503 (438).

³⁵ On the precise reference to Locke and Clarke see p. 460 n.67. On Voltaire's use of Locke, Clarke, and Collins, see E. D. James, 'Voltaire on free will', *SVEC*, 247 (1987), 1-18, esp. 1-9. On the topic of free will and its difficulties see also Ulrich Dierse, 'Die "trügerischen Gedankenblitze unserer Vernunft": Voltaire über das Recht der Vernunft und ihre Grenzen', *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert*, 29 (2005), 95-105, esp. 99-105.

between health or freedom, and illness or passion, and thus also shows that the general state of being is healthy, i.e. free (pp. 463-464).

It is important to note that in Voltaire's view, man only loses his ability to act on reasonable motives in cases of an exceptionally strong passion, a 'passion furieuse'. In cases of normal desires and emotions, man is free to deliberate before taking action. In the 'extrait d'un chapitre sur la liberté' sent by Voltaire to Frederick of Prussia in October 1737 (D1376) and published as an Appendix to the *Traité* in the Oxford edition, Voltaire stresses this. He insists on our 'pouvoir' or 'faculté' 'de suspendre nos désirs' three times in the text.³⁶ And chapter IV of the *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*, which date from the same period (their first publication in the Ledet edition was in 1738) affords another example of the possible triumph of the rational will over the passions.³⁷ Thus, though not explicitly referring to them anywhere in these texts, Voltaire's view of free will and human liberty in this period,³⁸ mirrors that of the ancient Epicureans, who, unlike the neo-Epicureans of the seventeenth and eighteenth century (including Mandeville), believed that even though man always sought pleasure as his or her ultimate goal, he had a free will, which could and should moderate the passions and desires, which would otherwise impact on the ability to act rationally and thus to achieve happiness in tranquillity of mind. This ability to control and moderate ones desires would be crucial in the defence of the passions – and thus ultimately of luxury – as offered in the final two chapters of the *Traité*.

Voltaire's moral and social philosophy as spelt out in chapters VIII and IX of the

³⁶ Appendix I (*OCV* vol. 14, 483-503), p. 487 and twice on p. 494 (both again are instances of Locke – see James, above).

³⁷ Voltaire, *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*, *OCV*, vol. 15, 216.

³⁸ Voltaire's view of human liberty would change significantly after the 1730s. On these developments, see James and Dierse above.

Traité, bears a striking resemblance to that developed by Du Châtelet in her 'translation' of Mandeville – unsurprisingly so, since the two collaborated extensively and regularly discussed their views and works.³⁹ Wade has identified sixteen precise passages Voltaire took from the translation (Wade, 70-73), and in his critical edition of the *Traité*, Barber has pointed them out faithfully; but little has been said about their actual significance. The passages that are taken almost verbatim from Du Châtelet's work are important in that they represent less the argument of the original *Fable* than her additions, changes, and comments that served to establish an Epicurean-like theory which could defend commercial culture. Chapter VIII, which treats the origin and nature of society, is almost wholly made up of Wade's passages 1-11. Chapter IX, on virtue and vice, contains passages 12-16. Voltaire follows Du Châtelet's definition of vice, virtue, and voluntarist origin of morality. He adopts her Lucretian assertion that society originated in love and the family unit, and cites her when stating that man, apart from 'amour-propre', also has a 'bienveillance naturelle' making him naturally social (p. 470).

However, Voltaire does more than reproduce these passages, important though they are. At the end of each chapter, he adds several paragraphs of further argument. Chapter VIII elaborates on human self-love and the passions, with another forceful attempt to rehabilitate them and to create a justification for modern luxury and commercial society. Chapter IX develops his theory of ethics.

The paragraphs Voltaire added after paraphrasing Du Châtelet in chapter VIII develop Mandeville's argument about the usefulness of the human passions and expand on the origin and development of societies. Like Du Châtelet and Lucretius, Voltaire

³⁹ On the working habits at Cirey see René Vailliot, *Avec Madame Du Châtelet 1734-1749* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1988), especially chapters 2-5. For a contemporary witness account, see the Graffigny letters from December 1738.

posits the origin of society in love and the family unit. But there is a change of emphasis. Du Châtelet's version reads:

Un homme etant devenu amoureux d'une femme, en aura eü des enfans. Le soin de leur famille aura fait subsister leur union au dela de leur goût. Deux familles auront eu besoin l'une de l'autre des quelles auront été formées, et ces besoins mutuels auront donné naissance a la société. (Wade, pp. 142-143)

Compare Voltaire's passage

Il suffit pour que l'univers soit ce qu'il est aujourd'hui, qu'un homme ait été amoureux d'une femme. Le soin mutuel qu'il auront eu l'un de l'autre, et leur amour naturel pour leurs enfans, aura bientôt éveillé leur *industrie* et donné naissance au commencement grossier des *arts*. Deux familles auront eu besoin l'une de l'autre sitôt qu'elles auront été formées, et de ces besoins seront nées de *nouvelles commodités*. (*Traité*, pp. 468-469 [emphases are mine])

For Voltaire it is important to underline that the beginning of society is also the beginning of the arts and industries – and of the first luxuries: 'commodities' that are not immediately necessary for survival came into being as soon as families and the first communities began to live together. They are not an outgrowth of developed civilisations, their ab initio existence echoes the Mandevillian argument that 'luxury' has existed in every society and every age, only the definition of what counts as luxurious changes.⁴⁰

After underlining the importance of man's sociability or 'bienveillance' in the formation of the first societies, he introduces another important distinction:

Mais cette bienveillance serait encore un faible secours pour nous faire vivre en société: elle n'aurait jamais pu servir à fonder de grands empires et des villes florissantes, si nous n'avions pas eu de grandes passions. (p. 470)

This distinction between small and large societies occurs also in the context of luxury in the *Défense du Mondain* of the same period, and remains a constant theme in Voltaire's thought on the topic: 'Sachez surtout que le luxe enrichit // Un grand Etat, s'il en perd

⁴⁰ Mandeville's 'Remark L', argues that, given that what is considered luxury is subject to constant change and that what was luxury but a generation or two ago now almost counts as a necessity, the only valid definition of luxury is to include every object not necessary for immediate survival, and that hence luxury is ubiquitous. Du Châtelet translates this faithfully (Wade, p. 125).

un petit'.⁴¹ It appears that natural goodwill is only working in small societies, presumably consisting of communities with strong personal ties. In these kind of communities strong passions, such as the craving for luxuries, status, power, and possessions, would harm the fabric of society. In large, developed and urban societies however, those passions provide the very foundation of a different kind of sociability, of what we can roughly term 'commercial' as opposed to 'natural' sociability.⁴² Such a sociability is based not on the instincts of *pitié* and *bienveillance* but on the passions and interests. He elaborates on the origin and nature of these 'commercial societies'. It is worth quoting the first few of these paragraphs at length:

L'envie de commander qui est une des branches de *l'orgueil*, et qui se remarque aussi visiblement dans un pédant de collège et dans un bailli de village que dans un pape et dans un empereur, excita encore plus puissamment **l'industrie humaine** pour amener les hommes à obéir à d'autres hommes, il fallut leur faire **connaître** clairement qu'on en **savait** plus qu'eux, et qu'on leur serait **utile**.

Il fallut surtout se servir de leur *avarice* pour **acheter** leur obéissance. On ne pouvait leur donner beaucoup sans avoir beaucoup, et cette *fièvre d'acquérir les biens de la terre* ajoutait tous les jours de **nouveaux progrès à tous les arts**.

Cette machine n'eût pas encore été loin sans le secours de *l'envie*, passion très naturelle que les hommes déguisent toujours sous le nom d'*émulation*. Cette envie réveilla la paresse et aiguïsa le **génie** de quiconque vit son voisin puissant et heureux. Ainsi de proche en proche *les passions seules réunirent les hommes* et tirèrent du sein de la terre **tous les arts et tous les plaisirs**. (pp. 471-472, emphases are mine)

There is a clear difference between this kind of society and the first societies based around the family unit. This kind of society is that of the 'grands empires' and the 'villes florissantes'. And it is established and held together by the selfish passions. There is no absolute dividing line between the original small societies and this large commercial ones; it is more a matter of change of emphasis. The early societies are based on love

⁴¹ Voltaire, *Défense du Mondain, OCV*, vol. 16, 304-309 (306, lines 53-54). Voltaire quotes these lines several decades later in the article 'luxe' of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. The distinction is also to be found in the *Fable* and translated by Du Châtelet: 'La frugalité est comme l'honnesteté. L'une et l'autre ne peuvent se trouver que dans une petite société, dont l'innocence est fondée sur la pauvreté,' (Wade, p. 185).

⁴² Hont uses this distinction from Smith, who differentiates societies built on love from those based on utility (*A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, II.iii.1-2), tracing it back to Pufendorf and Aristotle: Hont, 'The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the 'Four-Stages' Theory', reprinted in *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 159- 184. Our example however shows, that the development of a theory of 'commercial sociability' did not require the recourse to either Pufendorf or Aristotle but could also be effected by tempering the Augustinian-Epicureanism of Mandeville with recourse to the original theory of social development in Lucretius.

and Voltaire does stress man's inborn sociability, 'cette bienveillance qui nous dispose à l'union avec les hommes' (p. 470). However, this is only a general *disposition*, not an overruling characteristic; and even at this point there exists 'amour-propre', which, as Voltaire pointed out, always has the potential to overrule pity and goodwill. Moreover, if the original family unit is based on love, the unification of several families is based on needs and immediately gives rise to the production of commodities, the first luxuries, and then to more needs. So in several ways, the second model or stage of society described in the quotation above, is already foreshadowed in the first. There is a change of balance however. If the first stage was based primarily on love and natural sociability, and only in second place to satisfy needs, in this new form of society, though *bienveillance* and pity still exist, they are no longer the main guarantor of social cohesion. Self-interest and the passions have taken over, presumably once the immediate need for survival and protection has been met and the new commodities have produced new ambitions. This is the kind of self-interested society built on utility and boasting an advanced civilisation that we can term 'commercial society'. It is characterised by self-love and the passions – their predominance in the description is set out in italics – and by their positive side effects. Following Mandeville, Voltaire depicts their consequences as the growth of industry, the eradication of laziness and general utility. What he stresses in particular – and this sets him apart from Mandeville, who largely insisted on material comforts and national power - is the rise of the arts and sciences, and of the pleasures of luxury. This is marked out in bold and shows how Voltaire identified this kind of passion-led commercial society with the concept of 'civilisation', the idea of progress, the arts, the growth of knowledge and development of man's talents and capabilities.

Voltaire's vision thus differs from Mandeville's not only in that for him man is

more sociable and, even in a developed commercial society, retains that original sociability, but also in his view of the passions. Their consequences are more positive - greater pleasure and happiness, the development of man's potential, the rise of the arts and sciences, rather than just purely materialistic gains – and their evaluation is not only more favourable but in fact a direct attack on Mandeville's stance. Voltaire attacks 'les raisonneurs de nos jours' (p. 472) who criticise the passions and see them as a post-lapsarian punishment. This is the Augustinian and hence Jansenist view that Mandeville espouses when he condemns all passions as selfish and sinful and yet states that 'it is impossible that Man, mere fallen Man, should act with any other View but to please himself' (*Fable*, I, 348).⁴³ Instead Voltaire argues not only as above for the utility but moreover for the necessity of the passions. They were given by God, 'appelé par Platon, l'éternel géomètre, et que j'appelle ici l'éternel machiniste' (p. 472).⁴⁴ And they are indispensable: 'les passions sont les roues qui font aller toutes ces machines' (p. 472). Without them man would be utterly inanimate, simply a statue. To argue this point, Voltaire reverts to one of his favourite techniques: simile and metaphor. Self-love – which encompasses all the other passions – is likened first to life-blood, then to the winds, and finally to food. All three are things nobody would want to do without, despite their occasional disadvantages: without blood no apoplexy, without the winds no shipwrecks and without food no overindulgence, but the advantage of commerce, which is once again praised as uniting the far corners of the earth, far outweighs a few lost ships. They are unusual metaphors in that they have varying implications. Blood and food are, literally, vital; commerce is not. There is an element of choice involved in his last example, gluttony: those who give in to it, rather than enjoying the pleasurable array

⁴³ Voltaire would not disagree with the Epicurean tenet that man always acts to please himself. He merely disputes that this is sinful or indeed selfish – given that we are naturally sociable (*bienveillance*) and averse to see others suffer (*pitié*), and that the passions contribute to general happiness.

⁴⁴ The argument of the divine mechanic or eternal watchmaker could be found not only in Descartes and Boyle but already in Cicero (*De Natura Deorum*, II.xxxiv).

of available foods sensibly, have but themselves to blame ('ce n'est pas à nous à nous plaindre d'un bienfait dont on a fait mauvais usage' p. 473), implying, as he had done in the previous chapter, that man can moderate his passions. The previous example of blood and the winds do not involve such an element of choice, and make a slightly different point, namely that a few 'accidents' do not affect the overall positive value. So, Voltaire admits, self-love can have its excesses, but its corollaries, the passions and their creation of ever new needs, are doubly useful, having created both this order of a commercial society and given rise to the luxury of the arts and sciences: 'c'est à nos passions et à nos besoins que nous devons cet ordre et ces inventions utiles dont nous avons enrichi l'univers' (pp. 472-473).

Chapter IX on vice and virtue agrees with Du Châtelet's definition of these, with her assertion of the relativity of all other laws except the God-given, universal natural laws, like the original goodwill towards our fellow men. Thus Du Châtelet's and Voltaire's accounts of sociability and morality are clearly voluntarist, in fact rather Lockean in character. God has created man with the qualities that will make him live in society and the instincts that will allow him to be virtuous and to know right from wrong. Voltaire's God, crucial as he is to designing the workings of the clockwork, does not intervene once he had set the mechanism in motion.⁴⁵ And nowhere has he promised punishments and recompenses after death.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, contends Voltaire, crime never pays: 'tout homme raisonnable conclura qu'il est visiblement de son intérêt d'être honnête homme' (p. 481). Behaving sociably is not only an inborn tendency of our nature (*disposition*), it is also supported by our rational capacity (*raison*) and by our passions, which all derive from our self-love (*intérêt*). The sentiment of right and wrong

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 480: 'Dieu a mis les hommes et les animaux sur la terre, c'est à eux de s'y conduire de leur mieux.'

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 480: 'Plût au ciel qu'en effet un être suprême nous eût donné des lois, et nous eût proposé des peines et des récompenses!'

and the inclination to behave well are ingrained in human nature, in a way that he likens to our taste for good food and drink, a metaphor that permits him once again to illustrate that man has a natural liking for luxury items, a preference for the pleasurable over the merely necessary:

Un esprit droit est honnête homme par la même raison que celui qu n'a point le goût dépravé préfère d'excellent vin de Nuits à du vin de Brie, et des perdrix du Mans à la chair de cheval. (p. 481)

This statement epitomises Voltaire's argument as a whole: society and thus sociability and virtue are natural, as are the passions and thus luxury and the arts and sciences. They are part of the eternal watchmaker's master-plan and as such 'presents' He gave us.⁴⁷ They exist in different degrees in both kinds of societies, in the small and primitive ones as well as in the advanced once that are characterised by a different kind of self-interested 'commercial sociability'. And hence the new commercial culture, characterised by luxury, self-interest, the arts and sciences as well as the passions, is willed by God and as such neither a corruption nor sinful. On the contrary, since we all appreciate pleasure, and as advanced societies of this kind have more luxurious, intellectual, and aesthetic pleasures to offer, they are most likely an improvement over what Du Châtelet had called the 'grossiere simplicité de la nature'.

However, Voltaire's argument relies on three, partly interlinked premises. Firstly and most importantly, since the entire argument rests on a voluntarist basis, it requires the existence of a divine Creator who is both rational and benign. Secondly, man needs to be free in order to be able to suspend and moderate his desires – which in Voltaire's argument requires once again the existence of such a God; and thirdly man must be inherently good and remain uncorrupted. Again this partly requires a benign creator who has endowed man with the instincts of pity and goodwill. In the new kind of

⁴⁷ The term of Divine gifts or presents is indeed used by Voltaire: p. 479.

commercial society these instincts are perhaps less important, as man will act blamelessly from of reason and self-interest alone. He can only do that however, when he is not completely *overcome* by the passions. Commercial sociability relies on the incitement of the passions and yet Voltaire has claimed that liberty and the ability to reason are lost in a state of passion, illness, or tumult (p. 464-465). There is a chance that the 'fureur d'acquérir' will alienate man from his reasonable and sociable capacities, that they might lead to the very corruption of taste, which can make man value crime. And there is so far no proof that, even if society at large profits from luxury, that man derives happiness from it. All these are points on which Voltaire would be challenged, by the determinism expressed by his correspondent Frederick of Prussia, by atheism as the later *philosophes* would proclaim, and by the Rousseauvian argument that commercial societies with all their luxury, passions, politeness, arts and sciences might actually corrupt man, alienate him and make him miserable.

II.ii The Defence of Luxury: The *Mondain* and its companion pieces

Voltaire has been recognized as a central figure in the French luxury debate.⁴⁸ But whilst both his role in the debate and the importance of the problem of luxury in Voltaire's own thought have been pointed to, most works on the topic have focussed rather narrowly on the *Mondain*.⁴⁹ It is however crucial to consider the poem in the context not only of its companion pieces, the *Défense du Mondain* and *Sur l'usage de la vie*, but also in the wider context of the social and moral preoccupations of the 1730s, notably the *Traité de métaphysique* and the *Discours en vers sur l'homme*. Especially since his views may appear rather unclear otherwise: the *Mondain* is variously characterised as 'a defence of luxury as the cradle of the arts',⁵⁰ as an 'apologie de la vie épicurienne',⁵¹ or as a 'hymn to hedonism'.⁵² As a work of literature, the *Mondain* is of course more than a simple contribution to a contemporary debate. Nicholas Cronk for instance has pointed out how it also constitutes a defence of the poetic genre.⁵³ However, the focus here will be on its role in Voltaire's thought on luxury, offering an analysis of three aspects in particular: style, argument, and strategy.

⁴⁸ Cf. Renato Galliani, 'Le Débat en France sur le luxe: Voltaire ou Rousseau?', *SVEC*, 161 (1976), 205-217; Ellen Ross, 'Mandeville, Melon and Voltaire: The Origins of the Luxury Controversy in France', *SVEC*, 155 (1976), 1897-1912; Daniel Roche, *La France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), pp. 513-514; Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', pp. 412-417; André Morize, *L'apologie du luxe au XVIIIe siècle et "Le mondain" de Voltaire : Etude critique sur Le Mondain et ses sources* (Paris: H. Didier, 1909).

⁴⁹ See for instance: Morize, *L'apologie du luxe*; Haydn T. Mason, 'Voltaire's poems on luxury', in *Studies in the French eighteenth century*, ed. by D. J. Mossop, G. E. Rodmell, D. B. Wilson (Durham: University of Durham, 1978), pp. 108-122; Madeleine Raaphorst, 'Voltaire et la question du luxe', *Rice University Studies*, 51 (1965), 69-80; Ellen Ross, 'Mandeville, Melon, and Voltaire'; Henry C. Clark, *Compass of Society*; John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*.

⁵⁰ Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p. 210.

⁵¹ Morize, *L'apologie du luxe*, p. 25; cf. Nicholas Cronk, 'The epicurean spirit: champagne and the defence of poetry in Voltaire's *Le Mondain*', *SVEC*, 371 (1999), 53-80.

⁵² Mason, 'Voltaire's poems on luxury', p. 110; see also his introduction to his critical edition of the *Mondain: OCV*, vol. 16, 273-288 (279).

⁵³ Cronk, 'The epicurean spirit'. Mason makes a similar point: *OCV*, vol. 16, 280-281.

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The rather contradictory descriptions of the poem as both epicurean and hedonist partly stem from the centuries long conflation of the two schools. The *Mondain* is indeed epicurean – but not Epicurean with a capital E, in the sense of the classical philosophy. Rather it stands very much in the tradition of the *épicurisme mondain*, with which Voltaire aligned himself during his early years in Paris. In his classic study of the work, Morize has established a clear link with Saint-Evremond's writings.⁵⁴ Contemporary perceptions of Voltaire as an epicurean, a categorisation explicitly made in the *Encyclopédie*, seem to be based on his early association with the epicurean *Société du Temple*, a tradition that comes to life again in the *Mondain*, which might well explain why so much later in Voltaire's life Diderot still situated him in this tradition.⁵⁵

Stylistically, the *Mondain* forms part of Voltaire's flirtation with the 'épicurisme mondain', and closely resembles the two *Epîtres en prose et en vers*, published in the *Nouveau Mercure galant* in October 1716, which reflect the epicurean literary traditions of the *Temple* in form and content, and which already contained many elements that were to become stock-in-trade parts of Voltaire's image of luxury.⁵⁶ Verses 47 to 64 of the first of these, the *Lettre de monsieur Arouet à monsieur le Grand Prieur*, read:

Bacchus aurait paru de Tocane échauffé,
D'un bonnet de pampres coiffé;
Célébrant avec vous mainte joyeuse orgie,
Ayant sans cesse à son côté
Les plaisirs et la liberté,
Quelquefois même la folie,
Petits soupers, jolis festins,

⁵⁴ Morize, *L'apologie du luxe*, pp. 34-44.

⁵⁵ See for instance the *Encyclopédie* article 'Epicurisme' which names Voltaire as one of the famous Epicureans of the time: vol. 5, 779-785 (785). Voltaire is placed, together with de la Motte and Fontenelle, in the 'école de Sceaux', which formed part of his epicurean experience in his early years, before his stay in England. On his links with the *Société du Temple* and the Sceaux circle, see Pomeau, *D'Arouet à Voltaire*, pp. 77-86. On Diderot's perception of Voltaire's position on luxury, see also the introduction above.

⁵⁶ On this see Cronk's 'Introduction', *ibid.*, pp. 284-287.

Ce fut parmi vous que naquirent
 Mille vaudevilles malins,
 Que les amours à rire enclins
 Dans leur sottisier recueillirent,
 Et que j'ai vus entre leurs mains.
 Oh! que j'aime ces vers badins,
 Ces riens charmants, et plains de grâces,
 Tels que l'ingénieux Horace
 En eût fait l'âme d'un repas,
 Lorsqu'à table il avait sa place
 Avec Auguste et Mécénas.⁵⁷

The similarities with the later *Mondain* are striking. Compare for instance the following passage:

Allons souper; que ces brillants services,
 Que ces ragoûts ont pour moi de délices!
 Qu'un cuisinier est un mortel divin!
 Églé, Chloris me versent de leur main
 D'un vin d'Aï, dont la mousse pressée,
 De la bouteille avec force élançée,
 Comme un éclair fait voler le bouchon;
 Il part, on rit, il frappe le plafond.
 De ce vin frais l'écume pétillante,
 De nos Français est l'image brillante;
 Le lendemain donne d'autres désirs,
 D'autres soupers et de nouveaux plaisirs.⁵⁸

Poetry to celebrate poetry and pleasure: joyful dinner parties, good company, laughter, graceful sensuality, refined cuisine – and of course champagne, one of the major themes of the *Mondain*: Like the 'vin d'aï', the tocané was a new wine from the Champagne region, in fact mainly from around Ay. What the two poems share are not only imagery and atmosphere, but also a marked rootedness in the tradition of the *épicurisme mondain*.

The link to this tradition sets the *Mondain* apart from more classically Epicurean texts such as Du Châtelet's Mandeville translation, certain passages of the *Traité de métaphysique*, and the later *Epître à Horace*. Lines 81 to 112 of the poem, which describe one day of the worldling's life, reveal the haste and pressure underlying this lifestyle, which stands in sharp contrast to the tranquillity that characterises classic

⁵⁷ Voltaire, *Lettre de monsieur Arouet à monsieur le Grand Prieur*, *OCV* vol. 1B, 288-294 (292).

⁵⁸ Voltaire, *Le Mondain*, *OCV*, vol. 16, 295-303 (lines 101-111).

Epicurean pleasure. A simple enumeration of the verbs that define the mondain and his day makes this clear: 'sortir', 'rapidement traîné', 'il court', 'le plaisir presse', 'il vole', 'Il faut se rendre', 'malgré lui [il] court', 'allons'. Even the rhythm of the poem accelerates, allowing for a double caesura in the line 'Il part, on rit; il frappe le plafond.'. The champagne, image of this lifestyle mirrors these movements: 'pressée', 'élancée', 'comme un éclair fait voler'. The end of the episode emphasises the both ephemerality and perpetuity: 'Le lendemain donne d'autres désirs // D'autres soupers, et de nouveaux plaisirs.'

In terms of argument, the poem draws on Voltaire's and Du Châtelet's previous work, most notably on the *Lettres philosophiques*, the translation of the *Fable*, and, perhaps to a lesser degree, on the *Traité de métaphysique*. The advantages of luxury can be summarised under four main headings: peaceful commerce, the progress of the arts and sciences, the advancement of civilisation, and more generally enhanced pleasure. The first field in which luxury, according to Voltaire, brings positive developments is that of increased commerce, which as a global phenomenon is not only beneficial to both partners in a transaction bringing both pleasure and wealth, but also exerts a unifying and thus ultimately pacifying influence. Like commerce in the *Lettres philosophiques*, luxury, once again epitomised by French wine, poses an alternative to religious tensions, in this case even triumphs over the bellicose ambitions of oriental rulers:

Le superflu, chose très nécessaire,
A réuni l'un et l'autre hémisphère.
Voyez-vous pas ces agiles vaisseaux
Qui, du Texel, de Londres, de Bordeaux,
S'en vont chercher, par un heureux échange,
De nouveaux biens, nés aux sources du Gange,
Tandis qu'au loin, vainqueurs des musulmans,
Nos vins de France enivrent les sultans? (lines 22-29)

Like the *Lettres philosophiques* which link commerce to the flourishing of the arts and sciences, the *Mondain* closely links luxury to the arts and artisanship, represented in the poem in the form of precious artefacts, such as paintings and statues, beautiful furniture, tapestries, gardens with elaborate fountains, houses, and coaches, and the theatre and opera. The overall effect is a more advanced civilisation. This luxury-based civilisation is built on a very comprehensive notion of pleasure. Pleasure as depicted in the poem includes increased comfort, as in the well-sprung coach,⁵⁹ the comfortable bed, and all the conveniences that Adam and Eve could only have dreamt of; but it also comprises aesthetic pleasures, most notably perhaps the opera, 'ce palais magique' (lines 94-100); social pleasures as the joyous dinner company (101-110); and a marked sensual element (89-93).

Voltaire's arguments and illustrations are not chosen at random. The poem pursues a strong polemic line: it is directed against Fénelon's attack on luxury, as expressed in his *Télémaque*, which the poem explicitly evokes (lines 113-123). Fénelon's crucial role in the early luxury debate has been recognised by Hont, and Philippe Bonolas has analysed the important role of luxury in *Télémaque*.⁶⁰ Voltaire picks up on four of the most noticeable respects in which Fénelon criticised luxury. The first of these is contained in the poems perhaps most famous lines: 'Le superflu, chose très nécessaire' (22). This opposition is crucial in *Télémaque*, which teaches that man's desire for the superfluous is the root of human misery:

L'ambition et l'avarice des hommes sont les seules sources de leur malheur. Les hommes veulent tout avoir, et ils se rendent malheureux par le désir du superflu; s'ils voulaient vivre simplement et se contenter de satisfaire aux vrais besoins, on verrait partout l'abondance, la joie, la paix et l'union.⁶¹

⁵⁹ It is difficult not to perceive an allusion to Montaigne's 'Des Coches' here. This reference to such an important discussion of civilisation(s), is just another proof of Voltaire's conscious attempt to situate his defence of luxury in the wider context of debates about civilisation and progress.

⁶⁰ Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', pp. 383-387; and Philippe Bonolas, 'Fénelon et le luxe dans le *Télémaque*', *SVEC*, 247 (1987), 81-90.

⁶¹ François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. by Jacques

The superfluous in *Télémaque* is identified with luxury, which is also linked to commerce and the arts. Hence in his reform of Salentum (*Télémaque*, book X), Mentor not only severely limits commerce, which in the ideal state of Béthique does not exist at all, but also restricts all 'arts inutiles'. The connotations of luxury in the work are effeminacy and corruption, 'mollesse' is the term most frequently used. This 'feminine' nature of luxury is epitomised in the figure of Venus, characterised by 'mollesse' and 'volupté' and the wish to corrupt the young hero, and opposed to the masculine Minerva, who for most of the novel prefers male guise, Mentor, and who is defined by austerity, masculinity, and anti-sensuality:

Le visage de cette déesse n'avait point cette beauté molle et cette langueur passionnée que j'avais remarquée dans le visage et dans la posture de Vénus. C'était au contraire une beauté simple, négligée, modeste. Tout était grave, vigoureux, noble, plein de force et de majesté. (p. 47)

The feminine and sensual define luxury, which, according to Fénelon's *De l'Education des filles* is born from female vanity, and able to spread its noxious effects due to women's influence.⁶²

In the *Mondain*, Voltaire retains these connotations of luxury but attaches new value to them. The statement: 'J'aime le luxe et même la mollesse.' (line 9) sets the tone for this value-reversal. As we have seen, luxury-induced commerce, depicted as leading to conflict and war by Fénelon,⁶³ is a force for happiness and peace in the poem. In a similar vein, artistry and artisanship, condemned by Mentor, are extolled here. The feminine or indeed effeminating, sensual qualities of luxury, encompassed in the term 'mollesse', and repeated in the emphasis on beautiful exteriors, perfumes, sensuality, and

Le Brun, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), II, 3-326 (58). On the opposition of the superfluous and the necessary, real, or natural in the novel, see also Bonolas, 'Fénelon et le luxe', pp. 86-87.

⁶² Fénelon, *De l'Education des Filles*, in *Oeuvres*, I, 91-171; especially chapters IX ('Remarques sur plusieurs défauts des filles') and X ('La Vanité de la beauté et des ajustements').

On Fénelon's treatment of the feminine see Henk Hillenaar, *Le Secret de Télémaque* (Paris: PUF, 1994), pp. 39-60 and 100-109.

⁶³ On this see also Bonolas, 'Fénelon et le luxe', pp. 84-85.

flirtation, are retained by Voltaire, but instead of leading to corruption, they become part of a new concept of civilisation, which is set against the Christian-Stoic ideal of austerity and simplicity, as found in the Christian paradise, or in *Télémaque's* Salentum.

The strategy of polemic opposition to the Fénelonian attack on luxury, largely explains why the *Mondain* appears so much more uncompromising in its eulogy of luxury than Voltaire's other works on the topic. In many ways the *Mondain* depicts the Parisian lifestyle that Voltaire even at that time viewed very critically as an alienating and tumultuous and thus as inimical to the tranquillity happiness required.⁶⁴ We should hence be careful to take the poem as a straightforward expression of Voltaire's attitude to luxury and pleasure, as so many critics have done. It undoubtedly reflects in part the Cirey couple's interest in luxury, both theoretically, as in their work on Mandeville and Melon, and practically, as their lifestyle in Cirey testifies.⁶⁵ But more importantly it is a direct attack on Fénelon, and the polemic strategy tends to obfuscate the more nuanced evaluation of luxury that can be found in the companion pieces. However, even in the *Mondain*, there is evidence of a more ambiguous tone. The decision to change the poem's last line from 'Le paradis terrestre est à Paris' to 'Le paradis terrestre est où je suis', which to Voltaire's correspondents was a clear reference to Cirey, testifies to this.⁶⁶ Such a view is supported by the fact that a clear distinction is made in the poem between the wordling and the *moi lyrique*, who acts mainly as an observer in the part

⁶⁴ See for instance his letter to Madame de de Champonin from September 1739 where he writes: 'Ma chère amie, Paris est un gouffre, où se perdent le repos & le recueillement de l'âme, sans qui la vie n'est qu'un tumulte importun. Je ne vis point. Je suis porté, entraîné loin de moi dans des tourbillons.' (D2082). This criticism, perhaps most powerfully expressed in the 1749 *La Vie de Paris et de Versailles*, became a constant in the correspondence: see also D5843 (June 1754), D8076 (February 1759), D15491 (February 1769) and just before his death: D21101 (March, 1778)

⁶⁵ On the luxurious lifestyle in Cirey see Graffigny's letters from December 1738, and Vaillot, *Avec Madame Du Châtelet*, pp. 51-52.

⁶⁶ It was Du Châtelet who first called Cirey a 'paradis terrestre', and importantly this was before Voltaire had written the *Mondain* (to the Duc de Richelieu in May 1735, D874). The expression stuck and Voltaire frequently referred to Cirey as such in the following years (D1331, D1366, D1366, D1383, D1410, D1629, D1766).

that describes one day in the life of the mondain and only intervenes on occasion to praise certain aspects of this lifestyle.⁶⁷ Explicit praise in this section is reserved for the comfortableness of the modern coaches, the opera, and the excellent cuisine. And the other sections of the poem, which do not directly concern the daily life of the honnête homme, make slightly different arguments in favour of luxury. Best summed up in lines 9 to 11, the advantages of luxury are not the hectic race for more and more external stimuli, but the personal advantages of increased pleasure and comfort (les plaisirs, la mollesse, la propreté) on the one hand, and the progress of civilisation (les arts, le goût, les ornements) on the other.

There is another aspect of the moi's relationship with the mondain that critics have so far tended to overlook. Given that the early luxury debate was mainly fought along Neo-epicurean versus Christian-Stoic lines, Voltaire's adoption of the former style, should have been a clue. One of the most common arguments in the Neo-epicurean defence of luxury was that by refocussing man's selfish passions on acquisitiveness and sensual satisfaction it held benefits for society of large.⁶⁸ Voltaire has already used this line of argument in extolling commerce and an alternative to religious extremism in the *Lettres philosophiques* and he evokes it here to show how increased luxury lead not only to commerce but also to a flourishing of the arts. The fact that the mondain in the poem, as opposed to the figure of the moi, is caught in this race after luxury, has positive consequences of which he, in his hectic lifestyle, seems unaware. This includes not only worldwide commerce and spread of arts and comforts, but the civilising influence extends to the mondain himself 'malgré lui': his actions

⁶⁷ Mason is one of the few scholars to notice this dualism: 'Voltaire's Poems on Luxury', p. 118. See also his critical edition of the *Mondain, OCV*, vol. 16, 281-282.

⁶⁸ On this see especially Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith*, especially chapters 2 ('Epicurean vs. Stoic schemes') and 4 (Passions, interests, and society); and Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, especially part I, 'How the Interests were Called Upon to Counteract the Passions'.

aimed at a short term goal, for instance being well received by his lover, being fashionable, etc. lead to him being clean and pleasantly perfumed (89-90), and to his attending the opera and theatre, where he learns to admire the beauties of art: 'malgré lui il court admirer Ramau [sic]' (100).

In the poem the very elements that would make Voltaire more critical of luxury in general and Parisian life in particular over the coming years, and which would later be emphasised by opponents of luxury such as Rousseau, serve a purpose and contribute to the general good. These elements include hectic tumult, the alienating and never ceasing race for more and more pleasure on the one hand and the cult of appearances, of veneer over substance on the other. In the description of the *mondain's* day, the lexicon of appearances and of seduction is quite noticeable: The possible superficiality of appearances is hinted at by the usage of 'orner', 'dorer', 'paraître' (lines 82-85) whilst seductiveness is hinted at in the metaphor of being made drunk, of running somewhere in spite of himself, and in 'l'art de séduire les yeux' and 'de séduire les coeurs' (lines 93-100). And yet, in a Mandevillian twist, the very fact that the '*mondain*' is thus taken in, improves society at large, which become more sophisticated, more pleasant, and more cultured. However, the *moi* of the poem, conscious of these mechanisms, can enjoy all these advantages without being drawn into the Parisian tumult: he after all is in Cirey, '*paradis terrestre*' in that it allows the superior, truly Epicurean sage, to enjoy the advantages of luxury without becoming dependent on it.

Thus the *Mondain* is more ambiguous in its evaluation of the Parisian life of luxury than it is generally given credit for. It is important not only as Voltaire's first open engagement with the luxury debate, as a treasure-trove of what would become Voltaire's stock-in-trade imagery of luxury, because of its subtle argument, its strongly

anti-Fénelonian polemic, and its neo-epicurean tone, but also in that the scandal that it caused forced Voltaire to define his stance on luxury further by writing what can be termed the *Mondain's* 'companion pieces'. His first riposte to the moral outrage that ensued once the poem began to circulate widely in Paris, was the *Défense du Mondain*, which he wrote whilst in the Netherlands. It strengthened the argument of the social, cultural, and economic utility of luxury, drawing heavily on Mandeville and Melon.

La Défense du Mondain

Writing to Frederick in January 1737, Voltaire defines his *Défense du Mondain* as follows:

C'est un petit essay de morale mondaine où je tâche de prouver avec quelque guaité, que le luxe, la magnificence, les gals, tous les baux arts, tout ce qui fait la splendeur d'un état en fait la richesse, et que ceux qui crient contre ce qu'on appelle le luxe ne sont guères que des pauvres de mauvaise humeur. Je crois qu'on peut enrichir un état en donnant beaucoup de plaisir à ses sujets. (D1251)⁶⁹

This is a good summary of the poem's main argument. Like the *Mondain* itself, it is part of a worldly tradition, one of pleasure and optimism, gaiety and luxury. But, written as it is as a defence, it underlines the more serious points already implied in its predecessor: the apology of luxury in terms of social utility. Luxury is defended on two levels. On the one hand the poem casts itself as 'un petit essay de morale mondaine': situating itself in the eudemonistic tradition, it claims to be a course in how to live happily in the modern age of luxury; and on the other it makes a political and economical argument in favour of luxury as contributing to the greatness of a state in both financial and cultural terms. Those two sides are brought together in the image of a state that combines wealth and pleasure, and critics of the concepts are dismissed as either jealous ('pauvres' in the material sense of being unable to participate in the

⁶⁹ For 'gals' Besterman suggests 'galas' – 'bals' might seem more plausible but as Besterman has seen the actual handwriting, I am happy to concede this point.

lifestyle of luxury, and hence in a bad mood) or peevish ('pauvres' in the sense that they cannot but help their bad humour and ought to be pitied). Thus, like the *Mondain*, the intention is to keep both sides of the argument, the personal and the social, even though in the execution the *Défense* leans more strongly towards the side of social utility.

The poem opens with another dinner scene.⁷⁰ This time it features the opposition of the moi lyrique and a 'maître cafard', condemning the defence of luxury.⁷¹ The argument in this section (lines 1-48) is double, comprising the personal and moral as well as the socio-economic sphere. It relies on the charge of hypocrisy and on the nature of personal enjoyment. The Christian criticism of the immorality of luxury contrasts with the obvious pleasure the 'faux dévot' takes in luxury products. In a rather ingenious move, Voltaire depicts him as undermining his own argument further by establishing a link between God and pleasure. If pleasure is a gift from God, by extension luxury would be intended for man's enjoyment, which in turn would imply that it is Christian asceticism and not luxury that offends divine or natural law.⁷² As in the *Traité de Métaphysique*, Voltaire refuses to regard luxury as an unnatural or immoral phenomenon. While pleasure and innocuousness of luxury are thus established on a personal level, there is a parallel argument in favour of luxury on the socio-economic level. The four examples of luxury evoked in this section are fine wine, coffee, precious porcelain, and exquisite silverware. These items not only bring legitimate pleasure to

⁷⁰ On the importance of the dinner and dinner conversation in Voltaire's *oeuvre* and iconography, see Christiane Mervaud, *Voltaire à table : plaisir du corps, plaisir de l'esprit* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1998), which also argues that 'Le petit souper appartient à la mythologie du XVIIIe siècle frivole et mondain. Ce symbole d'une douceur de vivre s'est lesté de connotations philosophiques. Et c'est la faute à Voltaire' (p. 9). It summarises its significance as follows: 'la table pour Voltaire reste marquée de signes bénéfiques et le repas s'inscrit dans cette « culture des apparences » si caractéristique du XVIIIe siècle où se conjuguent cuisine ornementale, décor raffiné, conversation, plaisir de l'aliment et plaisir du mot. La table suppose la rencontre, donc l'échange de paroles autour du partage des nourritures et des breuvages' (p. 187).

⁷¹ Voltaire, *Défense du Mondain ou l'apologie du luxe*, *OCV*, vol. 16, 304-309.

⁷² The link between God and pleasure, pleasure as a proof of God and as God's design for man is frequently made by Voltaire in this period. See for instance the *Traité de métaphysique*, the 5th *Discours en vers sur l'homme* and his letter to Frederick from July 1738 (D1558).

the dinner party guests, they are also the product of intense industry and trade, which unites the world in peaceful employment by luxury. A clear optimism underlies this argument for luxury: unlike in Mandeville, and to a degree even in Melon, it is not the selfish passions and vices that create wealth and industry for the multitude, but the divinely instituted and hence morally justified pleasure of the individual which improves the state of the whole.

The next section of the poem (lines 49-72) elaborates on the social benefits of luxury with the aid of an extended metaphor. Having once again distinguished between small states to whom luxury is pernicious and large states who thrive on it, Voltaire introduces the image of a fountain to depict what modern economists would call the 'trickle-down theory': luxury and spending in the elite provide employment for the less well-off so that wealth and abundance will slowly spread throughout the whole of society. Cut off the water supply, Voltaire argues, and the entire landscape of society will wither. The image is potent in that it allies nature (life-giving water) with human endeavour (the fountain and canals)⁷³ just as on the personal level had linked God and human enjoyment. This mirrors the argument of the *Traité de métaphysique* according to which human progress is natural and willed by God.

Voltaire then replies at length to the objections of putative 'pédants à rabats', who would invoke the example of ancient Rome. Mason follows Morize in arguing that Voltaire chose Rome rather than Sparta as an example for frugality because of Bayle's

⁷³ Voltaire was undoubtedly aware of the importance of canal-based transport for the growth of commerce and industry. Note his appreciation of the Dutch canals in his letter to the Marquise de Bernières (D128). On the importance of canal-building for the English economy at the time see Simon Ville, 'Transport', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, vol. 1: *Industrialisation 1700-1860*, ed. by Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 295-331; and Rick Szostak, *The Role of Transportation in the Industrial Revolution: A Comparison of England and France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

depiction of Spartan thrift as virtuous.⁷⁴ Whilst this might not strike one immediately as a convincing reason, it is certainly possible, but, more importantly, Rome was crucial in other respects: a standard argument against luxury was that it had caused the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, which before its introduction had been a society of austere, simple morals – a point made amongst others by Fénelon, Voltaire's fictional opponent in the *Mondain*.⁷⁵ Voltaire puts the veracity of such a claim into question, but ironically agrees to believe 'la chimérique histoire' of 'un certain Curius Cincinnatus et des Consuls en us' (lines 77-84). His argument however is the same he had already applied to the garden of Eden in the *Mondain*: the austerity of their lifestyle was simply due to the fact that they lacked the means to live more comfortably:

Est-ce vertu ? c'était pure ignorance.
 Quel idiot, s'il avait eu pour lors
 Quelque bon lit, aurait couché dehors? (*Mondain*, lines 43-45)

As soon as they had the means to do so, they enjoyed luxury just as much as the next person, and the passage from wood to gold is so natural it can take place in one single line:

Leur Jupiter, au temps du bon roi Tulle,
 Etait de bois: il fut d'or sous Luculle;
 N'allez donc pas, avec simplicité,
 Nommer vertu, ce qui fut pauvreté. (*Défense*, lines 95-98)

Rome taken care of, Voltaire proceeds to another stage of the argument. Since he had fully embraced the 'feminine' character of luxury in the *Mondain*, he does not, as Mandeville and Melon had done, argue against the perhaps stronger charge that luxury had led to effeminacy, a decline in military virtue, and hence to the fall of Rome.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *OCV*, vol. 16, p. 308 n.10, cf. Haydn T. Mason, *Pierre Bayle and Voltaire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 99.

⁷⁵ On Fénelon's views of Roman luxury, see Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', p. 384. See also Patrick Riley, 'Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), pp. 78-93 (pp. 88-89).

⁷⁶ Mandeville spends much on his Remark on Luxury arguing against the claim that it has effeminating or weakening effects on the military and that it has never destroyed any great empire (*Fable of the*

Instead he goes on to praise Colbert and then to paint his kingly ideal, impersonated by Solomon. Louis XIV, under whom Colbert served as finance minister and conducted his economic policies, had already been lauded in the first *Epître* to Fawkener on the same grounds: for encouraging the arts and sciences as well as enriching the state through luxury, trade and industry. Voltaire was to elaborate on this topic in his *Siècle de Louis XIV*, just as he would on the next image he introduces: Solomon, as the ideal ruler, combining wisdom, philosophy, and knowledge, with luxury, beauty, and pleasure.

The companion pieces

The equation of the benefits of luxury on a personal level with those on the wider social level is made most strongly when Voltaire sent the *Défense* to the comte de Saxe in January 1737 (D1256). Here the Epicurean theme of moderation in all things, of enjoying whilst always preserving one's independence from addiction to these enjoyments, becomes abundantly clear, and Voltaire invokes Horace as the best example for this Epicurean enjoyment of luxury. Voltaire closes the letter with a short poem, that likens luxury, both on the individual and the social level, to fine wines, a favourite example for luxury in Voltaire since his early writings in the context of the neo-epicurean *Temple* and one made most famously in the *Mondain*. Like excellent wine, luxury contributes to happiness, and 'Il faut s'en permettre l'usage', for, in his Epicurean view, 'le plaisir sied très bien au sage'. However, whilst luxury encourages the talents and industries and makes for the grandeur of an empire, like alcohol it requires moderation: 'Buvez, ne vous enivrez pas'. The dangers are both overindulgence and a pathological dependence, i.e. the constant fear of poverty. Yet Voltaire seems optimistic that such a wise use of luxury is possible and that life – and the state – would be the

Bees, I, 117-123); Melon echoes this: [Jean François Melon], *Essai politique sur le commerce*. ([n.p.], 1734) : 'Chapitre IX : Du Luxe' pp. 129-157, (pp. 132-133).

poorer without it.⁷⁷

The socio-economic defence of luxury is made again in the 'Lettre de M. de Melon' to the comtesse de Verrue on Voltaire's poems on luxury. The letter, printed in the Ledet edition of 1738-39 where it follows the *Défense* and precedes the *Mondain*, is in fact by Voltaire himself, both sender and recipient having conveniently died recently and being unable to object. Melon, who had introduced some of Mandeville's arguments to the French wider public and had argued in favour of luxury in his *Essai politique sur le commerce*, would of course have been an important ally to have on board, and Voltaire certainly admired both the man and his work.⁷⁸ The letter reinforces the link between luxury, the arts, the grandeur of a state, the circulation of money, and the growth of industry; it once again makes the distinction between small states for whom luxury is ruinous and rich commercial ones for whom it is crucial; and it links Voltaire's defence of luxury to Melon's own theories as expounded in the *Essai*.

The socio-economic, or indeed cultural defence that Voltaire mounted in favour of luxury in the *Mondain*, the *Défense*, the *Lettre de M. de Melon*, and even earlier in the *Lettres philosophiques*, is fairly unambiguous. It is on the personal or psychological level that Voltaire seemed to feel the need to further clarify his position. This is best illustrated by the poem *Sur l'usage de la vie*, which comes closest to the 'petit essai de morale mondaine' that Voltaire had promised. Its subtitle makes the link to the question of luxury obvious: *pour répondre aux critiques qu'on avait faites du Mondain*. The

⁷⁷ The poem reads: Oui, je suis loin de m'en dédire, // Le luxe a des charmes puissants; // Il encourage les talents, // Il est la gloire d'un empire.
Il ressemble aux vins délicats, // Il faut s'en permettre l'usage: // Le plaisir sied très bien au sage; // Buvez, ne vous enivrez pas.
Qui ne sait pas faire abstinence // Sait mal goûter la volupté; // Et qui craint trop la pauvreté // N'est pas digne de l'opulence.

⁷⁸ Voltaire knew Melon personally and called his *Traité* a 'libellum aureum' (D1181 24 October 1736 to Berger). See also D837, D1202, D1279, and D1436.

poem, which Mason dates to the same period as the other writings on luxury, did not appear in print until 1767.⁷⁹ It has not received much scholarly attention, either because it could well be considered as one of the typical treatises on happiness summarised by Mauzi as 'lieux communs d'inspiration épicurienne',⁸⁰ or because it represents in many ways an abrégé of the *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, on which attention then focussed.⁸¹ It does have the advantage however that Voltaire did not intend it for immediate publication, and hence did not feel obliged to defend the more polemical assertions he had made in the *Mondain* to counter Fénelon. And indeed, as in the *Discours*, which were first entitled *Epîtres sur le bonheur*,⁸² when the *moi lyrique* sets out to teach his readers 'L'art peu connu d'être heureux',⁸³ this 'art' is straightforwardly Epicurean, and as such does not in any way correspond to the behaviour of the mondain:

Sachez, mes très chers amis,
 Qu'en parlant de l'abondance,
 J'ai chanté la jouissance
 Des plaisirs purs et permis,
 Et jamais l'intempérance. (*L'usage*, lines 1-5)

This repeats the Epicurean exhortation to moderation, the condemnation of intemperance as well as the classic Epicurean distinction between pleasures that are pure or natural and necessary, those that are natural or pure but not necessary, and those that are unnatural and thus to be avoided.⁸⁴ He also introduces the advice of learning how to renounce pleasures in order to enjoy them more later (lines 14-16), an idea also

⁷⁹ On the dating of the poem, see Mason's Introduction in *OCV*, vol. 16, 285-286.

⁸⁰ Robert Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur*, p. 9.

⁸¹ On the links between the two, see Mason's introduction to both *L'usage* (*OCV*, vol. 16, 273-288, especially 285-286) and the *Discours* (*OCV*, vol. 17, 390-450), as well as his notes to the poem (*OCV*, vol. 16, 311-313).

⁸² On this see Mason, 'A Voltairean Problem: The Seventh *Discours en vers sur l'homme*', in *Voltaire, the Enlightenment and the Comic Mode: Essays in Honor of Jean Sarrailh*, ed. by Maxine G. Cutler (New York: Peter Lang, 1990) pp. 125-141. See also his critical edition of the *Discours* in *OCV*, vol. 17, especially the introduction (*OCV*, vol. 17, 390-450).

⁸³ Voltaire, *Sur l'usage de la vie*, in *OCV*, vol. 16, 311-313 (line 8).

⁸⁴ On this see for instance Epicurus' letter to Menoeceus in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, X.127-129. Or, in a version that we know Voltaire was very familiar with: Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, X.93. On Du Châtelet's reading the *Tusculan Disputations* to him and her love for the work, see D1006 (9 February 1736 to Thieriot) and D1012 (12 February 1736 to Thoulhier d'Olivet).

found in the fourth *Discours en vers* as Mason points out,⁸⁵ which echoes the classic Epicurean warning not to grow dependent on kinetic pleasures. The advice to withdraw from the life of courts and politics in favour of solitude and study (lines 17-19) is another Epicurean commonplace. More intriguing are lines 22-29:

D'une recherche importune
Que vos coeurs embarrassés
Ne volent point, empressés,
Vers les biens que la fortune
Trop loin de vous a placés:
Laissez la fleur étrangère
Embellir d'autres climats;
Cueillez d'une main légère
Celle qui naît sous vos pas.

The *Mondain* was characterised by even this state, described in surprisingly similar terms: 'empresser'/'presser' (*Mondain*, line 91), 'voler' (*Mondain*, line 91), 'recherche'/'chercher' (*Mondain*, lines 24 and 123), coeurs embarrassés/coeur très immonde (*Mondain*, line 13). This hectic race after pleasure and luxury as depicted in the very poem that *l'usage* is meant to defend, is actually condemned here. The enjoyment advocated here is one Epicurus would have appreciated: enjoy what is easily available, but do not strive for more and endanger your tranquillity. One important difference could of course simply be that whilst the *Mondain* underlined the positive consequences of this race, without judging the race as such, the *Usage* has a different aim, namely to teach the good life. However, even the *moi* in the *Mondain*, distinct from the worldling, did enjoy the fruits of luxury. In this poem, that seems to be put in question: abandoning the 'fleur étrangère' could potentially have even wider implications: the ships carrying foreign luxury goods in the *Mondain*, the exotic porcelain, coffee, and silverware of the *Défense*, have all disappeared and are replaced by the bucolic idyll of lines 34-45, which resembles the Fénelonian landscapes ridiculed in the *Mondain* much more than the urban life the poem had praised. And one is left to wonder whether these foreign luxury products have perhaps been relegated to 'embellish

⁸⁵ *Sur l'usage*, p. 311 n1, cf. *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, OCV, vol. 17, 455-530 (499).

other climes'.

It is unclear in how far this is yet once again only part of a Voltairian strategy. Just as the Mondain had cast the author figure as an Anti-Fénelon, this poem portrays him as an Epicurean sage. The claim that nature easily provides for the vital needs of all living things (lines 34-39), the observation of the unreliability of fortune, of the unimportance of rank and riches (lines 51-71) are Epicurean commonplaces, as is the overarching importance of friendship, which provides the framework for the poem by opening and closing it. Nevertheless no reference to Epicurus and his disciples or even to the Garden is to be found in the poem. For this we would need to look at the fifth *Discours en vers*, which probably sprang from reworking the *Usage*:⁸⁶

Usez, n'abusez point; le sage ainsi l'ordonne.
Je fuis également Epictète et Pétrone.
L'abstinence ou l'excès ne fit jamais d'heureux. (*Discours V*, lines 89-91)

Voltaire here situates himself squarely between Stoicism as impersonated by Epictetus and the excessive Hedonism as found in the famous *Cena Trimalchionis* of Petronius' *Satyricon*. Voltaire adopts the moderate middle-position, that of an Epicurean sage. And, we may add, a still rather optimistic Epicureanism, at least during these years. As he writes in a letter to Frederick at around the time of the composition of the *Usage* and the *Discours*:

Je souffre très patiemment; et quoique les douleurs soient quelquefois longues et aiguës, je suis très éloigné de me croire malheureux. Ce n'est pas que je sois stoïcien, au contraire, c'est parce que je suis très épicurien, parce que je crois la douleur un mal et le plaisir un bien, et que, tout bien compté et bien pesé, je trouve infiniment plus de douceurs que d'amertumes dans cette vie. (D1506, 20 May 1738)

When Mauzi claims 'Les sentiments souvent contradictoires de Voltaire sur la

⁸⁶ On the *Usage* as material for the fifth *Discours en vers*, see Mason's discussion of this in his Introduction to the *Discours: OCV*, vol. 17, 405-406.

vie et sur l'homme sont à mettre, en grande partie, au compte de l'humeur et de l'accident. Lorsqu'il écrit son poème du *Mondain* (1736), il est un homme heureux',⁸⁷ he misconstrues the nature of Voltaire's writing. Voltaire's work is not simply an expression of a fleeting state of mind. His defence of luxury relies on a carefully worked out, philosophical argument, developed in a dialogue with Pascal, Mandeville, and Fénelon. Its basis is a voluntarist argument of God's benign creationism which included human liberty and man's power to moderate his passions and desires. In contrast to Mandeville, this foundation allowed him to mount a defence of the passions, not only as he perceived them as inclusive of, and hence balanced out by, a sense of goodwill and sociability, but more importantly because he considered them as beneficial in that they fostered human development and the advancement of civilisation. His concept of civilisation was now linked with that of luxury and its corollary, commerce. Already in his *Lettres philosophiques* he had argued for their impact on liberty, peace, and tolerance. In his *Epîtres* to Du Châtelet and to Fawkenner he added the aspect of improved manners or enhanced politeness, and the greater role of women in society. In direct opposition to Fénelon he maintained these connotations down to the very terminology of luxury but reversed their values in the *Mondain* with the aim of controlling the discourse on luxury. In accordance with Mandeville and Melon he stressed more straightforwardly economic elements in his appreciation of luxury: the growth of industry, the eradication of laziness, and the enrichment of the state and society at large. Most important of all however, was his connection of luxury with the growth of the arts and sciences, the general development of human potential and a greater 'enlightenment', an argument already familiar from the *Lettres*.

However, whilst the overall socio-economic and cultural impact of luxury was

⁸⁷ Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur*, p. 57

depicted as unadulteratedly positive, even at this early point Voltaire expressed certain reservations when it came to the impact of luxury on personal happiness. Hence, if, as Mauzi suggests, we take the *Mondain* as a straightforwardly optimist poem, one that is simply an expression of Voltaire's happiness at the time and an unequivocal endorsement of luxury, we would be forced to consider Voltaire as subject to persistent mood swings, once we take into account the ambivalence of *Sur l'usage de la vie* and, more strikingly, the continued adaptations and changes Voltaire effected on his *Discours en vers sur l'homme* in the same period of the mid to late 1730s. Mauzi's claim overlooks two decisive nuances of Voltaire's poems on luxury. The depiction of the mondain's hectic lifestyle is by no means uncritical, and is part of a wider, neo-epicurean argument about the socio-economic and cultural benefits of any individual's obsession with luxury. Despite acknowledging these advantages, this was not a lifestyle Voltaire advocated. What he endorses is an Epicurean enjoyment of luxury that is characterised by independence and moderation. Since much of the *Traité de métaphysique* was dedicated to proving that man, especially reasonable man, was able to moderate his desires, such an Epicurean enjoyment of luxury was perfectly feasible. To the discerning reader it should be clear that his position was far from the unbridled hedonism that scholars have detected in the *Mondain*. A more perceptive reading of the poem, one that takes into account its polemical, anti-Fénelonian strategy, its influence by the tradition of the *Temple's épicurisme mondain*, and the careful nuances that distance the *moi* from the 'mondain', reveals that Voltaire was never a proponent of unfettered luxury. Especially when the work is read in context with works such as the short poem to the comte de Saxe, Voltaire's letters, and other works such as the *Usage*, it becomes clear that Voltaire advocated an Epicurean position which appreciated both the social advantages and personal pleasures luxury had to offer but was at the same time fully aware of the dangers an overly avid pursuit of luxury could pose.

III THE HISTORY AND POLITICS OF LUXURY

III.i The *Siècle de Louis XIV* and the *Essai sur les mœurs*

Elements of historicizing social development were present both in the *Traité de métaphysique*'s conjectural depiction of how small family-based societies developed into commercial ones, and in the *Mondain*'s attack on 'l'état de la pure nature', but it is only in the works published in the 1750s, the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, that Voltaire mounts a fully fledged apology for human progress. And for Voltaire, this progress, neither linear nor irreversible, is towards a state of enlightened civilisation, one that is intimately bound up with both luxury and commerce.

Conceived and written very much in parallel, published within few years of each other, and eventually incorporated into one edition, the *Siècle* and the *Essai* have often been considered as part of the same project. Here, the Walther edition of the *Siècle*, dated 1753 but in reality published in 1752, and the 1756 Cramer edition of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, will be read in conjunction to analyse how Voltaire developed his

thought on commerce and luxury and how this fitted into his creation of what Brumfitt in his classic account calls 'the *mystique* of progress'.¹

Strengthening the defence of luxury and commerce

Brumfitt and O'Brien are amongst the few scholars to have recognised the important role of economics in Voltaire's historiographical writings.² Voltaire was in fact fully cognizant of the developing consumer culture, which for the first time made luxury goods freely available even to the lower and working classes. 'Il est certain', he writes in the *Essai*, 'que l'Amérique procure aujourd'hui aux moindres citoyens de l'Europe des commodités et des plaisirs.'³ He did not fail to emphasise the scale of these events: 'Je ne puis m'empêcher de remarquer que la France et l'Angleterre consomment aujourd'hui en denrées inconnues à nos pères plus que leurs couronnes n'avaient autrefois de revenus' (*Essai*, II, 383). His awareness of this quiet revolution and its socio-economic consequences lead to what O'Brien rightly summarises as a 'reading of European history as the transition from medieval, feudal to modern, commercial social systems'.⁴ Voltaire was not indifferent to this development, he celebrated and encouraged it, and part of his

¹ John Henry Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 127. Choosing these early editions of these texts avoids being sidetracked by Voltaire's later additions which served subsequent battles. After an analysis of these original versions, a comparison with later additions will, in the second part of this chapter, allow for a clearer picture of Voltaire's changing attitude to Montesquieu.

In terms of their thought on luxury, they are close to the 1750 *Dialogue entre un philosophe et un contrôleur-général des finances*, which, as Mark Waddicor points out in his introduction to the work, was 'an offshoot of Voltaire's research for *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*' and which reveals 'his specific intention to stress the importance of economic factors in the growth and decline of civilisations': Mark Waddicor, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 32A, 59-70 (pp. 59 and 66). However, as the historiographical works are more detailed and instructive, it will be sufficient to point to the most important repetitions of arguments in footnotes.

² Brumfitt, pp. 68-70. Cf. Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of the Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 11-12.

³ Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire, depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, ed. by René Pomeau, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1963), II, 336. The edition has fewer notes and textual variants than the one currently produced in the *OCV* series, however, since the latter is as yet incomplete and based on the later edition of 1775, the Pomeau edition is given preference here.

⁴ O'Brien, *Narratives of the Enlightenment*, p. 11.

histories was dedicated to strengthening and drawing together the arguments in favour of commerce and luxury he had made in earlier works. These are fourfold and include the historically relative nature of luxury, the relationship between luxury or commerce with both liberty and national power, and finally commerce and luxury as alternatives to religious extremism.

As in his earlier works, Voltaire maintains that luxury is a historically relative concept. And as in the *Mondain's* 'Quel idiot, s'il avait eu pour lors // Quelque bon lit, aurait couché dehors?',⁵ the emphasis is on the increased comfort luxury brings, on the fact that what was considered luxury a generation or two ago is now considered normal and necessary. Summarising the complaints about luxury voiced by La Flamma, or Fiamma, in the fourteenth century, Voltaire concludes with another blurring of the boundaries between luxury, the superfluous, and the necessary, again reminiscent of the *Mondain*: 'Cependant ce luxe dont il se plaint était encore loin à quelques égards de ce qui est aujourd'hui le nécessaire des peuples riches et industrieux' (*Essai*, I, 759).

Apart from being an indefinable and constantly evolving concept, luxury contributes to national power, a point already made in the *Lettres philosophiques*. England remains his favourite example for this, both in the *Siècle*, where he favourably compares her political and military power gained through commerce with the situation of France under Mazarin,⁶ and in the *Essai* where he links British 'grandeur' to her 'négoce' and English 'puissance' to her constant encouragement of commerce (*Essai*, II, 465 and 695). Another old favourite is also present, the Dutch republic; and indeed, Amsterdam is once again termed the 'magasin du monde' in both works (*Essai*, II, 728;

⁵ Voltaire, *Le Mondain*, OCV vol. 16, pp. 295-303 (lines 44-45).

⁶ Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, ed. by Jacqueline Hellegouarc'h and Sylvain Menant (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2005), p. 205.

Siècle, p. 141).

The argument implicitly relies on the rejection of the age-old association of luxury with cowardice and effeminacy. Voltaire underlines two counter-arguments to this claim: the decline and fall of Rome and the rise of Venice. One of the most persistent cases put forward to demonstrate the corrupting and pernicious consequences of luxury was that it had caused the decline and ultimate fall of Rome. Two fellow *philosophes* who had recently made that case were Montesquieu in the *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) and Rousseau in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750).⁷ Voltaire flatly refuses this interpretation. He dedicates two chapters of the *Essai* to the decadence and fall of Rome (XI and XII) and maintains that only two factors caused Rome's fall: 'les barbares, et les disputes de religion' (*Essai*, I, 303). And the barbarians, he is quick to add, would not have posed a problem, had not Christianity taken over, leaving the Empire with more monks than soldiers and the emperors busy assembling religious councils rather than fighting invaders (*Essai*, I, 304-306). Luxury and commerce then had nothing to do with this. Rather than contributing to the decadence of a nation they in fact not only render it powerful, but also free. Next to England and the Dutch Republic, Venice is a recurring example for this. And just to underscore that luxury and commerce were empowering rather than effeminating, Voltaire rolls out a whole host of literary devices. Not only does he place the example of Venice, elevated through commerce, directly after that of Rome, fallen through religious quarrels; by combining antithesis and parallelism with alliteration, he also strengthens the opposition between the couples fear-misery and courage-commerce, which once again implicitly associates commerce with power and disassociates it from any hint of effeminacy: 'Venise,

⁷ On the relationship of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, see below.

république fondée d'abord par la crainte et par la misère, et bientôt élevée par le commerce et par le courage' (*Essai*, I, 308).

The juxtaposition of fanaticism and commerce underlies the historical works of the 1750s at least as much as it did the *Lettres philosophiques*. Commerce, prosperity, and the power to maintain a state's independence are set against religion, misery, and war. There is a diametrical opposition between war, which impoverishes, and luxury, here in the typical guise of both art and pleasure, which enriches by stimulating production:

Ceux qui attribuaient l'affaiblissement des sources de l'abondance aux profusions de Louis XIV dans ses bâtiments, dans les arts et dans les plaisirs, ne savaient pas qu'au contraire les dépenses qui encouragent l'industrie enrichissent un Etat. C'est la guerre qui appauvrit nécessairement le trésor public. (*Siècle*, p. 707)⁸

War in turn, at least in its guise of civil unrest, is firmly linked to religion, and in Voltaire's mind luxury provides a solution to religious divisions in society. The huge bubble created by the Law scheme in 1719-1720 is a case in point: 'Le luxe et la volupté portés au dernier excès imposèrent silence aux disputes ecclésiastiques; et le plaisir fit ce qu Louis XIV n'avait pu faire' (*Siècle*, p. 842).

There are different nuances in his view of luxury as a replacement for religious fervour. The case he makes in favour of the Law speculation, relies on a more pessimistic portrayal of human nature driven by frenzied passions, characterised both by aggressiveness, 'fureur', madness, 'folie', and selfish greed, 'cupidité excitée':

La folie du système des finances contribua plus qu'on ne croit à rendre la paix à l'Eglise. Le public se jeta avec tant de fureur dans le commerce des actions; la cupidité des hommes, excitée par cette amorce, fut si générale, que ceux qui parlèrent encore de jansénisme et de bulle, ne trouvèrent personne qui les écoutât. (*Siècle*, p. 842)⁹

⁸ On Voltaire's attitude to Louis XIV's luxury, see below.

⁹ The portrayal of the Law scheme is similar, though perhaps less condemnatory, in the *Dialogue*: 'Un Ecosais, homme utile et dangereux, établit en France le papier de crédit; c'était un médecin qui donnait une dose d'émétique trop forte à des malades. Ils en eurent des convulsions; mais parce qu'on a trop pris d'un bon remède, doit-on y renoncer à jamais?' Voltaire, *Dialogue entre un philosophe et un*

All this is summarised in the notion of 'dernier excès'. This idea of luxury as the lesser evil, of substituting acquisitive for religious passion to lessen the potential for unrest also occurs in the *Essai*. It is very useful, he claims there, to allow monks and the clergy a life of luxury. Though unfair to those 'qui gagnent leur pain à la sueur de leur front', their luxury would not only increase industry and circulation, but also strengthen peace: the 'vie molle' of the monks left them less inclined to become troublesome and the debauched clergy were less revered by the people (II, 213). Yet there is a less sarcastic view of the contrast between commerce and religion, too. Anabaptists and Huguenots are both portrayed as changed into peaceful model citizens by their commercial activities: 'Les successeurs de ces fanatiques sanguinaires [the Anabaptists] sont les plus paisibles de tous les hommes, occupés de leurs manufactures et de leur négoce, laborieux, charitables' (II, 216). According to Voltaire, Colbert managed to instigate the same changes in the French Huguenot community by employing them in the arts and manufactures. And these gainful employments 'adoucirent peu à peu dans eux la fureur épidémique de la controverse' (*Siècle*, p. 786). Thus, depending on his view of the specific community he was describing, luxury and commerce could either be a countervailing passion, replacing one irrational fury with another, or a path to softer manners and reason, a medicine, rather than a counter-poison. The latter is more frequent, and expressed for instance by the case of the Puritans in New England, who finally abandoned witch trials and superstition for reason, commerce and productivity (*Essai*, II, 384-385).¹⁰

Commerce and luxury in fact become associated with progress and enlightenment. Colbert, 'le fondateur du commerce' (*Siècle*, p. 786), is a case in point.

contrôleur-général des finances, *OCV*, vol. 32A, 79-95 (92).

¹⁰ This corresponds to Hirschman's analysis of the 'countervailing passion' and of the 'doux commerce' thesis: *The passions and the interests*, pp. 21-27 and 57-62.

Voltaire portrays him as a practical *philosophe*, suffering the typical fate of one: misunderstood by his contemporaries, especially by the common rabble, he worked for the betterment of the human condition, a feat that posterity – and the more enlightened – will surely recognise: 'La postérité chérira cet homme dont le peuple insensé voulut déchirer le corps après la mort. Les Français lui doivent certainement leur industrie et leur commerce, et par conséquent cette opulence' (p. 703). Like another Locke or Newton, the 'génie de Colbert' allowed him to understand the 'grands principes' of commerce, yet unknown to his contemporaries (p. 675). Like those two *archi-philosophes*, he was faced by the opposition of the obstinate conservatives, the believers in the old system: 'Les partisans de l'ancienne économie, timide, ignorante et resserrée' (p. 676). Only once people become enlightened do they understand his achievements: 'Il a fallu que l'esprit philosophique, introduit fort tard en France, ait réformé les préjugés du peuple, pour qu'on rendît enfin une justice entière à la mémoire de ce grand homme' (p. 678). If the link between Colbert, commerce, and Enlightenment, the 'esprit philosophique', is not yet obvious enough, Voltaire goes on to liken his situation – attempting to reform finances, taxation, and commerce – to that of the *philosophes* – fighting prejudice, ignorance, and the 'old philosophy': 'il régnait d'ailleurs en général dans la finance autant de préjugés et d'ignorance que dans la philosophie' (p. 704). Commerce, and by extension luxury, have been firmly integrated into the project of the *philosophes*.¹¹

If commerce and luxury serve the Enlightenment project - spreading wealth,

¹¹ A very similar line of argument, linking Colbert's reforms to general civilisation and the dissemination of *lumières*, is also made in the *Dialogue*, pp. 79-81. Already in the 1738 *Sur Messieurs Jean Law, Melon, et Dutot* Voltaire had made the link between economic reforms and Enlightenment, calling Melon 'un philosophe', and, commenting on the general resistance and prejudice towards progress, wrote: 'Annoncer des vérités, proposer quelque chose d'utile aux hommes, c'est une recette sûre pour être persécuté'. Voltaire, *Sur Messieurs Jean Law, Melon, et Dutot, OCV*, vol. 18A, 239-255 (240-241).

combating religious fanaticism, strengthening states and maintaining their freedom - they also simply contribute to the individual's enjoyment of life. Just as commerce and luxury serve to 'adoucir les moeurs', they provide the 'douceurs de la vie' for individuals. Since what is considered 'luxury' changes over time, Voltaire is able to operate a subtle change, from 'luxury' to 'commodity': 'ces commodités [...] qu'on nomme *luxe*' (*Siècle*, p. 713), or simply 'commodités' - and these contribute to make life enjoyable, or 'douce'. Again referring to the commercial towns of Italy in the late Middle Ages, Voltaire remarks: 'on y vivait avec commodité, avec opulence; ce n'était que dans leur sein qu'on jouissait des douceurs de la vie' (*Essai*, I, 761). The link between *commerce* or *commodités* and *douceur* or *adoucir* is frequently made. In the case of the Quakers settling in Pennsylvania for instance, one of their achievements is that they procure the natives 'de nouvelles douceurs de la vie par le commerce' (*Essai*, II, 387). If they don't always afford 'jouissance' as in the first example, the least they do is to make life bearable: Voltaire also speaks of 'les commodités qui adoucissent l'amertume de la vie' (*Essai*, I, 338). Luxury and 'douceur' or at least 'adoucir' are inseparable.

Old versus new luxury

Despite this positive portrayal of luxury, there seem to be tensions and contradictions in the *Siècle* and especially in the *Essai*. On the one hand procuring enjoyment, spreading opulence, and elevating the 'génie' and 'courage' of nations (I, 761), luxury is also linked to 'débauche' in the case of monks (II, 213), to corruption in case of the Moors' rule in Spain (I, 478), and, in the *Siècle*, to 'excess' in the French Middle Ages (pp. 123-124). Yet the claim that the happy few live in excessive luxury, whilst the majority of the country languishes in poverty, stands in sharp contrast to the claim made in the same work, that it is 'impossible d'avoir chez soi le superflu que par la surabondance des arts

de première nécessité' (*Siècle*, p. 733).¹² Commerce and luxury are linked at once to opulence, peaceful enjoyment and *moeurs douces*, and to vice and ostentation: Voltaire claims that the 'vertus sont ensevelies dans l'obscurité, tandis que le luxe et le vice dominant dans la splendeur' (*Essai*, II, 213-214). Nevertheless, he is less ambiguous on the subject than it might first seem. The apparent contradictions are resolved in his implicit differentiation between an 'old', feudal, ecclesiastical, and seigneurial kind of luxury, and a 'new' bourgeois and commercial one; the distinction is made both in the *Essai* and the *Siècle*.

The term 'luxe commode' occurs in the very first chapter of the *Siècle*'s second volume (p. 599). But it is only in chapter 27 that Voltaire elucidates the term. He distinguishes between ostentatious luxury and luxury that belongs to the realms of convenience, 'savoir-vivre', and good taste:

On est parvenu enfin à ne plus mettre le luxe que dans le goût et dans la commodité. La foule de pages et de domestiques de livrée a disparu, pour mettre plus d'aisance dans l'intérieur des maisons. On a laissé la vaine pompe et le faste extérieur aux nations chez lesquelles on ne sait encore que se montrer en public, et où l'on ignore l'art de vivre. (p. 701)

This kind of luxury is not only superior in that it derives not from vanity and the desire to impress, but rather from an appreciation of comfort, beauty, and pleasure, it is also deserved, as it is the reward for work and industriousness:

A voir l'aisance des particuliers, ce nombre prodigieux de maisons agréables bâties dans Paris et dans les provinces, cette quantité d'équipages, ces commodités, ces recherches qu'on nomme *luxe*, on croirait que l'opulence est vingt fois plus grande qu'autrefois. Tout cela est le fruit d'un travail ingénieux, encore plus que de la richesse. (p. 713)

This kind of luxury spreads wealth, rather than swallowing it - Voltaire takes pains to show how it benefits both cities and the countryside (p. 714). The universal spread of opulence also renders men more equal: whilst the nobility have seen their incomes stagnate, '[l]e moyen ordre s'est enrichi à force d'industrie.' - 'Par là, il s'est trouvé moins

¹² Cf. the *Essai*: 'On n'a le superflu qu'après le nécessaire' (I, 769).

d'opulence qu'autrefois chez les grands, et beaucoup plus chez les petits; et cela même a mis moins de distance entre les hommes' (p. 715).

The characterisation of these two kinds of luxury as 'old' versus 'new' is more marked in the *Essai*, where Voltaire makes the contrast more explicit:

L'entrevue de François I^{er} et de Henri fut longtemps célèbre par sa magnificence. Leur camp fut appelé *le camp du drap d'or*; mais cet appareil passager, et cet effort de luxe ne supposait pas cette magnificence générale, et ces commodités d'usage si supérieures à la pompe d'un jour, et qui sont aujourd'hui si communes. (II, 166)

The old kind of luxury is that of kings and seigneurs. It is directed at the outside, designed to impress, but is neither solid nor lasting, a mere show, or rather show-off. The new kind of luxury is wide-spread, a product of general abundance, and aimed at enhancing the individual's quality of life. One of Voltaire's favourite examples for this are coaches. Mentioned in the *Mondain*, they are an illustration of this new luxury of comfort and opulence in the *Siècle* as well as in the *Essai*.¹³ Despite the magnificent luxury displayed by kings and seigneurs in the previous citation, '[l]es plus grands seigneurs menaient à cheval leurs femmes en croupe à la campagne: c'était ainsi que voyageaient toutes les princesses' (*Essai*, II, 166). Luxury at that time was rare and but a vain display, whilst now it has been transformed into a universal appreciation of comfort and convenience, permitted by the spread of opulence through commerce and the luxury industry, and best illustrated by 'cette quantité d'équipages' or that 'foule des chars dorés':

La magnificence de Charles-Quint, de François I, de Henri VIII, de Léon X, n'était que pour les jours d'éclat et de solennité. Aujourd'hui les spectacles journaliers, la foule des chars dorés, les milliers de fanaux qui éclairent pendant la nuit les grandes villes, forment un plus beau spectacle, et annoncent plus d'abondance, que

¹³ This may again be a reference to Montaigne's 'Des coches'. There is certainly a trend to identify commercial culture and progress with coaches, not only in Montaigne and the *Mondain*: Rousseau's intense dislike of them is only one case in point, and the same argument is again used in the *Dialogue*: 'S'il [Hugues Capet] se faisait transporter, quand il était malade, d'une maison dans une autre, c'était dans une charette; et moi je me fais porter dans un carrosse commode et agréable, où je reçois le jour sans être incommodé du vent' (p. 84).

les plus brillantes cérémonies des monarques du seizième siècle. (II, 166-167)¹⁴

If these two forms of luxury are temporally distinct, they also have a class dimension. In the selected excerpts above, the old kind of luxury is associated with kings, 'princesses', and 'grand seigneurs'. The affiliation of the other is less emphasised, mentioned only once: it belongs to 'le moyen ordre.' These two dimensions are linked: the 'old' kind of luxury is that seen in times of the 'coutumes barbares et féodales' (I, 769), the new kind is that of the bourgeoisie in commercial societies. In Voltaire's view, the bourgeoisie not only produces the general affluence that allows for this *luxe de commodité*, its very existence, dependent on commerce and luxury production, is also the precondition for making luxury morally acceptable:

Cette magnificence des prélats était plus odieuse alors qu'aujourd'hui, parce qu'il n'y avait point d'état mitoyen entre les grands et les petits, entre les riches et les pauvres. Le commerce et l'industrie n'ont pu former qu'avec le temps cet état mitoyen qui fait la richesse d'une nation. (I, 760-761)¹⁵

O'Brien is thus right when she calls Voltaire the first historian of the rise of the middle orders,¹⁶ and when she links him to Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, and Ramsay who all chart the development towards a modern, commercial society, characterised by the wealth and independence of the middle classes entailing a higher degree of personal and political liberty (ibid., p. 10-12). She correctly underlines the importance of the 'civilising process' in Voltaire's *Essai* (Ibid., 45-47). However, what she does not stress, and indeed what cannot be stressed enough, is how closely the bourgeois type of 'new'

¹⁴ Though never clearly defining his terms, Voltaire develops the distinction and begins to refer to one as 'faste' which is ostentatious and one as 'luxe' which is *savoir-vivre*. See especially the article 'Faste' which he wrote for the *Encyclopédie*, and which ends: 'Le faste n'est pas le luxe. On peut vivre avec luxe dans sa maison sans faste, c'est-à-dire sans se parer en public d'une opulence révoltante. On ne peut avoir de faste sans luxe. Le faste est l'étalage des dépenses que le luxe coûte.' *OCV*, vol. 33, pp. 67-68 (p. 68). This is linked to 'vaine gloire' in his article 'Gloire': 'La vaine gloire est cette petite ambition qui se contente des apparences, qui s'étale dans le grand faste', ibid., pp. 124-127 (p. 125). However, the distinction is never absolute, and both 'luxe', 'opulence', and 'pompe' continue to be used with both positive and negative connotations, depending on context.

¹⁵ 'L'ordre moyen' is also praised – and linked to the Enlightenment project – in the *Dialogue*: 'La populace reste toujours dans la profonde ignorance, où la nécessité de gagner sa vie, et j'ose dire le bien de l'Etat, doivent la tenir. Mais l'ordre moyen est éclairé. Cet ordre est très considérable; il gouverne les grands, qui pensent quelquefois, et les petits qui ne pensent point' (pp. 80-81).

¹⁶ O'Brien, *Enlightenment Narratives*, p. 22.

luxury was intertwined with the concept of civilisation that he advocated.

Luxury and civilisation: politesse, goût, and moeurs douces

One of the fundamental themes of these historical works is the contrasting of 'barbarie' with civilisation. As both Pomeau and O'Brien point out 'civilisation', despite being central to his project of philosophical history, is not a word Voltaire uses: he prefers the verb, usually in a reflexive form.¹⁷ Even as a verb, it is not his favoured term; instead, he opposes a cluster of concepts to 'barbarie' which when combined form the amalgam of 'civilisation'. Most commonly, the terms used in direct opposition to 'barbarie', include 'politesse', 'bon goût' – often used in conjunction with 'raison', or more generally the 'lumières', which shows how closely his concept of civilisation was linked to that of the *philosophes* or indeed the *lumières*.¹⁸ Another term frequently employed by Voltaire is 'moeurs adoucis', 'adoucir les moeurs' or 'adoucir les esprits', which generally equals that of 'poli' or 'polir', and is also linked to enlightenment via 'éclairer' or 'éclairer'.¹⁹ The *Essai* in particular uses the technique of contrast to enhance the opposition between civilisation and barbarism. These instances can prove very useful in understanding what precisely Voltaire's conception of 'civilised' entailed. The two most revealing cases of this are in his opposition between Gauls and Franks in chapter XVII, and of the Persians and the Turks in chapter CXCIII.

For political reasons at the time Voltaire had a vested interest in demoting the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 46. Pomeau, 'Introduction', pp. I-LXVI (p. XLVIII).

¹⁸ For examples of these see: *Essai*, I, 267: 'Aaron-al-Raschild [...] fit succéder dans ses vastes Etats la *politesse* à la *barbarie*'; *Siècle.*, p. 157 where 'barbarie' is characterised as a 'défaut de lumières'; and *Siècle.*, p. 259: 'Le *bon goût* et la *raison* pénétraient dans les écoles de la *barbarie*' [all emphasises are mine]. For the wide-ranging meaning and role Voltaire gives to the concept of good taste, see also the article 'Goût' which he wrote for the *Encyclopédie (OCV)*, vol. 33, 128-132).

¹⁹ Cf. for instance the *Essai*, II, 802, where he claims that the arts 'adoucisent les esprits en les éclairant' which he contrast to the 'barbares' whose 'superstitions [...] abrutissaient presque tous les esprits'.

Franks to barbarians, and depicting the Gauls as peaceful and civilised Romans.²⁰ The opposition of the two allows for an enhanced understanding of Voltaire's concept of 'civilisation' and it is thus worthwhile to quote the passage at length:

Les Gaulois avaient été heureux d'être vaincus par les Romains. Marseille, Arles, Autun, Lyon, Trèves étaient des villes florissantes qui jouissaient paisiblement de leurs lois municipales, subordonnées aux sages lois romaines. Un grand commerce les animait. On voit par une lettre d'un proconsul à Théodose, qu'il y avait dans Autun et dans sa banlieue vingt-cinq mille chefs de famille; mais dès que les Bourguignons, les Goths, les Francs arrivent dans la Gaule, on ne voit plus de grandes villes peuplées. Les cirques, les amphithéâtres construits par les Romains jusqu'au bord du Rhin, sont démolis ou négligés. Si la criminelle et malheureuse reine Brunehaut conserve quelques lieues de ces grands chemins qu'on n'imita jamais, on en est encore étonné.

Qui empêchait ces nouveaux venus de bâtir des édifices réguliers sur des modèles romains? Ils avaient la pierre, le marbre, et de plus beaux bois que nous. Les laines fines couvraient les troupeaux anglais et espagnols comme aujourd'hui. Cependant, les beaux draps ne se fabriquaient qu'en Italie. Pourquoi le reste de l'Europe ne faisait-il venir aucune des denrées de l'Asie? Pourquoi toutes les commodités qui adoucissent l'amertume de la vie, étaient-elles inconnues, sinon parce que les sauvages qui passèrent le Rhin, rendirent les autres peuples sauvages? Qu'on en juge par ces lois saliques, ripuaires, bourguignonnes que Charlemagne lui-même confirma, ne pouvant les abroger. La pauvreté et la rapacité avaient évalué à prix d'argent la vie des hommes, la mutilation des membres, le viol, l'inceste, l'empoisonnement. (*Essai*, I, 338)

Barbarism here is defined against a civilised culture. Such a culture is represented in this case by the Romans who brought it to the Gauls, who in turn serve to highlight the contrast to barbarianism in this example. The most obvious opposition that Voltaire establishes is that between happiness, pleasure, and tranquillity in civilisation – 'heureux', 'florissant', 'jouir paisiblement' – and unhappiness, misery, and violence in barbarism – 'malheureux', 'criminel', 'sauvage', 'pauvreté', 'rapacité', 'la mutilation des membres, le viol, l'inceste, l'empoisonnement'.²¹ More interestingly perhaps, barbarism is defined by both absence and destruction, whilst the constituting features of civilisation lie in presence and construction. A large part of what constitutes this 'presence' in civilised cultures is material: the only non-material aspect in this example are good and just laws. Otherwise even arts and entertainment, the theatre and circus,

²⁰ On Voltaire's involvement in the constitutional debate about absolute monarchy and the French *parlements*, see below.

²¹ The idea of 'douceur' in civilisation is clearly linked to commerce and luxury in the *Dialogue*: 'Le commerce fait le même effet que le travail des mains; il contribue à la douceur de ma vie. Si j'ai besoin d'un ouvrage des Indes, d'une production de la nature, qui ne se trouve qu'à Ceilan ou à Ternate, je suis pauvre par ces besoins; je deviens riche quand le commerce les satisfait' (pp. 85-86).

are designated in their physical manifestation as buildings. Most of the aspects of civilised life fall under the heading of economic prosperity: population growth, building work, commerce, infrastructure in the form road networks, etc. More importantly perhaps, they come in the category of luxury: what Voltaire bemoans is not only the lack of 'toutes les commodités qui adoucissent l'amertume de la vie', but the unwillingness to make them: luxury, at least in the bourgeois form that Voltaire advocates, always requires a level of industriousness that is absent here. The nexus of phenomena linked to luxury – commodities, as well as urbanisation, the performing arts, industriousness, and commerce – seems to form an integral part of the kind of civilisation that Voltaire opposes to barbarism, and his choice of examples emphasises the material aspect of civilisation.

Persia compared to the Ottoman Empire offers another example of the nature of civilisation.²² Here the comparison is not between barbarian and civilised but between two developed cultures, one being, according to Voltaire, more civilised than the other.

La Perse était alors plus civilisée que la Turquie; les arts y étaient plus en honneur, les moeurs plus douces, la police générale bien mieux observée. Ce n'est pas seulement un effet du climat; les Arabes y avaient cultivé les arts cinq siècles entiers. Ce furent ces Arabes qui bâtirent Ispahan, Chiras, Casbin, Cachan, et plusieurs autres grandes villes: les Turcs au contraire n'en ont bâti aucune, et en ont laissé plusieurs tomber en ruine. Les Tartares subjuguèrent deux fois la Perse après le règne des califes arabes, mais ils n'y abolirent point les arts; et quand la famille des Sophis régna, elle y apporta les moeurs douces de l'Arménie, où cette famille avait habité longtemps. Les ouvrages de la main passaient pour être mieux travaillés, plus finis, en Perse qu'en Turquie. Les sciences y avaient de bien plus grands encouragements; point de ville dans laquelle il n'y eût plusieurs collèges fondés où l'on enseignait les belles-lettres. La langue persane plus douce et plus harmonieuse que la turque, a été féconde en poésies agréables. Les anciens Grecs, qui ont été les premiers précepteurs de l'Europe, sont encore ceux des Persans. Ainsi leur philosophie était au seizième et au dix-septième siècles à peu près au même état que la nôtre. [...]

La cour de Perse étalait plus de magnificence que la porte ottomane. On croit lire une relation du temps de Xerxès quand on voit dans nos voyageurs ces chevaux couverts de riches brocards, leurs harnais brillants d'or et de pierreries, et ces quatre mille vases d'or dont parle Chardin, lesquels servaient pour la table du roi de Perse. Les choses communes, et surtout les comestibles, étaient à trois fois meilleur marché à Ispahan et à Constantinople que parmi nous.

²² It is difficult not to consider this a reference to Montesquieu – on this, see below. However, the positive example of Persia already occurs in the 1750 *Dialogue*: p. 89.

Ce prix est la démonstration de l'abondance [...]

Tout ce qu'on nous dit de la Perse nous persuade qu'il n'y avait point de pays monarchique où l'on jouit plus des droits de l'humanité. On s'y était procuré, plus qu'en aucun pays de l'Orient, des ressources contre l'ennui, qui est partout le poison de la vie. On se rassemblait dans des salles immenses qu'on appelait les maisons à café, où les uns prenaient de cette liqueur, qui n'est en usage parmi nous que depuis la fin du dix-septième siècle; les autres jouaient, ou lisaient, ou écoutaient des faiseurs de contes, tandis qu'à un bout de la salle un ecclésiastique prêchait pour quelque argent, et qu'à un autre bout ces espèces d'hommes, qui se sont fait un art de l'amusement des autres, déployaient tous leurs talents. Tout cela annonce un peuple sociable, et tout nous dit qu'il méritait d'être heureux. (*Essai*, II, 771-773)

The beginning of the excerpt is the opening of the chapter, and as such the first sentence stands out even more markedly in emphasising three main aspects of civilisation for Voltaire: the cultivation of the arts, 'mœurs douces', and 'police' or 'politesse'. The remainder of this introductory paragraph elaborates on further aspects of 'civilisé'. Three themes emerge: that of the 'mœurs douces', mentioned twice and linked to the 'police générale'; the encouragement of the sciences and of the arts, mentioned three times, and emphasised with the examples of philosophy, poetry, and *belles-lettres*; and finally that of material advancement, which Voltaire makes sure to link to the artistic and ethical ones. Urbanisation and flourishing cities are again evoked and linked to the arts via the Arabs. Commodities play an important role in the evaluation of what is a more advanced civilisation, and in this case their better quality ('mieux travaillés' and 'plus finis') exemplifies the Persians' superiority over the Turks. Again these instances of purely material advancement are placed in the context of moral and intellectual ones, following on directly from 'mœurs douces' and leading to the sciences. The passage then continues to comment on agriculture and high population numbers, especially in great cities, symptoms of a healthy economy and of a more advanced civilisation.

The excerpt's second paragraph makes a straightforward link between luxury and advanced civilisations. 'Magnificence' is a word frequently used by Voltaire to describe luxury, endowing it with a certain grandeur. Here its link with 'civilisé' is strengthened

by its echo of the chapter's opening sentence ('La Perse était alors plus civilisée que la Turquie;' and 'La cour de Perse étalait plus de magnificence que la porte ottomane.'). The association of luxury and magnificence with grandeur is reinforced via the reference to ancient heroics and Xerxes, which enhances the very evocative description of Persian luxury. What makes the Voltairian Persian culture advanced, however, is that its luxury is not the feudalist kind which required the masses to live in poverty: the population lives a comfortable and well-ordered life (Voltaire continues to argue that in Persia property is inheritable and not subject to any form of despotic intervention) in which 'abondance' ensures pleasant living.

The element of pleasure is most marked in the final paragraph, which paints a snapshot of civilised life. As in the example of Gaul, the precondition seems to be a just legal system, where one can 'jouir des droits de l'humanité'. The choice of 'jouir' in that context already points to the depiction of a lifestyle of enjoyment, intimately bound up with sociability and luxury, which follows. Grandeur, in the form of 'salles immenses', combines with one of the most typical Early Modern luxury items, coffee, to provide the setting for a gathering in which the individual and the sociable, the arts, consumption, religion, and amusements all find their place harmoniously, held together in one single sentence. The image is that of a civilised marketplace, with a wide range of choices available. Here people can chat, enjoy coffee, read, watch artists, listen to story-tellers, or, which to Voltaire was very much the same thing, listen to preachers – and pay for whatever they chose, which in turn allows all to profit, and each to select what affords him most pleasure.²³ In this respect, civilised society, with its underlying imagery of a luxury goods market, resembles Voltaire's own *Essai*, which, in his *Avant-Propos*, he called 'un vaste magasin où vous prendrez ce qui est à votre usage' (I, 196).

²³ It is worth noting that here, as in the *Lettres philosophiques*, but more strongly so, religion has lost its predominant status and been reduced to just one more item of private consumption amongst many.

Voltaire's concept of civilisation, then, has not a single translation or synonym. It consists of a cluster of conditions, which are all interconnected. It is a culture benefiting from a just legal framework and government which allow it to pursue peaceful trade and productivity. It is defined by *bon goût*, and reason, *police* or *politesse*, *moeurs douces*, flourishing arts and sciences, pleasure, and sociability – an urbanised, commercial culture characterised both by enlightened views and material welfare. It is what constitutes the happiness of a nation.²⁴ In this type of civilisation, the modern form of commercial, bourgeois luxury plays a central role in that it provides an alternative to religious fanaticism, and an incentive to make profits, thereby increasing the wealth of all. Through commerce and luxury individual as well as national liberty is strengthened, which in turn encourages artistic and intellectual creation. Cities flourish on the basis of luxury and commerce, and big cities are in constant need of spectacles and theatre.²⁵ All arts 'adoucissent les esprits en les éclairant' (*Siècle*, p. 643); but theatre in particular 'adoucit les moeurs, et conduit à la morale par le plaisir' whilst further increasing sociability in bringing together citizens (*Essai*, II, 169).²⁶ There is a more straightforward connection between luxury and commerce, or 'abondance', and the arts: the *beaux-arts* are the 'marque et le fruit de l'abondance' (*Essai*, II, 466). The necessary has to be provided for before the superfluous can come into being. This is the unifying characteristic of Voltaire's definition of civilisation: the transcendence of the necessary. It stands in opposition to the 'état de pure nature', which he had derided in the *Mondain* and which he qualifies in the *Essai* as the 'premier état d'ignorance et de grossièreté' (I, 202). This was a state where humans had only what was necessary to survive. What makes them civilised is the progress and development towards a state that exceeds mere

²⁴ In the *Siècle*, Voltaire claims that 'un temps heureux pour toutes les nations', is one marked by peace and the cultivation of commerce and the arts (p. 546).

²⁵ Cf. for instance *Siècle*, p. 575.

²⁶ See also *Siècle*, p. 643, praising theatre as animating society and forming the mind.

survival and allows them to transcend that animal-like state. What makes the superfluous so necessary is, as Pomeau already points out, that 'l'homme en échappant au besoin, se soustrait à l'animalité' ('Introduction', p. XLVIII). Thus luxury is on one level with politeness, pleasure, the arts and the sciences: it goes beyond the merely necessary. Its role in Voltaire's philosophy is even more crucial than that. It is the rise of the luxury-driven commercial society that creates the prosperity which provides the basis for this civilising process. The concept of bourgeois, commercial luxury is central to Voltaire's idea of civilised society and the progress towards it.

III.ii Voltaire and Montesquieu

It is almost impossible to discuss Voltaire's later historical writings without reference to Montesquieu. In her introduction to Voltaire's *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Loix de Montesquieu*, Sheila Mason finds that for Voltaire, after the publication of the *Esprit des lois*, 'Montesquieu emerges as an almost obsessional presence, eclipsing even Pascal'.²⁷ Scholars generally consider this presence to be particularly evident in the historical works. Brumfitt stresses Voltaire's preoccupation with the *Esprit des lois*, arguing that after the Bible it is the book Voltaire comments upon most frequently.²⁸ Although aware that Voltaire had read the *Esprit des lois* before completing the *Siècle*, Brumfitt finds no traces of influence there, detecting them more in the *Essai* (ibid., pp. 118-119).²⁹ O'Brien on the other hand claims that 'all of his later histories, whether explicitly or implicitly, represent an engagement with *L'Esprit des lois*' and are evidence of Voltaire's 'intellectual opposition to Montesquieu'.³⁰ For her, this also holds for the *Siècle* which, as a contribution to the debate about the legal-political foundations of French monarchy, about the role of the Franks, and the *thèse royale* versus the *thèse nobiliaire*, is directly engaging with Montesquieu (ibid., p. 33). In both the *Siècle* and the *Essai*, this debate is firmly linked to Voltaire's concept of civilisation and its tributary, modern bourgeois luxury.

Voltaire, Montesquieu, and the *thèse nobiliaire*

In the eighteenth-century debate about the French constitution, 'Germanist' theorists, like the comte Boulainvilliers, were pitted against 'Royalists', such as the abbé Dubos

²⁷ Sheila Mason, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 80B, pp. 209-311 (p. 209).

²⁸ Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian*, p. 116-117.

²⁹ It ought to be said that Brumfitt limits 'influence' to tracing the use of climate determinism in Voltaire.

³⁰ O'Brien, *Enlightenment Narratives*, p. 41.

and the Marquis d'Argenson. The former upheld the *thèse nobiliaire*, arguing that the Franks as conquerors had legally instituted a feudal and aristocratic form of government which thereby established a French constitution upholding the rights and privileges of the aristocracy, particularly in the form of the *parlements*.³¹ Against this, defenders of the absolute power of the king, the adherents of the *thèse royale*, such as the abbé Dubos argued that the Franks were not conquerors but initially servants of the Roman Empire, and that hence constitutionally it was not absolutism but feudalism that was an illegal usurpation.³² Indebted as he may have been to Dubos,³³ Voltaire does not believe in the peaceful take-over theory; for him the Franks were marauding barbarians whose customs should not be allowed to provide the basis for the current French system of government. As a staunch opponent of the French *thèse nobiliaire* he thus pitted himself squarely against Montesquieu. O'Brien summarises the situation as follows:

Montesquieu, as Voltaire realised, represented the most intelligent obstacle to this [the royalist] interpretation since he had successfully combined historical jurisprudence with a sociology of checks and balances. For this reason, in the *Siècle* and the *Essai* and in other works, Voltaire's objective was not so much to refute the Germanist-aristocratic thesis, as to rob it of all political significance. (*Enlightenment Narratives*, p. 39)

Both works do indeed comprise a double argument, against the Franks and feudalist customs on the one hand, and in favour of French absolutist government in the guise of Louis XIV on the other. Feudalism in general and the Franks in particular are posited as the polar opposite to the concept of civilisation Voltaire had elaborated in the two works. The depiction of the Franks as barbarians is particularly evident in the contrast to the Gaulish civilisation cited above. To Voltaire, the feudal government the

³¹ Cf. Henri Boulainvilliers, *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de la France avec XIV Lettres sur les Parlements ou Etats-Generaux* (Amsterdam & La Haye, 1727).

³² Cf. Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie françoise dans les Gaules* (Paris: Osmond, 1734).

³³ For a good overview of Voltaire's use of Dubos and d'Argenson see Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: the poet as realist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 102-109; and for Boulainvilliers and the debate about the *thèse nobiliaire* versus the *thèse royale* more generally see Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 346-350.

Franks were supposed to have instituted was quite simply a form of 'barbarie'. Amongst 'les malheurs mêmes que le gouvernement féodal, trop anarchique, avait partout occasionnés', perhaps its worst crime was that it led to the kind of 'abrutissement qui naît d'une longue servitude', so that in these times one would find neither politeness nor industry, and instead of developing human potential, it kept the majority of the population in an animal-like state of servitude (*Essai*, I, 779). The best summary of Voltaire's utter condemnation of Frankish feudalism appears in his direct attack on Boulainvilliers in the *Siècle's* 'Catalogue des Ecrivains':

Il appelle le gouvernement féodal « le chef-d'œuvre de l'esprit humain ». Il regrette les temps où les peuples, esclaves de petits tyrans ignorants et barbares, n'avaient ni industrie, ni commerce, ni propriété; et il croit qu'une centaine de seigneurs, oppresseurs de la terre et ennemis d'un roi, composaient le plus parfait des gouvernements. (*Siècle*, p. 901)

Frankish feudalism represents the 'anti-civilisation': it is destructive of public peace and tranquility ('anarchique', 'ennemis d'un roi'), of liberty ('opresseurs'); it is despotic and arbitrary ('petits tyrans'); and lacks all the necessary ingredients of the bourgeois commercial civilisation that Voltaire upheld, namely reason ('ignorants'), liberty ('esclaves'), politeness and taste ('barbares'), commerce, industry, and property – not even mentioning culture and the arts and sciences.

To feudalist barbarity Voltaire opposes Louis XIV as a representation of this new kind of commercial civilisation. Contradictory as this might seem at first glance, it was an absolute king whom Voltaire chose to represent as the unifying symbol of the rise of bourgeois civilisation. Voltaire presented what O'Brien rightly terms a 'bourgeois-royal narrative', in which 'monarchy' and 'modernity' were firmly linked (*Enlightenment Narratives*, pp. 39-40). According to Voltaire, the *tiers état* or as he sometimes called it 'cet état mitoyen', which through its involvement in commerce and industry 'fait la richesse d'une nation' (*Essai*, I, 760-761), is firmly supportive of the king and opposed

to the obstructive aristocracy which limits progress through privilege. Voltaire uses the struggle between king and *parlements* in the seventeenth century to emphasise that the 'nation' was opposed to the churches' demands as expressed in the *Parlement*, and to conclude that in general 'la raison' and 'la cause du peuple' demand the king be unimpeded by self-interested bodies (*Siècle*, pp.763-764). Reason, which was beginning to blossom in the bourgeois commercial societies, was firmly on the side of absolute monarchy and opposed to feudalist limits on his power: 'cet esprit philosophique, qui a gagné presque toutes les conditions, excepté le bas peuple, a beaucoup contribué à faire valoir les droits des souverains' (*Siècle*, p. 723).

As so often in Voltaire, his support of absolutist rule in France was pragmatic rather than ideological: absolute monarchs in countries like France were most likely to foster the new enlightened civilisation he wished to see.³⁴ Using the example of Louis XIV, Voltaire was able to show the connection between monarchy, the arts and sciences, luxury, and politeness. The connection is rather Mandevillian in spirit. A monarch's self-interest, or rather self-love, will compel him to seek *gloire*. According to Voltaire, in modern times the 'gloire de l'Etat' coincides with the 'délices des particuliers' and squarely defined as 'the arts' (*Siècle*, p. 755). Indeed, the statement follows from Voltaire's summary of the progress of the arts, of music, architecture, painting, sculpture, art medals, engravings, and surgery in the chapter in question (chapter XXX), and of literature, poetry, drama, and philosophy in the preceding one. Louis is the ideal ruler. He is the protector and friend of all men – and women³⁵ – of great talent, taking

³⁴ For the classic account of Voltaire's political pragmatism see Gay's *Voltaire's Politics*.

³⁵ As one might expect, in endorsing modern luxury, Voltaire also applauded the increasing influence of women as a hallmark of progress and civilisation. He claims that women have transformed Parisian society into 'écoles de politesse' (*Siècle*, p. 700). Including several female writers in his *Catalogue*, he states that '[l]e nombre des dames qui ont illustré ce beau siècle est une des grandes preuves des progrès de l'esprit humain' (p. 933).

their advice and encouraging them.³⁶ The promotion of their creations and the numerous spectacles and amusements with which he delighted the public 'perfectionnaient en France le goût, la politesse et les talents' (p. 596). His role as the 'civiliser' of the French is what makes him the real hero of Voltaire's piece. He recaptures the glory of the Roman golden age: Colbert is 'Mécène' (p. 751), which by association makes Louis XIV, friend and protector of the greatest artists of his time, Augustus. And yet he is a thoroughly modern hero as well. His direct and personal patronage is in line with the spirit of the new commercial civilisation combining the arts and sciences, and material progress in the form of commerce and manufacture. In a letter to Lord Hervey he summarises the reasons for Louis's greatness, concluding his eulogy as follows:

Il donnait à Quinault le sujet de ses opéra; il dirigeait les peintures de le Brun; il soutenait Corneille & Racine contre leurs ennemis; il encourageait les arts utiles comme les beaux arts, & toujours en connaissance de cause; il prêtait de l'argent à Vanrobez pour établir des manufactures; il avançait des millions à la compagnie des Indes qu'il avait formée; il donnait des pensions aux savants, & aux braves officiers. Non seulement il s'est fait des grandes choses sous son règne, mais c'est lui qui les faisait. (D2216, c. 1 June 1740)³⁷

Given how closely Voltaire's espousal of the *thèse royale* was linked to his advocacy of a bourgeois civilisation based on commerce, luxury, politeness, and the arts and sciences, it is unsurprising that he should be so opposed to Montesquieu's thought, especially bearing in mind that Voltaire had gone to some length in the *Essai* to prove that the fall of Rome had not in any way been caused by the growth of luxury and commerce, a thesis at least partially upheld in Montesquieu's *Considerations*.³⁸

³⁶ After enumerating all the great French writers and thinkers of the seventeenth century, Voltaire stresses that '[t]ous ces grands hommes furent connus et protégés de Louis XIV'. (*Siècle*, p. 742) Voltaire, failed educator of princes, must have been particularly pleased to have inserted an anecdote in which Racine's *Britannicus* teaches the king the inappropriateness of dancing in public, so that Voltaire was able to conclude: 'le poète réforma le monarque.' (p. 607). What better illustration of perfect kingship could there be for one like Voltaire?

³⁷ Note again the reference to Voltaire's and du Châtelet's apparently favourite example, Van Robais. Cf. chapter 2.

³⁸ Montesquieu's *Considerations*, first published in 1734, argue that Rome began to be corrupted by luxury relatively early and was only able to persist because its citizens cultivated neither commerce nor the arts and thus military virtue could be preserved for longer: Montesquieu, *Considerations sur*

However, Montesquieu was not a target in the *Siècle*. As evident in the quotation above, Voltaire attacked Boulainvilliers for his defence of the feudalist and German-aristocratic tradition, and once again censured Fénelon, this time for his criticism of Louis XIV, especially of Louis' luxury.³⁹ Neither the first edition of the *Siècle* nor that of the *Essai* make any direct negative references to Montesquieu. All points that might be construed as critiques of Montesquieu's arguments, such as claiming that Rome did not decline because of luxury or that it is wholly mistaken to call China 'despotic', are made without any direct reference to Montesquieu. Rather than any attacks or criticisms, and much like the 1750 *Remerciement sincère à un homme charitable*, written in defence of Montesquieu after the attacks of the Jansenist journal the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, the entry on Montesquieu that Voltaire added to the *Siècle's Catalogue des Ecrivains* in 1756 was almost entirely laudatory. Voltaire points out some factual errors in the *Esprit des lois* and partly criticises its methodology, but he posits it as one of the great achievements of the modern age, and concludes his unusually long entry by firmly associating Montesquieu with the party of the *philosophes*:

Il n'y a guère d'ouvrages où il y ait plus d'esprit, plus d'idées profondes, plus de choses hardies, et où l'on trouve plus à s'instruire, soit en approuvant ses opinions, soit en les combattant. On doit le mettre au rang des livres originaux qui ont illustré le siècle de Louis XIV, et qui n'ont aucun modèle dans l'antiquité. Il est mort en 1755, en philosophe, comme il avait vécu. (*Siècle*, p. 1161)

And yet Voltaire's pronouncements on Montesquieu change. The later editions of both the *Essai* and the *Siècle* include direct attacks on him, in both text and notes. In

les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence, ed. by Catherine Volpilhac-Augier and Catherine Larrère (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), especially chapter 10, 'De la corruption des Romains', pp. 131-134.

³⁹ It ought to be said, however, that he was mostly laudatory of Fénelon, and despite mocking him for claiming that the superfluous was destroying the necessary, he maintains that it was only his contemporaries who chose to read his *Télémaque* as a direct satire or attack on Louis, without evidence of Fénelon's actual intentions (*Siècle*, pp. 731-734). In Voltaire's depiction Fénelon emerges as a well-meaning dreamer, 'romanesque' in both his religious and political views (p. 857), '[p]lein de la lecture des Anciens, et né avec une imagination vive et tendre' (p. 732), whose maxims are 'un peu austères' and 'plus approchantes de la république de Platon que de la manière dont il faut gouverner les hommes' (pp. 856-85), but who, despite his mistaken ideas, is ultimately characterised by honesty and modesty which allowed him to live out his life in a 'retraite philosophique et honorable' (p. 858).

1761 he added several paragraphs to the *Essai*'s 'Résumé' strongly opposing a whole host of Montesquieu's assertions and theories. Three of these additions name him directly. Firstly, Voltaire ridicules him for claiming that the European population has dwindled since Roman times (II, 811).⁴⁰ He then censures him for mistakenly claiming that there were no republics in Asia (II, 807), and finally dismisses his entire theory of geographical determinism, concluding: 'Il est bien délicat de chercher les raisons physiques des gouvernements; mais surtout il ne faut pas chercher la raison de ce qui n'est point' (II, 807). Other additions do not explicitly mention Montesquieu, but especially in the context of these new criticisms, which have named him, most readers would not fail to recognise the reference when Voltaire refers to the 'quelques dissertateurs qui accommodent tout à leurs idées' who against all evidence claim that republics are more virtuous and happier than monarchies (II, 805), or when he denies the overriding influence of climate on a people's spirit, placing it instead on par with the influence of religion and government (II, 806). This change in attitude from praise for a fellow *philosophe* to direct attacks in a major work, remains unexplained. The most common assumption is that Voltaire turned against Montesquieu when the latter was being used in defence of the *parlements*' privileges.⁴¹ This is certainly true of Voltaire's *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois* written and published in the 1770s when the *Esprit des lois* was used to argue the case of the *parlements* against Maupeou's reforms. The

⁴⁰ This claim would annoy Voltaire most strongly, since parts of both the *Siècle* and the *Essai* were devoted to proving that thanks to the developing bourgeois commercial society modern Europe was superior to antiquity. Note especially the passages that follow from his depiction of the 'new' kind of luxury: after his description of the new, interior luxury and 'art de vivre' that has replaced the 'vaine pompe et le faste extérieur' as cited above, Voltaire continues: 'L'extrême facilité introduite dans le commerce du monde, l'affabilité, la simplicité, la culture d'esprit, ont fait de Paris une ville qui, pour la douceur de la vie, l'emporte probablement beaucoup sur Rome et sur Athènes, dans le temps de leur splendeur.' (*Siècle*, p. 701). Just before attacking Montesquieu on this score he indeed points out that Europe these days 'est incomparablement plus peuplée, plus civilisée, plus riche, plus éclairée' and that Europe thus was 'beaucoup supérieure à ce qu'était l'empire romain' (*Essai*, II, 811).

⁴¹ In a recent study James Hanrahan sets out to reassess the commonly held view of Voltaire's strong dislike of the *parlements*, but after a detailed study of all the available evidence he concludes that 'the argument I set about disproving, namely, that Voltaire and the parlement are avowed enemies, is actually confirmed': James Hanrahan, *Voltaire and the "parlements" of France*, *SVEC* 2009:06, p. 246.

accusation of self-interested reasoning levelled at Montesquieu in the *Commentaire* concerning the sale of offices shows how, at least partially, the latter had mutated in Voltaire's mind from a fellow *philosophe* into a self-interested member of the forces of reaction.⁴² However, the same charge is made by Voltaire almost ten years earlier in the *A,B,C* and rather more strongly so. The *Commentaire* only hints at the motive of self-interest ('l'ingénieux', 'indigne de lui') when it piously exclaims: 'La fonction divine de rendre justice, de disposer de la fortune et de la vie des hommes, un métier de famille! De quelles raisons l'ingénieux auteur soutient-il une thèse si indigne de lui?' (XXVIII: p. 362) The earlier work is much more direct:

Il est vrai que Montesquieu a la faiblesse de dire que la vénalité des charges est bonne dans les États monarchiques. Que voulez-vous? il était président à mortier en province. [...] Il est bien difficile à l'esprit le plus philosophique de ne pas payer son tribut à l'amour-propre. Si un épicier parlait de législation, il voudrait que tout le monde achetât de la cannelle et de la muscade.⁴³

Most of the criticisms made in the *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois* are in fact taken from earlier works, notably the 1768 *ABC* and the 1765 *Idées républicaines*.⁴⁴ To a degree they can already be found in the additions to the *Essai* from 1761 onwards. Voltaire's change in attitude to Montesquieu can thus not be attributed to his use by the pro-*parlement* faction in the 1770s debate surrounding Maupeou's proposed reforms. Sheila Mason argues that the turning point was Montesquieu's death, that by the time Voltaire added the *Catalogue* entry he had privately already become more critical, and that '[t]he precipitating factor may possibly have been the appearance of the corrected and revised edition of the *Lois* in the wake of Montesquieu's death'.⁴⁵ Situating the

⁴² Voltaire, *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois de Montesquieu*, OCV vol. 80B, XXVIII: pp. 362-363.

⁴³ Voltaire, *L'A, B, C, ou Dialogues Entre A, B, C; Traduit de l'anglais de M. Huet*, Moland, vol. 27, 311-400 (325).

⁴⁴ Gay has made a convincing case arguing that the *Idées* were published in 1765 and not as it is often claimed in 1763. This also corresponds to Grimm's comments on the work in the *Correspondance littéraire* of January 1766. Cf. 'The Date of Voltaire's *Idées républicaines*', published as an appendix to *Voltaire's Politics*, pp. 346-351.

⁴⁵ Mason, 'Introduction' to the *Commentaire*, p. 218.

change of opinion in the later 1750s may well be correct, but whilst this pinpoints a time it does not explain the reason for this development. Another factor must have been at play to make Voltaire change his allegiance so drastically.

Voltaire, Montesquieu, and the luxury debate

Traditionally, Montesquieu has been considered as one of the advocates of luxury and commerce in France. In his classic account, Hirschman names him as the most influential exponent of the *doux commerce* thesis.⁴⁶ He devotes a chapter to Montesquieu, representing him as one of the foremost advocates of commerce, which is seen as promoting peace amongst nations and politeness in societies, by pitting men's self interest (for instance profit through commerce) against their passions (for instance their impulse to act aggressively) and ensuring that the interests would inhibit the passions (ibid., pp. 70-81). This 'Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine' is discussed in similar terms by Pierre Force.⁴⁷ Berry, though devoting less space to Montesquieu, also cites Hirschman and ranges the *philosophe* under the 'doux commerce' heading, under which commerce is seen as leading to softer manners and greater peace.⁴⁸ These points are indeed made in the *Esprit des Lois* which provides many instances of praise for commerce and luxury that were much in line with Voltaire's arguments. In book VII, on sumptuary laws, he links luxury to cities and to women;⁴⁹ in book XX, on commerce, he claims that commerce led to 'moeurs douces', eradicated prejudices, led to peace both amongst individuals and amongst nations (II, 2-4 (XX,i-ii)), and while '[l]e commerce

⁴⁶ Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: a genealogy of economic science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 150-152.

⁴⁸ Christopher J. Berry, *The idea of luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 146-147.

⁴⁹ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, ed. by Robert Derathé, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1973), I, 105 - 122 (VII).

corrompt les moeurs pures [...] il polit et adoucit les moeurs barbares' (II, 2 (XX,i)). All these are terms Voltaire himself uses to defend commerce and luxury. When Montesquieu states that '[I]'effet du commerce sont les richesses ; la suite des richesses, le luxe ; celle du luxe, la perfection des arts' (II, 22 (XXI, vi)), Voltaire would certainly have agreed.

These are not, however, the only instances where Montesquieu analyses luxury and commerce. Unfortunately, since Hirschman's account has been so convincing overall, it has served to obscure many ambiguities in Montesquieu's thought. Montesquieu's claim, cited above, that while commerce improved barbarian manners it did corrupt pure morals, already hints at the very equivocal status of commerce and luxury in Montesquieu's philosophy. Roger Boesche is one of the few scholars to pick up on this. In his article 'Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism' he reveals some of the anxieties Montesquieu expressed about both luxury and commerce, and which ultimately led to contradictions in the *Esprit de Lois*, for instance the claim that luxury strengthens as well as undermines monarchies. While one can certainly question whether these anxieties led Montesquieu to formulate an implicit second theory of despotism, one, as Boesche claims, 'that depends not on fear, but on pleasure to solidify the servitude of its subjects',⁵⁰ his insights provide an excellent counterbalance to Hirschman's dominant assertions, which place Montesquieu squarely amongst the supporters of commercial luxury. Galliani is aware of these tendencies in Montesquieu's thought and is perhaps the only scholar to point out their relevance in the relationship between Montesquieu and Voltaire. Studying Voltaire's marginal notes on his copies of the *Esprit des lois*, he focuses on what he considers the 'débat capital qui s'est produit au XVIII siècle sur les vertus frugales de l'antiquité, sur

⁵⁰ Roger Boesche, 'Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism', *The Western Political Quarterly*, 43 (1990), 741-746 (p. 751).

les dangers ou avantages du luxe, du commerce, des arts, etc.', or in short on what is now generally referred to as 'the luxury debate'.⁵¹ Whilst again trying to split the luxury debate along tripartite lines, into nobility, upper bourgeoisie, and petite bourgeoisie who, like Rousseau, take up the rhetoric of the reactionary nobility (ibid., pp. 9-10),⁵² he makes some valuable observations about Montesquieu's changing attitude to commerce and luxury, and Voltaire's awareness of this: 'Il est clair pour nous que Montesquieu s'est aligné sur les positions conservatrices par la façon dont il parle de l'antiquité.' Montesquieu's observations on luxury in republics and in the Roman Empire are meant to have contemporary resonance. 'Voltaire', Galliani concludes, 'décèle la polémique sous-jacente et répond en conséquence' (pp. 10-11).⁵³

Galliani is right. Voltaire is very much aware of these tendencies, as evidenced in his annotation to his copy of Montesquieu's *Considérations*. The copy is a 1750 edition, which suggests that the 1750s and 60s are indeed the period in which Voltaire became more interested in – and more doubtful about – Montesquieu. Whilst he makes the usual criticisms about Montesquieu's style and method, in particular about his 'gullibility' and lack of care when it came to historical sources, the main disagreements are centred on luxury and commerce. This is not to say that Voltaire disregarded the other aspects of the work: he praises some sentiments and analyses, but again criticises climate and geographical determinism and Montesquieu's views on Asian despotism.⁵⁴ Most of his criticism is however reserved for the depiction of the role of luxury in Rome and for Montesquieu's theories on commerce in republics. Voltaire's finds it 'très

⁵¹ Renato Galliani, 'Quelques notes inédites de Voltaire à l'Esprit des lois', *SVEC*, 163 (1976), 7-18 (7-8).

⁵² On this division see especially Renato Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire: étude socio-historique*, *SVEC* 268 (1989).

⁵³ Galliani detects a change in Montesquieu's attitude to commerce and luxury from the *Lettres persanes* to the *Esprit des Lois*, which he explains by the fact that when the former was written '[l]e pouvoir de la grande bourgeoisie financière et commerçante ne s'est point encore révélé comme une menace mortelle pour l'ordre ancien.' (p. 11)

⁵⁴ That he picks up on these again shows that he read the *Considérations*, in light of the *Esprit des Lois*.

peu probable' that riches lead to decadence and corruption in general, calls Montesquieu's claim that 'l'opulence est dans les mœurs' an 'expression louche', and refutes his claim that luxury was on a dramatic increase, exemplified by Montesquieu with the steep price rise of a private villa, by citing both added-value through improvements and possible monetary inflation as reasons.⁵⁵ He also opposes Montesquieu's view of republics, by countering his claim that republics are small states, relying on mediocrity and strict discipline with the example of Venice, sometimes strengthening this by evoking Amsterdam and the Swiss republics as well (V, 710, 715-717, and 721-722). He makes the same criticisms about the *Esprit des Lois* in marginal notes in his two copies of the work, and takes these up in the *Idées républicaines*, the *A.B.C.*, and in the *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois*. To avoid repetitiveness I will focus on these rather than on the less substantial notes on the *Considérations*.

The *Idées républicaines*, the *A.B.C.*, and the *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois* all follow the same strategy. Whilst praising Montesquieu for his good intentions, they seek to discredit him as an authority.⁵⁶ This was of course particularly useful when, as in the case of the *pro-parlementaires*, Montesquieu was used for backing up views very much opposed to Voltaire's own. Pursuing this strategy Voltaire questioned both Montesquieu's style and his factual accuracy. Concerning his style, Voltaire likes to echo Mme du Deffant's *bon mot* that the book was more 'de l'Esprit sur les lois' than anything else,⁵⁷ and complains about unnecessary digressions, 'saillies d'esprit', and

⁵⁵ Voltaire, *Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire*, 6 vols (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, and Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1979-), V, 708-726 (709 and 717).

⁵⁶ The sentiment expressed at the end of the *Idées républicaines* is echoed almost verbatim in the later two works: 'Malgré ses défauts, cet ouvrage doit être toujours cher aux hommes, parce que l'auteur a dit sincèrement ce qu'il pense [...] Il a partout fait souvenir les hommes qu'ils sont libres; il présente à la nature humaine ses titres, qu'elle a perdus dans la plus grande partie de la terre; il combat la superstition; il inspire la morale.' Voltaire, *Idées républicaines par un membre d'un corps*, Moland, vol. 24, 413-432 (Idée LXII p. 431). Cf. *A.B.C.*, pp. 321-322; *Commentaire*, pp. 314 and 397-98.

⁵⁷ Voltaire first uses the expression he duly attributes to her in a letter to the duc d'Uzès in September 1751 (D4569). He seems to appreciate it greatly and repeats it to Mme Dupin in January 1761 (D9559), to d'Alembert (D11709), to Panckoucke (D20565), and to Gin (D20702) amongst many

inappropriate similies or metaphors (*Idées*, p. 430 (LX-LXI); *Commentaire*, p. 329 (vi); *ABC*, p. 321). More importantly, Voltaire dwells on Montesquieu's factual errors: his anecdote about Christopher Columbus' rejection by François I,⁵⁸ his mistaken claim that Holland consisted of fifty independent republics (*Commentaire*, p. 379 (xxxvii)), his doubtful geographical information about Persia (*ABC*, p. 315), and what Voltaire feels are misquotations of Richelieu's *Testament politique* which Voltaire claimed was a fake anyway.⁵⁹ The last is part of what Voltaire depicted as his opponent's most systematic failing, namely wrong citations and bad use of evidence: 'Ce qui est encore révoltant pour un lecteur un peu instruit, c'est que presque partout les citations sont fausses; il prend presque toujours son imagination pour sa mémoire' (*ABC*, p. 316). Hence, according to Voltaire, he misunderstands Plutarch enough to claim that all Greeks are gay and misogynist (*Idées*, p. 428 (LIII); *Commentaire*, pp. 352-353 and p. 377 (xxi and xxxvi); *ABC*, p. 317), and his misreadings of Paul Ricaut's accounts produce a completely incorrect picture of Turkish government (*Idées*, p. 428 (LIV); *Commentaire*, p. 339 (xiii); *ABC*, p. 317). In fact, according to Voltaire, Montesquieu is generally wrong about Muslim and Asian cultures in general and about despotism in particular. This is part of his wider criticism of Montesquieu's philosophy. Voltaire gives numerous examples of why both geographical and climate determinism do not work,⁶⁰ and strongly opposes Montesquieu's division and principles of governments. According to him a 'dépot des lois' is not only necessary in monarchies, nor virtue only in republics, they are required in all forms of government (*Commentaire*, pp. 364-366 (xx); *ABC*, p. 320). Likewise, he utterly disagrees with the division between monarchies and

others. He also quotes her on this in the *Commentaire*, p. 348 (xx).

⁵⁸ This was indeed one of Montesquieu's more unfortunate mistakes given that when Columbus set out on his first voyages, François had not even been born: *Idées*, p. 429 (LVI); *Commentaire*, p. 380 (xxxviii); *ABC*, p. 348.

⁵⁹ It was not a fake at all, but Voltaire remained convinced. *Idées*, p. 427 (LII); *ABC*, p. 316.

⁶⁰ *ABC*, p. 316. The *Commentaire* devotes a whole section to the question of climate and its influence, pp. 405-411.

despotism. Following the traditional Aristotelian categorisation, Voltaire maintains that they are one and the same thing, despotism being simply the corruption of monarchical government, which he seeks to prove by elaborating on the etymological origin of the word 'despot'.⁶¹ These examples are important because, although Voltaire touches on other topics, such as the nature of British government, the role of theft in Sparta, and in the *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois* particularly – and predictably – the role of the Franks,⁶² the two points he perhaps dwells on most are Montesquieu's characterisations of despotism and republics.

To both modern scholars and contemporary readers it is and was fairly obvious why Voltaire expended so much energy on countering Montesquieu's theory of despotism. It is, and was, obvious to them that when Voltaire maintained that both monarchies and despotisms were identical in that they were the government of one man only, when he claimed that all monarchies were always limited if not *de iure* then at least *de facto* and that they differed from feudal or aristocratic rule in that they did *not* need intermediary powers, and when he roundly dismissed all of Montesquieu's claims about the nature of Asian despotism, he was not talking about Asia or Muslim cultures, he was talking about France and the constitutional debates taking place there. What contemporaries would also have been aware of, but what modern scholars mostly ignore, is the context for his second set of assertions concerning the nature of republics. And this context also explains why Voltaire became so much more outspoken against Montesquieu from the late 1750s onwards.

Just as Voltaire held up ancient Persia and China against Montesquieu's image of

⁶¹ *ABC*, p. 323; *Commentaire*, pp. 320-324 (iii and iv). Sheila Mason points out that Voltaire takes the etymological argument from Gin: Mason, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 80B, 276-277.

⁶² This was particularly relevant for the constitutional debates of the 1770s and in the *Commentaire* Voltaire dedicates two sections to this, 'Des Franks' and 'Clovis' (pp. 417-431).

despotism, he held up Venice, and to a certain degree Amsterdam, against Montesquieu's depiction of republics. The two *philosophes'* views of republican society were diametrically opposed. The principle underlying republics according to Montesquieu was virtue. Republican societies had to be egalitarian, disciplined, and frugal, hence any form of luxury needed to be banned from them, since '[à] mesure que le luxe s'établit dans une république l'esprit se tourne vers l'intérêt particulier.'⁶³ His republics are along the ancient model, in particular that of early Rome and in this context the aversion to luxury was particularly pronounced: 'le luxe en [des républiques] est banni, et avec lui la corruption et les vices' (I, 114 (VII.ix)). Voltaire on the other hand proposed a modern, commercial model of republics. In this view of the functioning of republics, the principle was self-interest, and the self-interests of all citizens combined would balance each other out. Virtue had no part in the running of the republic, save for the self-interested desire to be honoured, which was part of human nature and hence part of any form of political society. The most detailed statement of this is in the *Commentaire*, but the *Idées* and the *A.B.C.* express the same view.

Vous me parlez sans cesse de monarchie fondée sur l'honneur, et de république fondée sur la vertu. Je vous dis hardiment qu'il y a dans tous les gouvernements de la vertu et de l'honneur.

Je vous dis que la vertu n'a eu nulle part à l'établissement ni d'Athènes, ni de Rome, ni de Saint-Marin, ni de Raguse, ni de Genève. On se met en république quand on le peut. Alors l'ambition, la vanité, l'intérêt de chaque citoyen, veille sur l'intérêt, la vanité, l'ambition de son voisin; chacun obéit volontiers aux lois pour lesquelles il a donné son suffrage [...] Il n'y a là aucune vertu. Quand Genève secoua le joug de son comte et de son évêque, la vertu ne se mêla point de cette aventure. Si Raguse est libre, qu'elle n'en rende point grâce à la vertu, mais à vingt-cinq mille écus d'or qu'elle paye tous les ans à la Porte-Ottomane. Que Saint-Marin remercie le pape de sa situation, de sa petitesse, de sa pauvreté. [...] je ne vois pas que les Romains fussent plus vertueux en chassant Tarquin le Superbe que les Anglais ne l'ont été en renvoyant Jacques II. Je ne conçois pas même qu'un Grison, ou un bourgeois de Zug, doive avoir plus de vertu qu'un homme domicilié à Paris ou à Madrid. (*Commentaire*, pp. 364-366 (xxix))⁶⁴

⁶³ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois*, I, 108 (Book VII, chapter ii).

⁶⁴ Cf. the *A.B.C.* which makes the same point about the balance of interests which underlies and preserves governments: 'On n'a jamais assurément formé des républiques par vertu. L'intérêt public s'est opposé à la domination d'un seul; l'esprit de propriété, l'ambition de chaque particulier, ont été un frein à l'ambition et à l'esprit de rapine. L'orgueil de chaque citoyen a veillé sur l'orgueil de son voisin. Personne n'a voulu être l'esclave de la fantaisie d'un autre. Voilà ce qui établit une république, et ce qui la conserve.' (p. 322).

Hence the *Idées'* claim that all a republic needs are laws regulating and balancing individuals'

If virtue played no vital role in maintaining republican government, commerce and luxury could do no harm.⁶⁵ Hence Voltaire stresses that Montesquieu was very much mistaken in seeing commerce and its corollary luxury, as dangerous to republics. In both the *Idées* and the *A.B.C.* he emphasises that Montesquieu is wrong in claiming the Greek republics despised and outlawed commerce and that instead, with the exception of Sparta they practised it assiduously (*Idées*, p. 429 (LV); *ABC*, p. 318). In the *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois* he denies Montesquieu's claim that the laws in Venice forbade the nobility to trade, claiming that instead the laws positively encouraged them to engage in commerce (xlvi: p. 399).

The debate about the nature of republics, especially about their relationship to luxury and commerce was very important to Voltaire. It was not an abstract argument about Venice and the general principles of republican societies. Just as Asian governments previously, Venice was a smokescreen. What was at stake was Voltaire's own involvement in the republic in which, and next to which, he lived: Geneva. In Geneva the debate about luxury, commerce, and the merits of the arts and sciences, in particular of the theatre, had been raging since the publication of d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* article 'Genève' in 1757 and Rousseau's response of 1758. In both works of the 1760s, the *A.B.C.* and the *Idées républicaines*, one sentence is word for word repeated: 'Ce livre défectueux est plein de choses admirables, dont on a fait de détestables copies' (*Idées*, p. 431 (LXI); *ABC*, p. 321). Just as in the 1770s the 'real enemy' was not Montesquieu but those using his arguments, and in the 1760s

ambitions (*Idée* XIV, p. 416).

⁶⁵ Not that Voltaire would have agreed with the underlying argument that luxury was corrupting. But for the sake of convincing a majority of readers, including those for whom virtue had to be austere and egalitarian, Voltaire did not question this link in any of the three works. The context of the debate will explain Voltaire's motivations for this reticence.

Montesquieu's arguments were being used by one of Voltaire's arch-nemeses: Rousseau. The *Idées républicaines* were written for and about Geneva and they criticise two writers jointly: Montesquieu and Rousseau – the latter, unlike the former, not deserving to be referred to by name, only as 'l'auteur du Contrat social'. The reason that Voltaire turned against Montesquieu from the late 1750s onwards was that he became associated with Rousseau, who made many of the same arguments, often invoking him directly. The additions to the *Essai*, the *Idées*, as well as the *A.B.C.* treat both thinkers together, and when Voltaire attacks Rousseau in the *Idées*, it is for the very points that he also opposes in the *Esprit des Lois*. Remark XXX for instance reads:

On dit, dans ce même Contrat social, que 'la monarchie ne convient qu'aux nations opulentes; l'aristocratie, aux États médiocres en richesse ainsi qu'en grandeur; la démocratie, aux États petits et pauvres'.

Mais, au XIVe, au XVe, et au commencement du XVIe, les Vénitiens étaient le seul peuple riche: ils ont encore beaucoup d'opulence; cependant Venise n'a jamais été et ne sera jamais une monarchie. La république romaine fut très-riche depuis les Scipions jusqu'à César. Lucques est petite et peu riche, et est une aristocratie; l'opulente et ingénieuse Athènes était un État démocratique. (*Idées*, p. 419 (XXX))

Voltaire's critique is directed at precisely the same points as in his answer to Montesquieu. He refuses to dissociate democracy and riches – his choice of 'opulence' hints at more than riches, too. In his mind republics can prosper with both luxury or opulence and the arts and sciences – the 'ingénieuse Athènes' was after all the cradle of western theatre, literature, and philosophy. Montesquieu's arguments, when taken up by Rousseau, became much more dangerous to Voltaire, as they concerned *his* role in Geneva, *his* theatre productions, and *his* luxurious parties. Like most passages Voltaire cites in the *Idées*, this one was taken from book III of the *Contrat social*, which sets out the different forms of governments and their principles – and which is very much inspired by Montesquieu. Indeed chapter viii of book III of the *Contrat social*, from which Voltaire's above quotation is taken, opens with the words:

La liberté n'étant pas un fruit de tous les Climats, n'est pas à la portée de tous les peuples. Plus on médite ce principe établi par Montesquieu, plus on en sent la vérité. Plus on le conteste, plus on donne occasion de l'établir par de nouvelles

preuves.⁶⁶

Voltaire would not have been happy. Montesquieu was back, climate determinism was back, and with them were arguments in favour of austere republics, of Geneva as *the* austere republic.

From the late 1750s onwards Voltaire's apology for luxury was under attack, again. When, in the 1761 addition to the *Essai*'s 'Résumé', he criticises Montesquieu for claiming that Europe in Antiquity was more populated – and hence superior – to the modern Europe characterised by bourgeois commercial society he had eulogised, the full quotation is as follows:

C'est une idée digne seulement des plaisanteries des *Lettres persanes*, ou de ces nouveaux paradoxes, non moins frivoles, quoique débités d'un ton plus sérieux, de prétendre que l'Europe soit dépeuplée depuis le temps des anciens Romains. (II, 811)

To explain what these 'nouveaux paradoxes' might be, Pomeau inserts a footnote which simply reads: 'Ceux de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.' The link between Rousseau and Montesquieu, and the contemporary situation in Geneva explain why Voltaire suddenly began to attack the latter from the late 1750s onwards. Rousseau had brought Montesquieu back to haunt him. The question of luxury, particularly where it concerned Geneva, which both *philosophes* called their home, strongly opposed Rousseau and Voltaire. Given how crucial these topics were to the theory of civilisation and progress that Voltaire had developed in the *Essai* and the *Siècle*, and which underlay all of his philosophy, it can come as no surprise that Voltaire would react strongly to any critique of these – especially one involving one of his most famous fellow-*philosophes*, Montesquieu.

⁶⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, ed. by Bruno Bernardi (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 117.

IV VOLTAIRE ROUSSEAUISTE ?

IV.i Voltaire's later poetry on luxury

It would seem that in Voltaire's thought on luxury, everything leads to an epic confrontation with Rousseau. Rousseau did not only, as argued in the preceding chapter, employ Montesquieu's theories to set them against a Voltairian stance on opulence and material progress, he also brought to the fore other figures in connection with his critique of luxury, writers whom Voltaire presumed he had laid to rest. Mark Hulliung points out that in his attack on the notions of civilisation and progress, Rousseau employed many Pascalian propositions, in particular the critique of amusement as alienation, which Voltaire had thought to have discredited decades previously.¹ In complete agreement with Judith Shklar, Patrick Riley sees Fénelon and Locke as the two major influences and poles of Rousseau's thought, Locke providing the axis of voluntarism and Fénelon the critique of luxury and passion-driven modernity.² Rousseau also relied on the arguments of another writer who had left Voltaire uneasy, and whom he had felt the need to correct: Mandeville. Adam Smith felt the connection was striking: 'Whoever reads this last work [Rousseau's Second Discourse] with attention will observe that the Second volume of the *Fable of the Bees* has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau.'³ Smith also judged that Rousseau's theses, less obviously satirical than Mandeville, would have to be taken more seriously, that they attained the

¹ Mark Hulliung, 'Rousseau, Voltaire, and the Revenge of Pascal' in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 57-77. See also Mark Hulliung, *The autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the philosophes* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), especially pp. 10-15.

² Patrick Riley, 'Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns' in *Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, pp. 78-93.

³ Adam Smith, 'A Letter to the Author of the *Edinburgh Review*', in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. by William P. Wightman, J. C. Bryce, Ian S. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 11.

level of the greatest philosophers such as Plato. And yet, even Smith seems to have felt some unease at their apparent radicalism, at the fact that they went 'a little too far': '[T]he principles and ideas of the profligate Mandeville seem in him to have all the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato, and to be only the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far' (p. 12).

Given the central place of progress and luxury in Voltaire's thought, any well-argued attack on these concepts could be a serious threat to his thought and reputation, particularly if it brought into play both Pascal, Fénelon, Mandeville, and Montesquieu, the main figures Voltaire had wrestled with in the elaboration of his philosophy of civilisation. Add to this the contemporaries' perception of Voltaire's and Rousseau's diametrically opposed roles,⁴ and it will leave readers rather startled to find certain scholars speaking of a Rousseauian turn in Voltaire's view of luxury. The argument was first made in an article entitled 'Voltaire Rousseauiste?' in 1967.⁵ The short piece mainly relies on citations from Voltaire's correspondence which are taken out of context and read at face value, disregarding irony, changes of opinion over time, and Voltaire's ever varying use of masks and roles. It comes to the conclusion that Voltaire developed a strong dislike of Paris, expressed in Rousseauian terms – alienation, selfishness, vacuousness, interminable pursuit of wealth and false pleasures, wearing of masks, hypocrisy, corruption – and instead developed an equally Rousseauian appreciation of Geneva as the city of tolerance, naturalness, simplicity, honesty, as an ideal human community. Ages is right in that Paris was a frequent subject of attacks in his

⁴ The best depiction of this is to be found in a 1762 engraving showing Voltaire and Rousseau as the incarnations of civilisation versus nature, engaged in a fistfight. The image is reproduced and discussed in Samuel S. B. Taylor, 'Public awareness of the Voltaire-Rousseau quarrel: the iconographical and bibliographical evidence', in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: essays in memory of R. A. Leigh*, ed. by Marian Hobson, John T. A. Leigh, and Robert Wokler (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1992), pp. 209-223.

⁵ Arnold Ages, 'Voltaire rousseauiste?', *University of Windsor Review*, 3 (1967), 62-68.

correspondence, though one might also find many instances that testify to the contrary; and it hardly needs saying that Voltaire, if indeed he ever did hold these opinions on Geneva, became quickly disenchanted with it.⁶

The article might have sunk into well-deserved oblivion, had it not struck a nerve with other scholars. John Pappas refers to it when he makes a similar, though much better argued and evidenced case. Citing Voltaire's critique of Parisian life as hollow and alienating in both his works and correspondence, he concludes that Voltaire, growing older, changed his position from that expressed in the *Mondain* and came to dismiss the Parisian life of luxury in favour of country-life, of the 'thèse "rousseauiste" du cultivateur plus proche de la nature, s'opposant à la ville frivole qui dénature l'homme'.⁷ He considers this 'Rousseauian' development to be of greater importance than the defence of luxury in the *Mondain*: 'la thèse agricole de Voltaire est soutenue beaucoup plus longtemps dans sa vie que celle du *Mondain*, qui se termine en 1748' (p. 87). The article cites several of Voltaire's works in evidence for this claim, relying most heavily on the 1749 *Epître à Mme Denis sur la vie de Paris et de Versailles* and the 1761 *Epître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture*. Discussing the former, he agrees with Pomeau's calling it Voltaire's *Anti-Mondain* (p. 86).⁸

Thus to discuss the development of Voltaire's position of luxury, it is

⁶ On Voltaire's 'complete and visible' break with Geneva in 1758, see Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p. 407. On his problems with Genevan censorship, see Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: the poet as realist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 207-209. On his difficulties when intervening in the problems between aristocracy, bourgeoisie, and 'natifs', see Gay, pp. 196-233, and John Renwick below. On Voltaire's view on Calvin, see René Pomeau, Christiane Mervaud et al., *De la Cour au jardin 1750-1759* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991), pp. 318-320. On the scandal caused by d'Alembert's article 'Genève' and Voltaire's reaction to it, see *ibid.*, pp. 332-339. On *Les Scythes* as an allegorical play on the situation in Geneva, see Besterman, pp. 505-507. For his most critical statements on the city, see the *Guerre civile de Genève* and John Renwick's introduction to it: *OCV*, vol. 63A, 69-147 and 3-37.

⁷ John Pappas, 'Voltaire et le luxe: une mise au point', in *Enlightenment studies in honour of Lester G. Crocker*, ed. by Alfred J. Bingham and Virgil W. Topazio (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1972), pp. 83-94 (p. 86).

⁸ Cf. René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris: Nizet, 1956), p. 237.

indispensable to have a closer look at these two epistles. They should however be considered in the context of two other epistles that treat similar themes: the *Epître de l'auteur, en arrivant dans sa terre près du lac de Genève*, which, written in 1755, six years after the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* and six years before the *Epître sur l'agriculture*, provides a bridge between the two; and the 1772 *Epître à Horace*, which is often considered as Voltaire's poetical testament, and which unites the topoi of the previous three.

Epître à Mme Denis sur la vie de Paris et de Versailles

The *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* opens and closes with a plea to 'ma chère Rosalie' to live with the *moi* in quiet friendship away from the tumult of Paris. The poem describes life in the fashionable and luxurious circles in Paris in the darkest terms, before moving on to Versailles, which it condemns for its servile adoration of false idols, and ends on a dismissal of the public's taste and judgement.

In how far then would it be correct to describe it as an *Anti-Mondain*? There are striking similarities. Both written in decasyllables, they trace the day of a mondain – in this case of a mondaine – in Paris. Episodes and themes are similar: coaches, sumptuous decorations, sensuality, and above all, a dinner party. And yet their evaluation and connotations, as Pappas and Pomeau would argue, are exactly reversed. Parisian life is above all characterised by alienation. Its inhabitants are dragged along a hectic stream of empty pleasures: 'fracas', 'tourbillon', and pressure serve to hide the futility and boredom of their existence: 'ennui', 'inutilité', 'oisiveté', and, even more damning, the 'néant' of their hearts, and their 'âmes excédées'.⁹ Central images of the *Mondain* are

⁹ Voltaire, *Epître à Mme Denis sur la vie de Paris et de Versailles*, OCV, vol. 31B, 279-287.

subverted. The coach for instance is no longer comfortable, graceful, and a wonder of modern inventiveness, it is now a confining space in which a woman of fashion is trapped in great discomfort. Compare the passage of the *Mondain*

Un char commode, avec grâces orné,
Par deux chevaux rapidement traîné,
Paraît aux yeux une maison roulante,
Moitié dorée, et moitié transparente:
Nonchalamment je l'y vois promené,
De deux ressorts la liante souplesse,
Sur le pavé le porte avec mollesse. (*Le Mondain*, lines 82-88)

With the corresponding passage from the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles*:

On a conduit son insipidité
Au fond d'un char, où montant de côté,
Son corps pressé gémit sous les barrières
D'un lourd panier qui flotte aux deux portières. (lines 11-14)

Whilst the *Mondain* expresses strong pleasure and admiration for the beauty of artefacts, furnishings, and decorations, these are curiously absent in the *Epistle*. Instead the topos of decoration takes on another meaning: it hides the emptiness within and emphasises vanity and lack of authenticity. Two examples are of particular interest. The first is the only instance where interior decorations are mentioned: the only furnishing alluded to is a mirror, in which one of the characters looks, convinced he will please the company. Summarised in just two lines (42-43) the scene is set for a gathering in which exteriority and vanity combine with self-centredness in which the other only serves to reflect back a preferred image of the self. This is more extensively illustrated in the image of colourful birds, which opens the description of the dinner party:

D'autres oiseaux de différent plumage,
Divers de goût, d'instinct et de ramage,
En sautillant font entendre à la fois
Le gazouillis de leurs confuses voix:
Et dans les cris de la folle cohue
La médisance est à peine entendue.
Ce chamaillis de cent propos croisés
Ressemble aux vents l'un à l'autre opposés (lines 45-52)

The bird metaphor combines these two aspects: 'plumage', vanity, primacy of

appearance, and 'gazouillis', empty chatter. There are 'cent propos croisés', nothing of substance is being said and nobody listens: when a military man begins to drone about his exploits, 'Nul ne l'écoute, et le cruel poursuit' (line 40). In the *Mondain* the dinner party is also central, but there 'on rit'. The guests share a sentiment. In this instance, the double objective is both ostentatious self-presentation and to avoid the 'stupide silence' which follows and reveals the underlying boredom and lack of substance. Ultimately the guests are atomised: no sociability, sympathy, or friendship mark their dealings with each other. Worse, they have lost their very humanity. Humans have been transformed into machines and reduced to a state of animality. In the *Mondain* dinners were sociable affairs with witty and playful conversations. Now communication is impossible,¹⁰ and the physical is primordial. It has become the sole reductive focus of man's intellect:

L'homme machine, esprit qui tient du corps,
 En bien mangeant remonte ses ressorts;
 Avec le sang l'âme se renouvelle,
 Et l'estomac gouverne la cervelle. (lines 71-74)

The reason Pomeau and others have called the Epistle an *Anti-Mondain*, is due to the close textual parallels. The *Mondain's* predominant symbol, champagne, recurs in the Epistle but in the context of excess and hypocrisy. The brilliance of the earlier poem has become a *faux brillant* here, which sums up the lack of real pleasure and sociability. The *Mondain's* apology of joyful laughter, pleasure, and sparkling wit are summed up in the image of champagne:

D'un vin d'Aï dont la mousse pressée,
 De la bouteille avec force élançée,
 Comme un éclair fait voler le bouchon;
 Il part, on rit, il frappe le plafond.
 De ce vin frais l'écume pétillante
 De nos Français est l'image brillante. (*Mondain*, lines 105-110)

¹⁰ Cf lines 81-84: 'Monsieur l'abbé vous entame une histoire, // Qu'il ne croit point, et qu'il veut faire croire; // On l'interrompt par un propos du jour, // Qu'un autre conte interrompt à son tour.'

In the Epitre the atmosphere has changed perceptibly, though the correspondences are striking:

Ce vieux Crésus, en sablant du champagne,
Gémit des maux que souffre la campagne;
Et cousu d'or, dans le luxe plongé,
Plaint le pays de tailles surchargé.
[...]
De froids bons mots, des équivoques fades,
Des quolibets et des turlupinades,
Un rire faux, que l'on prend pour gaité,
Font le brillant de la société. (lines 77-80 and 85-97)

One could go further than this and even find instances that appear to negate arguments of other works in defence of luxury, such as the *Défense du Mondain* and the *Lettres philosophiques*. The *Défense* had instated King Solomon as the ideal ruler who combined luxury, the arts and sciences, and wisdom or moderation. In the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* the assembled party has instead instated King David who in this case stands for card games and gambling.¹¹ In the Royal Exchange scene of *Lettres philosophiques*, perhaps the most powerful defence of commerce and trade, the protagonists were active and engaged in useful pursuits. They were content and their relationships were characterised by trust and friendship. In both philosophical and grammatical terms they were the subjects of their actions ('le juif, le mahométan, et le chrétien, *traitent l'un avec l'autre*', 'le presbytérien *se fie à l'anabaptiste*', 'l'anglican *reçoit la promesse du quaker*', etc). Their meetings are not only 'pacifiques' but 'libres'.¹² In this poem, both liberty and action are lost. The men characterised by luxury are passively dragged along and no longer capable of true sociability or friendship. Both in philosophical and grammatical terms, they are no longer positive subjects but either objects or the subjects of a negation:

Comment aimer des gens qui n'aiment rien,
Et qui, portés sur ces rapides sphères

¹¹ In a note after the invocation to king David to dispell their boredom, Voltaire makes the reference clear: 'Tous les jeux de cartes sont à l'enseigne du roi David.' (Ibid., note 2b).

¹² Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. by Frédéric Deloffre (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), Letter VI, p. 60 [emphases are mine].

Que la fortune agite en sens contraires,
L'esprit troublé de ce grand mouvement,
N'ont pas le temps d'avoir un sentiment? (lines 112-116)

Another seeming disavowal of the *Lettres'* argument is pointed out by Pomeau: he calls the Epistle a 'satire du divertissement', in which 'Voltaire donne raison [...] à Pascal.'¹³ And lines such as 'Leur âme vide est du moins amusée // Par l'avarice en plaisir déguisée' (65-66), do indeed seem to give in to Pascal's critique of outside pleasures as a disguise for man's inner void, boredom and desperation.¹⁴ Following this line of analysis we could even see one more old obstacle creeping into Voltaire's verse: Mandeville. The importance of appearances, the fundamental selfishness, and the ubiquitousness of vice in disguise in the urban life of luxury, are all themes Voltaire was familiar with through Mandeville's *Fable*.

Pascal, Mandeville, a critique of the alienating nature of the urban race after luxuries and pleasures: it seems Pappas and Ages were justified in seeing a Rousseauian turn in Voltaire's thought. Except of course that they are not. Theirs, as well as Pomeau's interpretation, relies on an overly simplified reading of the *Mondain* itself. Such a reading overlooks its internal ambiguities, the role of the *moi* as the observer and the *mondain* as the observed, the fact that the 'paradis terrestre' is precisely not in Paris but at Cirey, and some of the more critical overtones. It takes the work out of the context of its companion pieces and simply reduces it to an 'ouvrage d'un temps d'ivresse' (p. 232). As argued previously, two elements in the *Mondain* had been problematic: Paris' hectic tumult, the alienating and never ceasing race for more and more pleasure on the one hand, and the cult of appearances, of veneer over substance on the other. These were furthermore emphasised in the correspondence of the time. Just a few years after the

¹³ Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire*, pp. 237 and 239.

¹⁴ Cf. Letter XXV of the *Lettres philosophiques*.

publication of the *Mondain*, and more than a decade before, according to Pappas, Voltaire's Rousseauian turn was to begin, Voltaire wrote to Mme de Champbonin in precisely the terms that would characterise the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles*: 'Ma chère amie, Paris est un gouffre, où se perdent le repos & le recueillement de l'âme, sans qui la vie n'est qu'un tumulte importun. Je ne vis point. Je suis porté, entraîné loin de moi dans des tourbillons' (D2082, 28 September 1739). Not only the sentiments but even the terminology are already there.

There was as such nothing new about his critique of the alienating lifestyle of fashionable Paris. Nor was his apparent condemnation of luxury and amusement a contradiction of his previous stance. There are crucial differences between the scenes depicted in the *Lettres philosophiques* and the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles*. Note 'Versailles': the Royal Exchange scene opens with the words 'cette place plus respectable que bien des cours'. It continues: 'vous y voyez rassemblés les députés de toutes les nations pour l'utilité des hommes.' The difference between these men and the people assembled in the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* is that the former do useful work. The latter don't do anything at all. The critique of idle aristocrats is already to be found in the *Lettres*, when he makes an explicit comparison between a bourgeois merchant and an aristocratic courtier, to the detriment of the latter. The protagonists in the Parisian scene are, if they are not also the same people depicted in the court scene that follows - and for one the 'pédant du palais' of line 75 certainly is - at least pointedly useless. Hence the vocabulary of indolence, insipidity, boredom, 'inutilité', and 'oisiveté', that dominates this part of the poem. The pointed reference to 'le pays de tailles surchargé', emphasises that these characters not only contribute nothing, but parasitically benefit from their status, being exempt from these taxes and making vast profits collecting them.¹⁵

¹⁵ Most contemporary readers would probably take the 'vieux Crésus' to refer to a tax farmer. On the link between criticism of the French fiscal administration and the luxury debate see John Shovlin who

It is true that Voltaire had not yet explicitly elaborated the difference between the bourgeois and commercial 'luxe commode' and 'luxe d'ostentation' or 'faste', often linked to aristocratic display, that we find in the *Siècle*, the *Essai sur les moeurs*, and the article 'Faste' for the *Encyclopédie*. However, even without the explicit distinction, it is fairly obvious that it is the latter which is depicted here. The emphasis on uncomfortable but fashionable clothes, the mirror scene, the use of 'plumage', all point to ostentation rather than enjoyment. And given that the 'fade plaisant, galant, escroc, et prêtre' who is giving the dinner party is 'du logis pour quelques mois le maître' (lines 29-30), we can assume that the house is not built for private enjoyment and comfort, but for ostentation – the invited guests are clearly not friends, and as already pointed out, their only two goals are to be admired and to escape their boredom.

Thus the poem does not announce a change in attitude, it is consistent with the differentiation between several types of luxury and with the continued support of a commercial and bourgeois type of 'luxe commode'.¹⁶ It is also consistent with the *Mondain* if the latter is being read with attention to nuances and in the context of its companion pieces. Pomeau's statement that the *Mondain* was the work of a 'temps d'ivresse', seems almost ironic, given that in the same period, in the letter to the Comte de Saxe, Voltaire had used alcohol precisely as a metaphor illustrating the need for moderation in the enjoyment of luxury. Both luxury and alcohol can contribute to enjoyment but both require moderation. It is in the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* that

argues that hostility to luxury was very frequently based on 'an association between *le luxe* and financier interests': John Shovlin, 'Hume's *Political Discourses* and the French Luxury Debate', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, ed. by Carl Wennerlin and Margaret Schabas (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 203-222 (p. 210).

¹⁶ Another difficulty that Pappas and Ages chose to ignore are Voltaire's later defences of luxury, such as the articles 'luxe' in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, which do not square with a supposed Rousseauian anti-luxury turn in Voltaire's thinking. On these see the following chapter.

'ivresse' is depicted. Read with Voltaire's earlier warning in mind, the entire dinner party scene appears like an assembly of drunks: yawning, or talking all at once, unable to listen, to concentrate or to think, desperate for some entertainment. Drunkenness is a metaphor for the overindulgence of luxury, but luxury in itself, like alcohol, is not to be condemned completely. As in *De l'usage de la vie*, and, if read carefully, in the *Mondain's* distinction between 'moi' and the mondain, and between 'ici' and Paris, a different kind of enjoyment of luxury is still possible. In the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles*, Voltaire never denies his Epicurean ethic of pleasure.

The *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* opens and closes with the Epicurean injunction to live unnoticed or in obscurity. The parallelism of the opening and closing of the poem, emphasises its Epicurean message. The very opening 'Vivons pour nous', a variation on the Epicurean topos of 'vivre caché', sets the tone and is immediately strengthened with the equally Epicurean commonplace of friendship. The Epicurean and Horatian 'tempus fugit' and 'carpe diem' motifs are reiterated first as a warning,¹⁷ and then at the close of the poem, as an exhortation:

Ah! cachons-nous; passons avec les sages
Le soir serein d'un jour mêlé d'orages;
Et dérobons à l'oeil de l'envieux
Le peu de temps que me laissent les dieux.
Tendre amitié, don du ciel, beauté pure,
Porte un jour doux dans ma retraite obscure.
Puissé-je vivre et mourir dans tes bras,
Loin du méchant qui ne te connaît pas,
Loin du bigot, dont la peur dangereuse
Corrompt la vie et rend la mort affreuse! (lines 157-166)

Very few readers at the time would be aware that the reference might be to anything but the arms of pure friendship, his affair with Mme Denis, the addressee of the Epistle, was still kept secret at this time. And with the purity of friendship, all classic Epicurean topoi are reunited in these few lines. The Epicurean sage makes its reappearance as well

¹⁷ Lines 89-91: 'C'est donc ainsi, troupe absurde et frivole, // Que nous usons de ce temps qui s'envole; // C'est donc ainsi que nous perdons des jours'.

as the ideal of living in obscurity, the rejection of religious fervour which, as the ancient Epicureans never tired to point out, marred life by constant fear of punishment after death ('corrompt la vie et rend la mort affreuse'). Part of the Epicurean eudemonist philosophy was not only to avoid pain at all costs (i.e. to live away from the 'méchant') but also to enjoy 'pure' pleasures, of which friendship was one, and moderate luxury, the 'douceur' of life another.

This Epicurean outlook of the *Epître*, aligns it with the earlier poems on luxury, most notably with the *Usage de la vie*. It is not an *Anti-Mondain*. Instead, it echoes many of the sentiments expressed in the earlier works. Voltaire's ideals and heroes remain the same. Colbert, hero of the *Siècle*, but also of the *Défense du Mondain*, where he is portrayed as the father of commercial economy, opulence and luxury, is still evoked here as having done great services to the French people, ungrateful as they may be (lines 131-132). The theatre is still a place of the highest art – even if the audience does not always appreciate it as it ought (lines 137-144). But there is hope and times enlighten even the worst public, so that the third idol, Pope, poet and philosopher, though wronged in his life, is now buried next to kings and 'un peuple entier fait son apothéose' (lines 153-156). The *Epître* expresses the same ideals and the same criticisms as the *Mondain*, except that in the latter the positive much outweighs the negative, whilst the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* focusses almost exclusively on the critique. But even in the *Mondain* the 'paradis terrestre' was not Paris. The *Epître* is designed as a plea to withdraw to such a place, which, like Cirey but now with a different lover, would combine the pleasures of Paris with the garden of Epicurean moderation. And this *locus amoenus* would form the subject of his 1755 *Epître de l'auteur, en arrivant dans sa terre près du lac de Genève*.

Epître de l'auteur, en arrivant dans sa terre près du lac de Genève, en mars 1755

The 1755 *Epître* is classicizing in both tone and imagery. Written in traditional alexandrines, though, as often in Voltaire's poetry, anisometrically interspersed with octosyllabic lines, it opens with an apostrophe to this newly found *locus amoenus*, the poet's new estate in Geneva. And the stance adopted here is clearly Epicurean, even hedonistic, unmissably put in the poem's first line: 'O maison d'Aristippe, ô jardins d'Epicure'.¹⁸ As in the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* the Epicurean eudemonistic ethic frames the poem as both its opening and closing lines and recurs in the form of a warning within the Epistle. The opening, after the topos of the Epicurean garden joined to the luxury of an Aristippian house, evokes the equally Epicurean commonplace of tranquillity in an asylum far from the multitude, and, albeit anaphorically reiterating the Epicurean notion that perfect happiness is not the human lot,¹⁹ it maintains that a certain degree of happiness is achievable. How to achieve it, is set out in the comparison between the *moi* and the fifteenth-century antipope, Amadeus, duke of Savoy, in lines 30-40. These lines address Amadeus directly:

Est-il vrai que dans ces beaux lieux
Des soins et des grandeurs écartant toute idée,
Tu vécus en vrai sage, en vrai voluptueux,
Et que, lassé bientôt de ton doux ermitage,
Tu voulus être pape, et cessas d'être sage ?
Dieux sacrés du repos, je n'en ferais pas tant. (lines 33-37)

The ideal of wisdom set out here is clearly Epicurean: the 'vrai sage' is a 'vrai voluptueux', one who knows how to combine 'repos', retreat from worldly ambitions ('soins' et 'grandeurs') with pleasure: the ermitage is 'doux'. Another version of the Epistle even elaborated on what the nature of these pleasures would be, and they are the same instances of luxury that we find in the *Mondain* and the *Vie de Paris et de*

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Epître de l'auteur, en arrivant dans sa terre près du lac de Genève*, *OCV*, vol. 45A, 255-261 (line 1).

¹⁹ Epicurean philosophy holds that only the gods can achieve a state of perfect tranquillity and happiness.

Versailles : 'Ta cellule, et ton vin, ta maîtresse, et tes jeux'. It is the use or abuse of these that determines whether they are beneficial or detrimental to happiness. Once again luxury is closely linked to Epicurean moderation.

The closing lines of the poem, set the newly found Epicurean retreat against the lifestyle depicted in the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles*. Addressing himself to the goddess of liberty, the *moi* evokes the simplicity of the Epicurean garden retreat ('simples gazons') and the overriding importance of both friendship and independence, contrasted with the vanity, frivolity, and aggression of the 'monde':

Embellis ma retraite, où l'amitié t'appelle ;
sur de simples gazons viens t'asseoir avec elle.
Elle fuit comme toi les vanités des cours,
les cabales du monde et son règne frivole.
ô deux divinités ! Vous êtes mon recours. (lines 116-120)

Liberty, evoked at the close of the poem, forms one of its major themes. And the classicizing nature of the invocation of the goddess of liberty and the depiction of her reign, might at first glance lead readers to believe the Epistle contrasts an austere, classically republican vision of liberty to sensual and luxurious despotism. The treatment of liberty in the poem adopts three stages. From a depiction of a personified goddess of liberty follows the description of Swiss liberty, which in turn leads to a survey of the state of liberty in the contemporary world. The second of these deserves quoting in full:

Un peuple entier la suit: sa naïve allégresse
Fait à tout l'Apennin répéter ses clameurs;
Leurs fronts sont couronnés de ces fleurs que la Grèce
Aux champs de Marathon prodiguait aux vainqueurs.
C'est là leur diadème ; ils en font plus de compte
Que d'un cercle à fleurons de marquis et de comte,
Et des larges mortiers à grands bords abattus,
Et de ces mitres d'or aux deux sommets pointus.
On ne voit point ici la grandeur insultante
Portant de l'épaule au côté

Un ruban que la vanité
A tissu de sa main brillante,
Ni la fortune insolente
Repoussant avec fierté
La prière humble et tremblante
De la triste pauvreté.
On n'y méprise point les travaux nécessaires :
Les états sont égaux, et les hommes sont frères. (lines 61-78)

This apology of Swiss liberty with its emphasis on rural simplicity, frugality, naivety, and equality did not convince its readers, at least not judging by the poetic *Réponse* which widely, though anonymously, circulated in Paris within weeks of the original's publication. It accused Voltaire of hypocrisy:

Toi, qui te fais un dieu de l'or,
Oses-tu nous chanter encor
Les douceurs d'une vie tranquille et frugale?²⁰

Voltaire the Epicurean advocate of luxury did not appear quite genuine in this apparent eulogy of rural frugality. Except of course that this accusation is based on a – perhaps wilfully – naïve reading of the poem itself. The invocation of liberty follows on from a reference to Virgil's *Georgics*, and the *Epître* self-consciously adopts a Virgilian pose. The frequent comparisons to Roman and Greek antiquity, the rural idyll which is explicitly likened to Virgil's *Georgics*, the imagery and the meter itself – the alexandrines corresponding to the Virgilian hexameters – reveal the intentionality of the imitation. And yet despite this classicizing tone and imagery Voltaire manages not to contradict any of his previous assertions on luxury. The critique contained in the passage above is certainly one designed to appeal to his new Calvinist audience in Geneva, targeting both the Catholic Church ('ces mitres d'or aux deux sommets pointus') and the nobility ('de marquis et de comte').²¹ And yet it sits easily next to Voltaire's earlier expositions on commercial economy and luxury. The first part of the passage

²⁰ *Réponse à l'Epître de M. de V****, (published as an appendix to the original), *OCV*, vol. 45A, 263-264 (lines 14-16).

²¹ For a good analysis and exposition the intended double audience of Paris and Geneva see Nicholas Cronk's introduction to the poem (*OCV*, vol. 45A, 225-244).

cited above maintains the classicizing tone, meter, and imagery, most notably in the evocation of Italy ('tout l'apennin') and ancient Greece ('la Grèce // aux champs de Marathon'). The second part, starting with 'On ne voit point ici', which is at least in part written in quite non-Virgilian octosyllables, is an attack on the kind of ostentatious, aristocratic luxury or 'faste' depicted in the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* and the *Essai sur les mœurs* which Voltaire was publishing at this time. The alternative to this kind of luxury was a more equal society where 'on n'y méprise point les travaux nécessaires'. This society could be the Swiss idyll of course. However, it could as easily be the England Voltaire had described – or invented – in the *Lettres philosophiques*. A society where rank did not debar anybody from useful and necessary pursuits, where a nobleman could be a trader as well as a writer, and where a more developed commercial economy would spread wealth and a modern kind of 'luxe commode' throughout society.

In the following section that surveys the state of liberty in the contemporary world, England is indeed mentioned, together with the other favourite examples for commercial economies, the Netherlands, Venice and Genoa. Yet before these are named and extolled, four lines might again appear to favour a frugal, classic republican – and by extension almost Rousseauian – understanding of Voltaire's stance:

Chez vingt peuples polis à peine es-tu connue.
Le Sarmate à cheval t'embrasse avec fureur;
Mais le bourgeois à pied, rampant dans l'esclavage,
Te regarde, soupire, et meurt dans la douleur. (lines 83-86)

The opposition between politeness and liberty, seems indeed Rousseauian, or, in a wider sense, plays on the classic republican opposition between politeness, luxury, effeminacy, decadence and slavery on the one hand, and freedom, frugality, and the martial virtues on the other, here represented by the ancient, nomadic warrior people of the Sarmatians, who fought Roman predominance.²² Cronk suggests that as often in Voltaire the term

²² On this typical dichotomy see David Wootton (ed.), *Republicanism, liberty, and commercial society*,

refers to the Poles and the reference might be intended to flatter Stanislas I.²³ However, given that the poem maintains a critical tone towards courts and the lack of liberty there,²⁴ it seems more likely that the Sarmatians serve as a model for ancient liberty that is here set side by side with the examples of modern commercial liberty that follow. The examples of loss and preservation or gain of liberty are juxtaposed: the Sarmatians preserved the ancient kind of liberty that Rome and Grece have lost (lines 80-83). The 'peuples polis' deprived of liberty are those where the bourgeois live in misery (line 84-85). Yet examples of the existence of bourgeois liberty immediately follow on from there in the guise of England, the Netherlands, Venice and Genoa (lines 87-96). Given that, as Cronk rightly emphasises, the poem is written to address two distinct audiences, Paris and Geneva, it depicts two distinct types of liberty: Genevan liberty is ranged alongside ancient liberty, the type that Montesquieu described in his definition of republican governments. This is evident not only in the classicizing depiction of its republican traditions discussed above, but also in its contrast with the Byzantine, now Ottoman, loss of ancient liberty (lines 108-113). France is ranged with the commercial and bourgeois culture of liberty, such as depicted by Voltaire in his *Lettres philosophiques* or by Hume in his *Essays and Political Discourses*.²⁵ This kind of liberty is here exemplified in the commercial republics, and France is set slightly apart from these (lines 101-107) to hint that its liberty is not as fully developed as that of England and the Netherlands.

1694-1779 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), especially the chapter by Paul A. Rahe ('Antiquity Surpassed: The Repudiation of Classical Republicanism', pp. 233-269). See also the excellent collection of essays in Quentin Skinner and Martin von Gelderen (eds.), *Republicanism: a shared European heritage*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), particularly relevant here is Iain Hampsher-Monk's 'From Virtue to Politeness' (II, 85-105).

²³ *Épître en arrivant*, p. 259 n.11.

²⁴ Cf. the lines, still in this section, addressed to liberty and surveying the state of liberty in the world which read: 'Tout à côté du trône à Stockholm on t'a mise; // un si beau voisinage est souvent dangereux' (Ibid., lines 97-98).

²⁵ See especially 'Of civil liberty', 'Of Luxury', and 'Of commerce'. On Voltaire and Hume, see below.

The third major theme of the *Epître*, one that chimes in with both the classicizing Virgilian references to the Epicurean philosophy of the garden and the motif of liberty, is the portrayal of nature. Nature is present both at the opening and the close of the poem. The first full sentence in fact reads:

O maison d'Aristippe, ô jardins d'Epicure,
Vous qui me présentez dans vos enclos divers
Ce qui souvent manque à mes vers,
Le mérite de l'art soumis à la nature. (lines 1-4)

The link between 'art' and 'nature', emphasised by having each close a hemistich, is vital to appreciating the use of the nature depictions that follow. The nature portrayal begins in the second stanza, which follows the first Epicurean one. Its first three lines read:

Que tout plaît en ces lieux à mes sens étonnés!
D'un tranquille océan l'eau pure et transparente
Baigne les bords fleuris de ces champs fortunés; (lines 16-18)

These lines, though seemingly conventional at first reading, work a crucial transformation, that is echoed more strongly in the first lines of the following stanza:

Le voilà ce théâtre et de neige et de gloire,
Eternel boulevard qui n'a point garanti
Des lombards le beau territoire. (lines 23-25)

Cronk finds the theatre and boulevard metaphors of this third stanza 'not entirely happy', and an example of the lack of real sensitivity towards nature in the poem.²⁶ And yet these two metaphors are not simply an unfortunate lapse: a very similar example, the use of 'amphithéâtre' in a nature description recurs in the *Epître à Horace*. These metaphors are at the very core of what Voltaire tries to achieve in the poem: a link between art and nature, but, more importantly, a link between Paris and Geneva. The first two lines of the second stanza form an interesting contrast: pleasure ('tout plaît') and sensual excitement ('mes sens étonnés') in the first line, are set against tranquillity, purity, and transparency in the second. The first lines of the third stanza combine images of urbanity ('boulevard') and urban arts ('théâtre') in the first hemistiches of the alexandrines, with images of country and nature in the second hemistiches ('neige' and

²⁶ Cronk, 'Introduction', p. 241.

'territoire'). The poem thus reads almost as an answer to the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles*. The *moi* has managed to combine the best of Parisian life – pleasure, sensual excitement, the arts – with the best of country life – tranquillity, purity, and transparency. He has avoided both the race after more and more pleasure (he found tranquillity), and the constant obsession with appearances (he found transparency). And yet he has also avoided the brutish and unpleasant existence of the austere Salentum or rustic Eden depicted in the *Mondain*: he has maintained both sensual pleasure ('tout plaît [...] à mes sens étonnés'), human workmanship (the boulevard), and the sophisticated arts (the theatre). Just as Cirey was an improved Paris, and only as such a 'paradis terrestre', his new home was equally depicted as combining the best of both worlds, has a happy compromise between urban luxury, culture, and sophistication, and rural purity and tranquillity.

The attempt to link Paris and his country retreat to form an ideal *locus amoenus*, combining both luxury, the arts and sciences, and rustic tranquillity and independence, became a topos, repeated both in the *Épître à Horace* and the *Épître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture*. It also became essential to his selfportrait as the 'patriarche', which adopted all the features of the Epicurean sage figure set out in these poems.²⁷

Épître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture

The 1761 *Épître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture* elaborates on many of the themes of

²⁷ The pose of the 'patriarche', was according to Cronk's analysis a type of 'posture' as defined by Alain Viala. It was characterised by connotations of innocent rural life combined with a position of leadership of the Parisian philosophes: Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire and the 1760s: the rule of the patriarch', in *Voltaire and the 1760s: Essays for John Renwick*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk, *SVEC 2008:10*, pp. 9-21. On Viala's notion of the 'posture' see Georges Molinié and Alain Viala, *Approches de la réception: sémiostylistique et sociopoétique de Le Clézio* (Paris: PUF, 1993), which defines 'posture' as 'façon d'occuper une position': 'chaque posture [...] postule une manière de se situer par rapport aux destinataires' (pp. 216-217). For an application of the notion to the eighteenth century, to Rousseau in particular, see Alain Viala, *Lettre à Rousseau sur l'intérêt littéraire* (Paris: PUF, 2005), pp. 84-85.

both earlier *Epîtres*. Because of this, and because of the readings offered by Pappas and Ages that make it out to be a Rousseauian hymn to the simplicity of country life, it deserves a closer analysis. Written in classic alexandrines, it can be divided into five different sections. The first elaborates on a subject already encountered in the previous Epistle: Virgil. The Voltaire of the poem compares himself to the classic poet and finds, just as in the earlier comparison to the fifteenth-century antipope, that their development lacked the wisdom that he has gained: Virgil gave up country-life for the court, whilst Voltaire effected the opposite move and maintains the importance of independence – and of the independence wealth and ownership can bestow.²⁸

The second section (lines 15-23) sets Voltaire against Fontenelle, again to reinforce the image of Voltaire as a true patriarch. He criticises the hypocrisy of Fontenelle who lauded the pleasures of rustic simplicity whilst living in the middle of Paris, thus implying that he by contrast is genuine in his praise which was based on actual experience.

The third section (lines 24-74) is interesting as it repeats the previous critique of Paris but this time provides a detailed alternative. It introduces the figure of a young Parisian, another mondain, who is set against the experience and wisdom of Voltaire-the-Epicurean-sage or indeed, which amounts to the same thing, of Voltaire-the-patriarch. The young man's speech condenses most of the previous condemnations of Paris life into six lines of verse:

'Mais quoi! loin de Paris se peut-il qu'on respire?
Me dit un petit-maître, amoureux du fracas.
Les Plaisirs dans Paris voltigent sur nos pas:

²⁸ Voltaire, *Epître à Mme Denis sur l'agriculture*, in Moland, vol. 10, 378-82 (see especially lines 11-14). It should be borne in mind, that this was most likely another attempt at positioning himself, at making a virtue out of necessity, since Voltaire was not actually allowed back into Paris. However, whilst the position adopted may well have been partly tactical, justifying his current unavoidable circumstances, it has its own thematic significance in the broader context of Voltaire's reflections on luxury.

On oublie, on espère, on jouit, on désire;
Il nous faut du tumulte, et je sens que mon coeur,
S'il n'est pas enivré, va tomber en langueur. (lines 24-29)

The constant fear of boredom recurs ('je sens que mon coeur // [...] va tomber en langueur.'), as well as the hectic and noisy whirlpool and rat-race theme ('fracas', 'tumulte'), which is strengthened by the quadruple caesura in line 27 that emphasises the repetitive nature of the agitated chase for more and more stimuli and fleeting pleasures. For the first time made explicit is the metaphor of drunkenness ('enivré'), which denotes at once a wrong use of luxury, i.e. overindulgence and dependence instead of Epicurean moderation, and alienation, insalubriousness, and irrationality. The Voltaire figure of the poem replies with the wisdom the sage has gained through age and experience, the experience of being betrayed, of theft, jealousy, hypocrisy, slander, and of money winning out over merit (lines 30-38). Reminiscent of the first Epistle to Mme Denis, he imparts to the young Parisian that once he has experienced all these aspects of life in the capital, he will understand the merits of the Epicurean *vivre caché*: 'Tu verras qu'il est bon de vivre enfin pour soi' (lines 37-38).

More interesting, though certainly no less moralising, is the sage's reply to the young Parisian's objection to this advice: 'Mais vivre sans plaisir, sans faste, sans emploi!' (line 39). The use of caesuras in the line strengthens the three aspects of the objection that the patriarchal sage figure will have to address: lack of pleasure, of ostentatious luxury, and the 'ennui' that lack of employment will cause. By the time Voltaire wrote and circulated this poem, he had published both the *Siècle*, the *Essai sur les moeurs*, and his *Encyclopédie* article 'Faste' – no need to address the subject of *faste* and ostentatious luxury therefore: they had been roundly condemned by him already. Which leaves lack of pleasure and possible boredom. The answer to both of these is the Candidian injunction of 'il faut cultiver notre jardin'. Useful work will chase away

boredom, and its results will be pleasurable. In this case the resulting pleasure is not as directly sensual and luxurious as Candide's pistachios and *cédrats confits*; it is the pleasure gained from *bienfaisance*. Here is Voltaire's opportunity to advertise the improvements he introduced to the life of the communities of Gex and Ferney, making the land fertile, the inhabitants richer, happier, and more populous (lines 47-61). It is worth noting that Nicholas Cronk emphasises the link between the Candidian imperative and the figure of the patriarch, stating that 'the sense of the word 'patriarche' is intimately bound up with the injunction to 'cultiver le jardin".²⁹ This is another example of how important the positioning on luxury was for the elaboration of the patriarch or Epicurean sage persona. Here, the Candidian imperative introduces the passage ('La France a des déserts, ose les cultiver', line 44) and closes it:

Dieu veut que l'on travaille et que l'on s'évertue;
 Et le sot mari d'Ève, au paradis d'Éden,
 Reçut un ordre exprès *d'arranger son jardin* .
 C'est la première loi donnée au premier homme,
 Avant qu'il eût mangé la moitié de sa pomme. (lines 70-74)

The note Voltaire appended to this is the third mention of *Candide's* conclusion and this time verbatim:

Cet ordre exprès, que la Genèse dit avoir été donné de Dieu à l'homme, de *cultiver son jardin*, fait bien voir quel est le ridicule de dire que l'homme fut condamné au travail. L'Arabe Job est bien plus raisonnable: il dit que l'homme est né pour travailler, comme l'oiseau pour voler. (Ibid., note 4 [emphases are mine])

Readers could not miss the allusions to *Candide*, but given both the subject matter and the reference to paradise, Eden, Adam and Eve, the *Mondain* might also spring to mind. Yet sensual and luxurious pleasures, such as good food in *Candide* and fine wine and *haute cuisine* in the *Mondain*, are wholly absent in this Epistle.

However, the poem is not a rejection of luxury and its linked topos of the arts and sciences in favour of rusticity and *bienfaisance*. Its fourth section (lines 75-106)

²⁹ Cronk, 'The rule of the patriarch', p. 16.

widens the scope of Voltaire's 'garden', and, like the previous *Epître* establishes a link between Ferney and Paris, between his philanthropic and economic activities in the country and his involvement in philosophy and the arts in Paris:

Mais ne détournons point nos mains et nos regards
Ni des autres emplois, ni surtout des beaux-arts.
Il est des temps pour tout; et lorsqu'en mes vallées,
Qu'entoure un long amas de montagnes pelées,
De quelques malheureux ma main sèche les pleurs,
Sur la scène, à Paris, j'en fais verser peut-être;
Dans Versaille étonné j'attendris de grands coeurs; (lines 75-81)

Voltaire, patriarch of Ferney, explicitly links himself with the Parisian *philosophes* and *Encyclopédistes*, naming both d'Alembert (line 94) and Diderot (line 91). It is the combination of luxury – in the form of the arts and sciences – and necessity – in the form of agriculture and food production –, the combination of Paris and Ferney, that forms Voltaire's garden. The concluding section (lines 107-122) summarises this neatly: 'C'est ainsi qu'on peut vivre à l'ombre de ses bois, // En guerre avec les sots, en paix avec soi-même' (lines 107-108). And the cultivation of the garden becomes synonymous with the cultivation of the arts ('cultivez les arts', line 116 states). Pappas thus mistakes the meaning of Voltaire's oft-repeated catchphrase, when he argues that 'à chaque fois qu'il cite son propre "il faut cultiver notre jardin", c'est pour jeter la vie fourbe et dangereuse de Paris en se réfugiant dans son activité agricole de Ferney'.³⁰ Voltaire's new 'paradis terrestre' was indeed his garden. But the garden he depicted was a 'Best of': it consisted of both urban and rural elements, of both Ferney and Paris, combining their most beneficial aspects. Yet the problem remains that whilst the poem maintains some positive aspects about Parisian life, namely the arts (i.e. the theatre) and the sciences (i.e. philosophy), other aspects that are more straightforwardly associated with luxury, such as any material comfort or pleasures, are absent. Did Voltaire at this stage disassociate the arts and sciences from material luxury? As the *Epître à Horace* makes

³⁰ Pappas, 'Voltaire et le luxe', p. 87. Cf. his 'Candide, rétrécissement ou expansion?', *Diderot Studies*, 10 (1968), 241-263.

clear he did not. The arts just like an Epicurean or commercial kind of luxury remain identified with the double function of providing pleasure and furthering the civilising process, by fostering politeness and virtue.

Epître à Horace

The 1772 *Epître à Horace* incorporates most of Voltaire's thought on luxury. It has, as Nicholas Cronk points out, the character of a poetical testament, designed to fix his image for posterity.³¹ As such it provided another forceful example of the importance of the concept of luxury in Voltaire's oeuvre, as well as an excellent opportunity to evaluate how he dealt with the subject towards the end of his life.

After a brief introduction that sets the *Epître* in the context of a previous one, addressed to Boileau, the poet addresses himself directly to Horace, doyen of Epicurean poetry. It is worth quoting these lines in full:

Je t'écris aujourd'hui, voluptueux Horace,
A toi qui respiras la mollesse et la grâce,
Qui, facile en tes vers, et gai dans tes discours,
Chantas les doux loisirs, les vins, et les amours,
Et qui connus si bien cette sagesse aimable
Que n'eut point de Quinault le rival intraitable.³²

The poem strongly resembles the *Mondain*. In the course of the poem, Voltaire compares himself to, and identifies with, Horace and his depiction is both strongly Epicurean and reminiscent of the *Mondain*. The notion of 'volupté', first characteristic of Horace, pervades the entirety of the *Mondain*; 'mollesse' in Voltaire was best remembered for his controversial 'J'aime le luxe, et même la mollesse' of the *Mondain* (line 9); and gaiety also characterise the *Mondain*'s dinner scene. Moreover, as Cronk

³¹ Nicholas Cronk, 'Introduction', *OCV* vol. 74B, pp. 251-272 (pp. 267-269).

³² Voltaire, *Epître à Horace*, *OCV* vol. 74B, pp. 279-290 (lines 7-12).

has pointed out in his analysis of the *Mondain*, the poem is partly intended as a defence and celebration of poetry itself.³³ So is the *Epître à Horace*, whose last section criticises the recent trend of non-versified French theatre. And in the first address to Horace, Voltaire's choice of alter-ego, poetry is once again linked to Epicureanism (line 9). 'Douceur', particularly in the adjectival form as it is used here, is another term Voltaire associates with luxury, and it occurs as a qualifier three times in the *Mondain* (lines 13, 70, and 89). The importance of fine wine in the *Mondain* and in Voltaire's imagery of luxury in general hardly needs stressing, nor does the element of sensuality evoked in this *Epître* as 'les amours' in the citation above and again as a reference to Horace's heterosexual as well as homoerotic love poetry (lines 112-113). Thus Horace's 'sagesse aimable' is supposed to represent Voltaire's: a moderate (or 'sage') enjoyment of both sensual and intellectual pleasures.

The comparison between Voltaire and Horace, and hence also the depiction of Voltaire as an Epicurean sage continues throughout the Epistle. The following section contrasts their relationship with kings and courts, or Augustus to Frederic the Great. Voltaire's relationship with Frederic is portrayed as that of one Epicurean sage with another. The topos is again that of suppers characterised by 'goût délicat' and 'finesse agréable' (line 27), by 'bon mots' (line 29) and a 'douceur pacifique' (line 32) which united the philosophers in their detestation of 'les préjugés, les fripons, et les sots' (line 30). Luxury, but in a sophisticated and private form, is united with Enlightened and Epicurean attitudes to form a perfect Epicurean garden. Which the poet left, wise Epicurean that he was, as soon as 'le plaisir s'envola' (line 33).³⁴

³³ Nicholas Cronk, 'The epicurean spirit: champagne and the defence of poetry in Voltaire's *Le Mondain*', *SVEC*, 371 (1999), 53-80.

³⁴ The narrative hardly corresponds to the actual facts of Voltaire's abrupt departure from the Prussian court, but is once again a good example of how important Epicureanism and moderate use of luxury were in Voltaire's self-fashioning.

The next section compares their rural retreats and it is important in that it draws heavily on the themes and imagery of the *Epîtres* discussed above and yet, unlike these but like the historiographical works discussed in the previous chapter, emphasises the advantages of opulence, luxury, and commerce, as well as their inherent intertwinement with liberty. The first lines recall the injunction of the *Epître sur l'agriculture* and make explicit what could only be guessed at there, that the cultivation of one's garden not only gives negative, or, in Epicurean terms, katastematic pleasure through the absence of pain, i.e. of boredom, but also positive, or kinematic pleasure, 'un vrai bonheur':

Je cherchai la retraite. On disait que l'ennui
De ce repos trompeur est l'insipide frère.
Oui, la retraite pèse à qui ne sait rien faire;
Mais l'esprit qui s'occupe y goûte un vrai bonheur. (lines 34-37)

The next aspect of Voltaire's *retraite*, the direct comparison with Horace's Tibur recalls the *Epître en arrivant*, not only in its evocation of the 'jardins vantés par Epicure' (line 40), which opened the earlier Epistle, but also in the image of the Alps as a grand theatre, an amphitheatre in this case, with the connotations discussed above. This description leads into a more general portrait of the region which gives Voltaire an opportunity to stress his role as patriarch, as a cultivator, benefactor and civiliser.

Still elaborating on his country retreat of Ferney, Voltaire uses the description of the views from his terrace to contrast two economies visible from there: the seigneurial economy of the Savoie that of 'L'indigent Savoyard, utile en ses travaux, // Qui vient couper mes blés pour payer ses impôts' (lines 49-50) with the free commercial economy of Geneva and Switzerland: 'Des riches Genevois les campagnes brillantes; // Des Bernois valeureux les cités florissantes' (lines 51-52). The difference does not lie in city versus country: the Genevan countryside is rich and flourishing just as the cities of the

canton of Berne were. The difference lies in the type of economy and the degree of freedom that goes with it: a bourgeois commercial economy offers freedom and prosperity, whilst the old seigneurial economy relied on an unfair tax and class system, which offered neither liberty nor opportunity and in which economic progress was thus nearly impossible. Only economic and political freedom would lead to happiness and prosperity, the section concludes: 'Je te dis, mais tout bas, heureux un peuple libre' (line 56). The topos of Swiss liberty, elaborated so extensively in the *Epître en arrivant*, where it was still associated with antiquity and a frugal, classical republican model, has now been aligned with the liberty and prosperity of commercial economies extolled already in the *Lettres philosophiques* and then more extensively in the *Essai sur les mœurs*.

The next section continues on a related topic and is a brilliant combination of Epicureanism with the arts and sciences and luxury or commerce in the image of Voltaire as the patriarch of Ferney. It retains the double aspect of Voltaire the Parisian with an emphasis on the non-material aspect of luxury (i.e. the arts and sciences), and Voltaire the cultivator or civiliser, with an emphasis on the material aspects of luxury (i.e. commerce, artisanship, and prosperity). This duality neatly splits the stanza into two sections of ten lines each. The first ten lines depict a Voltaire who as Epicurean sage has managed to reunite the best of the urban world in his retreat:

Je le suis en secret dans mon obscurité.
Ma retraite et mon âge ont fait ma sûreté.
D'un pédant d'Anniki j'ai confondu la rage,
J'ai ri de sa sottise: et quand mon ermitage
Voyait dans son enceinte arriver à grands flots
De cent divers pays les belles, les héros,
Des rimeurs, des savants, des têtes couronnées,
Je laissais du vilain les fureurs acharnées
Hurler d'une voix rauque au bruit de mes plaisirs.
Mes sages voluptés n'ont point de repentirs. (lines 57-66)

Voltaire is depicted as the model Epicurean, replacing Horace in this role. He combines the Epicurean retreat advocated in the three *Epîtres* discussed above ('secret', 'obscurité', 'retraite', 'ermitage') with 'plaisirs' which are distinctly Epicurean: they are voluptuous, i.e. sensual, but 'sages', i.e. enjoyed in Epicurean moderation, so that no overindulgence or dependency (either on these sensual pleasures or on the opinions or 'hurlements' of his detractors) could lead to any regrets or disquiet which would mar his Epicurean tranquillity and pleasure. And if his retreat is not austere or lacking in pleasure, nor does it lack in the non-material aspects of luxury, the arts and sciences, and sophisticated, cultured, and sensually attractive company: his house is graced with the visits of poets, scientists, royalty, military leaders – and beautiful women. They arrive from 'cent pays' and 'à grands flots', to bring sophistication and pleasure, just as the 'agiles vaisseaux' of the *Mondain* had brought their luxury goods in from all over the world.

The second half of the stanza focusses on the more material aspects of luxury, namely on the economy, or, to be precise, on the betterment of living conditions and general progress that the proponents of the concept of 'luxury' in the contemporary debate hoped to see, and which Voltaire the patriarchal *civilisateur* claimed – with apparent modesty – to have put into practice:

J'ai fait un peu de bien; c'est mon meilleur ouvrage.
 Mon séjour est charmant, mais il était sauvage.
 Depuis le grand édit (a) inculte, inhabité
 Ignoré des humains, dans sa triste beauté;
 La nature y mourait, je lui portai la vie;
 J'osai ranimer tout. Ma pénible industrie
 Rassembla des colons par la misère épars.
 J'appelai les métiers, qui précèdent les arts,
 Et, pour mieux cimenter mon utile entreprise,
 J'unis le protestant avec ma sainte Église. (lines 67-76)

His *bienfaisance* corresponds to the counsel given to the young Parisian in the *Epître sur l'agriculture*, namely to make himself useful. His intervention traces the general

material progress of humanity: agriculture would bring individuals together into communities, who would soon specialise into certain *métiers*, and artisanship would soon give rise to the arts proper. This echoes the *Traité de métaphysique*, in which the development of civilisations was willed by God who had given man the preconditions and predisposition for it. Voltaire had not only surpassed Horace, he has assumed a God-like figure which led a small section of humanity from misery and poverty to a prospering economy which combined agriculture with artisanship and the arts. And this community has the one characteristic shared by all of Voltaire's idealised communities, be these the England or Pennsylvania of the *Lettres philosophiques*, or the Eldorado and the final garden of *Candide*: religious tolerance. Once again, material prosperity and religious toleration are inextricably linked and reinforce each other.

This link between prosperity and tolerance is emphasised even more in a note to his poem, marked '(a)', which summarises the effects of 'le grand édit', the Edict of Nantes, and contrasts this to the situation of Geneva. The effects of Louis XIV's proscription of Protestantism on Voltaire's pays de Gex were mass-exodus and depopulation and hence loss of arable land and economic decline. This point is not new, Voltaire had already made it in the *Siècle* and several times in the *Essai sur les mœurs*.³⁵ The contrast between the situations of Geneva and the impoverished county of Gex could be portrayed as particularly striking, for, as Voltaire points out they were not only immediately adjoining geographically, Geneva also held less land. Nevertheless it prospered – and in the way it was set against the example of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes the reader was left to assume this was because of its greater tolerance.³⁶ It was

³⁵ Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, ed. by Jacqueline Hellegouarc'h and Sylvain Menant (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2005), pp., 790 and 797-798. In the *Essai* he refers several times to the revocation's negative consequences for the French economy and culture (though positive for the countries that welcomed the Huguenot refugees), most notably in the *Remarques*, and in chapters 153, 178, and 182.

³⁶ In order not to weaken his argument, Voltaire for once forbore to mention his own grievances with

also because of its more modern, bourgeois commercial economy: 'Genève par sa seule industrie, et presque sans territoire a su acquérir plus de quatre millions de rentes en contrats sur la France, sans compter ses manufactures et son commerce' (p. 283, note a). The fact that Geneva was so much more prosperous was not due to any difference in character: as Voltaire had argued time and time again, human nature was the same everywhere, only conditions changed. Geneva was rich because it was industrious – and, given the context we may presume it was industrious because it was free and in a free society incentivisation existed: clear rewards were to be had from work and investment. The basis for its wealth was that it embraced a new kind of economy, that could allow small countries to become prosperous even if they lacked an agricultural basis: it was the economy of luxury. This type of economy was based on manufactures, commerce, and finance, all of which depended on – and produced – luxury. The *Épître à Horace* presents a repetition of Voltaire's case for luxury made with increasing coherence since the 1730s.

The next stanzas of the Epistle are less interesting in terms of Voltaire's thought on luxury. They focus on deism and further comparisons between Voltaire and Horace in terms of their historical, cultural, and religious context. More interesting for our purposes are stanzas 12 and 13 which set out Horace's Epicurean philosophy and Voltaire's identification with it. The identification of Voltaire with the Latin poet, as well as their equality and brotherhood is expressed in one succinct line: 'Jouissons, écrivons, vivons mon cher Horace.' (line 140). In this spirit Voltaire declares he will do his utmost to follow the lessons of Horace's philosophy, which gives him an opportunity to set out Epicureanism as he understands it. For him it consists in the following:

A suivre les leçons de ta philosophie,

Geneva, a city he had found much less tolerant than he had originally made it out to be.

A mépriser la mort en savourant la vie,
 A lire tes écrits pleins de grâce et de sens,
 Comme on boit d'un vin vieux qui rajeunit les sens.
 Avec toi l'on apprend à souffrir l'indigence,
 A jouir sagement d'une honnête opulence,
 A vivre avec soi-même, à servir ses amis,
 A se moquer un peu de ses sots ennemis,
 A sortir d'une vie ou triste ou fortunée,
 En rendant grâce aux dieux de nous l'avoir donnée. (lines 148-156)

The importance of the passage is underlined by its use of anaphora. Not to give in to any fear of death or the afterlife and instead finding happiness in this life is indeed the basis of Epicurean thought. Voltaire's depiction of Epicurean pleasure however is more idiosyncratic. He focuses on positive pleasures, not on the absence of pain. And his depiction of pleasure links the aesthetic ('grâce') and intellectual ('sens') pleasure of reading with the sensual ('rajeunit les sens') pleasure of fine wine. The importance of this comparison is underlined by the break with the anaphoric pattern. Since the 1730s fine wine had become the symbol of luxury, and its value, praised in the *Mondain*, condemned in the *Epîtres à Mme Denis*, depended on its usage, namely moderation. In many ways thus, the *Epître à Horace* represents the most explicit statement in favour of Epicurean luxury yet, one that clearly links the material forms of luxury, here contained in the image of exceptional wine, with its non-material forms, the arts.

The passage continues in a more conventional Epicurean vein, by stressing the importance of independence. One who was not addicted to luxury, and imbued with Epicurean wisdom, could live without it, but enjoy it when it was there. And the choice of words in this line deserves attention in that it allies Epicureanism ('jouir sagement') with Voltaire's conception of modern bourgeois luxury. This luxury, as we have seen in the previous chapter, consisted of comfort and enjoyment rather than ostentation or 'faste'. 'Opulence' was the word Voltaire most usually employed, and 'honnête' as a qualifier denotes at once the morally sound acquisition of this fortune, i.e. through

commerce and investment rather than noble privilege, and harks back to the 'honnête homme', the mondain – only that this time his enjoyment is Epicurean and thus 'sage' of course. The next few lines are traditional once again, stressing Epicurean autarky and self-reliance, the independence from the opinion of others, and at the same time as the overriding importance of friendship. Only the closing line is again Voltairian rather than Horatian or indeed Epicurean, in that it introduces an element of positive deism wholly absent from the ancient philosophy.

The treatment of deism leads into a discussion of death, both of Voltaire's and Horace's, both of whom, not subject to the superstitions and prejudice of established religions can die in peace. And indeed Voltaire concludes: 'Tout m'assure qu'Horace est mort en honnête homme' (line 167), which aligns Horace not only with Voltaire's religious views but also with the concept of luxury he encompassed in the ideal of the 'honnête homme'. This is perhaps one of the reasons that Nicholas Cronk aligns the *Epître à Horace* with Voltaire's early epicurean poetry written with and for the *Société du Temple*.³⁷ However, with its reference to ancient Epicureanism in the form of Horace, rather than to neo-Epicureanism in the form of Chaulieu, to whom he had addressed much of his early verse, it is much closer to the works of the 1730s. Under the influence of Mme Du Châtelet's reworking of Mandeville's neo-Epicurean tenets, he had come to emphasise the importance of independence and moderation in the enjoyment of luxury, an injunction stressed in the *Mondain's* companion pieces, and one that became even more pronounced in his later poems on luxury, the *Epîtres* discussed above. It is only with this emphasis on correct usage that Voltaire can once again fully endorse the enjoyment of luxury in its material forms (such as wine) just as he had always defended it in its non-material form, the arts, both of which he once again he closely aligns in this

³⁷ Nicholas Cronk, 'Introduction', *OCV* vol. 74B, pp. 251-272 (pp. 267-269).

work.

In many ways Voltaire's thought on luxury had closed the circle with the *Epître à Horace*, incorporating both its beneficial social and personal consequences, lauded in the poetry and the *Traité de métaphysique* of the 1730s and the later historical works, as well as the warnings about its abuses and ensuing pernicious consequences outlined in the earlier *Epîtres*. Given the role of the *Epître à Horace* as a testament creating a coherent image of himself for posterity, this is unsurprising. Of all the artists and writers of his age, Voltaire was perhaps the one most aware, and most preoccupied with his self-image, which he manipulated and polished in almost all of his work as well as in the circulation methods of his writings. Given this preoccupation, a Rousseauian turn in Voltaire's thought is unlikely from the outset as it would put into question the coherence of the persona Voltaire was attempting to project, especially since his defence of luxury and civilisation had become such an important part, not only of his philosophy but also of his public persona as the patriarch. By the time that Rousseau published his *Discourses* Voltaire had become not only the doyen of the *philosophes*, but also the main public figure identified with the defence of luxury and commercial civilisation. At least in the public eye then, an emerging writer such as Rousseau, writing against these concepts, would be considered as writing against Voltaire.

IV.ii Voltaire and Rousseau – the contextual explanation

Having found that Voltaire's Rousseauian *Epîtres* are not Rousseauian at all, the student of Voltaire's thought on luxury is still left waiting for that expected epic confrontation of these two figures. He is bound to be disappointed. Rousseau played no role in the *Epîtres*, neither influencing Voltaire's more critical attitude to luxury – the *Vie de Paris et de Versailles* was published in 1749, one year before Rousseau's first *Discours* was written and crowned – nor making an appearance in any of the later Epistles, or in the final Epicurean recuperation of moderate luxury. And no confrontation was forthcoming. Much work has been devoted to the analysis of Voltaire's relationship with Rousseau, and it is one of the few topics that has elicited a consensus. Scholars as varied as Cotoni, Pomeau, Trousson, and Samuel S. B. Taylor come to the same conclusion as Henri Gouhier in his magisterial study on the subject. In *Rousseau et Voltaire: Portraits dans deux miroirs*, he discerns three stages in Voltaire's view of Rousseau. The first was one of tolerance and encouragement but ultimately of condescension. A change in attitude occurred with Rousseau's response to d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* article 'Genève', when Voltaire began to consider him as a 'personnage encombrant'. The third stage, finally, was one of hatred. Voltaire blames Rousseau not only for the problems he experiences in Geneva with his theatre projects, but also sees him as a traitor of the philosophical cause, nothing less than a Judas, and, perhaps most importantly, feels personally attacked and endangered by Rousseau's naming him as the author of the *Sermon des cinquante* in his *Lettres écrites de la Montagne* in 1764. And yet, during the entire period, Voltaire never took Rousseau's intellectual contribution in itself seriously.

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³⁸ Henri Gouhier, *Rousseau et Voltaire: Portraits dans deux Miroirs* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1983). Voltaire begins refers to Rousseau as 'Judas' for the first time in a letter to Damilaville dating from September 1762 (D10698). He still uses the term in a letter to Helvétius in November 1766 (D13662).

A careful reading of Voltaire's works, marginalia, and correspondence reveals that even on the rare occasions that he did not dismiss, ridicule, or misrepresent him completely, in the *Idées républicaines* and the *A.B.C.* for instance, no discussion of Rousseau's arguments seemed to lead Voltaire to rethink or at least reformulate his views.³⁹ It is hence more interesting to find out *why* he refused to take Rousseau seriously. It does not seem to be the fear that Rousseau had the power to collapse the entire edifice that was Voltaire's concept of civilisation and progress: the rare occasions where he does engage with Rousseau's arguments, show that he is quite comfortable in setting his own theories against those of his antagonist. The only danger that did seem to worry him was their potential to serve as ammunition for the enemies of the *philosophes* or that they might confuse the less enlightened reader. The reasons for his dismissal must thus be contextual rather than intrinsic. There seem to be two overarching reasons for Voltaire's lack of interest in Rousseau's philosophy: first, he failed to see any originality in them, and second, whilst he did fear their potential usefulness to the enemies of the philosophical movement, he seems to have felt that a consensus was building around the notions of civilisation, progress, and luxury, which would have left Rousseau as a lone anachronism.

Voltaire on Rousseau

In the *Idées républicaines* Voltaire implied that some of Rousseau's arguments were just stolen from Bayle and then exaggerated beyond common sense to cover up the

³⁹ Voltaire's marginalia on Rousseau's works were not included in the original publication of the *Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire* of the Akademie Verlag and have not yet appeared in the *OCV*. However, George Havens included them in his study: John R. Havens, *Voltaire's Marginalia on the pages of Rousseau: A comparative Study of Ideas* (New York: Haskell House, 1966).

plagiarism.⁴⁰ He owned a copy of Cajot's *Les plagiats de J-J Rousseau de Genève sur l'éducation*, and must have been quite pleased with its allegations.⁴¹ Voltaire himself most probably saw Rousseau as a nostalgic classical republican. In an intriguing letter to Charles Bordes, he makes the following claim:

Je ne lui trouve aucun génie; son détestable Roman d'Héloïse en est absolument dépourvu, Emile de même, et tous ses autres ouvrages sont d'un vain déclamateur qui a délaïé dans une prose souvent inintelligible deux ou trois strophes de l'autre Rousseau, et surtout celle cy:
Couché dans une antre rustique
Du nord il brave la rigueur;
Et vôtre luxe asiatique
N'a point énervé sa vigueur.
Il ne regrète point la perte
De ces arts dont la découverte
A l'homme a coûté tant de soins,
Et qui devenus nécessaires
N'ont fait qu'augmenter nos misères
En multipliant nos besoins. (D13699, 29 November 1766)

Three distinct points are made against Rousseau. Firstly he writes 'romans'. From the *Lettres philosophiques* onwards, where Voltaire qualified Pascal's thought as a 'roman ingénieux' or a 'roman de philosophie', 'romans' came to stand for unreasonable, fantastical, and all in all nonsensical and inferior creations.⁴² Secondly, Rousseau's language is obscure and unreadable. For a staunch defender of the classical style like Voltaire, form and content are inseparable. Anybody raised with Boileau's 'ce que l'on conçoit bien, s'énonce clairement' could only conceive of Rousseau's writings, so far removed from Voltaire's ideals of classical style, as 'galimatias'.⁴³ The third clue to Voltaire's rejection lies in the use of the word 'génie', a term which implied great intellectual or artistic capacity, which necessarily required originality.⁴⁴ Rousseau,

⁴⁰ XXXIX of the *Idées républicaines* claims that Rousseau's *Contrat Social* was only a cheap plagiarism of Bayle: *Idées républicaines par un membre d'un corps*, Moland, vol. 24, 413-432 (423).

⁴¹ [Joseph Cajot], *Les plagiats de M. J.J.R.[Rousseau] de Genève, sur l'éducation* (La Haye & Paris: Durand, 1766). The work is number 516 in the Ferney Catalogue: *SVEC*, 9 (1959).

⁴² *Lettres philosophiques*, IV (p. 50) and XIV (p. 100). On Voltaire's condemnation of 'novels' see also the *Essai sur la poésie épique*.

⁴³ 'Galimatias' is a word of which Voltaire seems particular fond. He had not only grown up with Boileau as his neighbour, he also continued to admire him and his style all his life, cf. the *Epître à Boileau*, or the entry 'Art poétique' in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.

⁴⁴ The fourth edition of the *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* (1762) defines it as follows: 'Talent, inclination ou disposition naturelle pour quelque chose d'estimable, & qui appartient à l'esprit. [...] On dit, **Travailler de génie**, pour dire, **Faire quelque chose de sa propre invention**.' [bold emphasis is

according to Voltaire, thus not only lacked talent, he also did not say anything new. The latter claim is strengthened with the citation from the late Jean-Baptiste Rousseau. The excerpt, taken from his Odes (II, ix. 81-90), is indeed striking in that it sets up a contrast similar to the one Jean-Jacques liked to depict: virility, independence, rusticity, and rugged vitality are set against effeminacy, luxury, and unhappiness through the enslavement to ever-increasing desires. The choice is an apt one. It also reveals that to Voltaire, Rousseau did nothing but repeat anti-luxury topoi, which, rooted in Christianity and classical republicanism, can be traced, via writers such as Pascal and Fénelon, right back to Greek and Roman antiquity.

Even more importantly perhaps, Voltaire appears to have felt that amongst the enlightened elite a consensus was building. It can of course be considered mere flattery when he writes, again to Charles Bordes, that the latter had 'si bien réfuté' the quarrelsome Rousseau (D12288, 4 January 1765);⁴⁵ but his library contains ample evidence for his sustained interest in political economy and here a majority of authors seemed to favour a modern, liberal, and commercial economy – which would perforce entail an endorsement of luxury.⁴⁶ Probably most important to his mind was the double impact of Hume and the *Encyclopédie*.

mine].

⁴⁵ The reference, according to Besterman, is most likely to Bordes' *Second discours sur les avantages des sciences et des arts* (Avignon 1753), which Voltaire had in his library (#475).

⁴⁶ Most interesting is the shelf f.43v., labelled 'voyages, commerce, et romans', which included not only Voltaire's 1730s preoccupations - #2025: Melon, *Essai politique sur le commerce*, #990: Dutot, *Réflexions politiques sur les finances et le commerce*, and #3136 Voltaire's own *Observations sur Lass, Melon, et Dutot* – but also more recent publications such as #1275: Gee, *Considérations sur le commerce et la navigation de la Grande Brétagne* (1749), #2924 Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, *Elémens du commerce*, 2 vols. (Leyden & Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand: 1754) whose eleventh chapter 'Du Luxe' was a clear endorsement of modern commercialism (vol. 2, pp. 221-243), #761 Coyer, *La Noblesse commerçante* (1756), #1909 the comte de Magnières', *Remarques sur plusieurs branches de commerce et de navigation* (1757), and #311 Bigot de Sainte-Croix, *Essai sur la liberté du commerce et de l'industrie* (1775). Other works were distributed more unevenly across his library and include 32 volumes of the *Journal oeconomique* (Paris 1751-66), Necker's *Eloge de Colbert* (1773) and his *Essai sur la législation et le commerce des grains* (1775).

The *Encyclopédie*

Voltaire much appreciated the *Discours préliminaire*, and we can assume this was not only due to the empiricist outlook and the postulation of a close link between arts, sciences, and philosophy, of which Voltaire must have wholeheartedly approved.⁴⁷ Four other points must have pleased him as well. These were the praise lavished on Voltaire as a writer, poet and playwright which set him above all the other authors mentioned in the discourse; d'Alembert's account of the origin of society and the arts; his depiction of progress contrasted to the Middle Ages; and his verdict on Rousseau's view of the arts and sciences. The latter three are of consequence to our topic. Though, unlike Voltaire, not postulating a natural sociability, and basing society solely on its utilitarian value to human self-preservation, d'Alembert sees the development of the arts and sciences as a natural phenomenon, an immediate consequence of needs and desires inherent in human nature.⁴⁸ This must have pleased Voltaire, who, since the 1730s had postulated that the development of the arts and sciences – and, as he would have added, of luxury – were an integral part of natural human development and not, as Rousseau would claim, a consequence of socially imposed desires alien to original humanity. Also much like Voltaire, d'Alembert contrasted the happy state of modernity with the ignorance, poverty, superstition, in short, the 'tradition barbare' of the Middle Ages which was characterised by an 'état d'esclavage où presque toute l'Europe était plongée' and by 'les ravages de la superstition qui naît de l'ignorance' (p. XX). Progress, knowledge, and sophistication, both intellectual, social, and material were unquestionably positive (pp. XX-XXVIII).⁴⁹ What must have appealed to Voltaire especially in later years when his

⁴⁷ Cf D7842 to d'Alembert (2/8/1758) where he expresses his admiration. See also letter VIII of the *Lettres à S. A. M. le prince de *** sur Rabelais* and the *Introduction* to the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.

⁴⁸ Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Discours préliminaire des éditeurs*, in *Encyclopédie*, vol 1, I – LII (pp. III-IV, XIV).

⁴⁹ For the same see also pp. XXXII-XXXIII which includes the lengthy section in praise of Voltaire.

quarrel with Rousseau intensified, was one of the last sections of the discourse which took issue with the way the Genevan had depicted the arts and sciences in his First Discourse. In many ways it is a very polite disagreement, but Rousseau was nevertheless depicted as fundamentally mistaken in his view of the arts and sciences, and obliquely accused of hypocrisy, by being named as a contributor to this encyclopedia on the arts and sciences (p. XXXIII).

Luxury is treated more extensively and equally positively in Saint-Lambert's entry 'Luxe' (published in volume nine in 1764), to which we will return more fully in the next chapter.⁵⁰ At this point it is important only to note that Saint-Lambert dismisses Rousseau completely and instead posits a consensus on the generally beneficial effects of luxury: 'Cette opinion est assez générale, & même M. Hume ne s'en éloigne pas' (p. 764). This aside is more important than it would first seem. François Moureau cites Forbonnais' 1754 *Eléments du commerce* as a main influence on Saint-Lambert;⁵¹ but Forbonnais himself in his chapter on luxury extensively cites Hume. Almost an entire page is given to a quotation from Hume's 1752 Essay 'Of Luxury', which argues that once men are roused from their lethargy through the incentives luxury provides, this spirit then spreads to improve each and every art and science.⁵² These are just two

⁵⁰ Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, 'Luxe', *Encyclopédie*, vol. 9, 763-771.

There is no direct material proof of Voltaire's reaction to the article, it is not annotated in his copy of the *Encyclopédie*. However, as the editors of the *Corpus des notes marginales* rightly point out: 'On trouve souvent dans la correspondance de Voltaire des appréciations fortement exprimées sur différents articles qui ont attiré son attention, mais qui ne portent cependant pas de marques de lecture dans l'exemplaire de BV [...] On trouve dans les *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* des jugements de Voltaire sur les articles *Axe*, *Bataillon*, *Certain*, *certitude*, *Femme*, *Guerre*, *Paradis*, *Roi*, *Reine*, *Somnambules*, et *Songes*, *Testicules*, etc. Ces articles n'ont pas été marqués de signes de lecture par Voltaire.' (*Corpus*, vol. 3, note 382, p. 694). It is however unlikely that Voltaire did not read the article: by his own account he read the entire work avidly (D13156, D13159, D15298, etc.), and the question of luxury would certainly have interested him.

⁵¹ François Moureau, 'Le manuscrit de l'article *Luxe* ou l'atelier de Saint-Lambert', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 1 (1986), 71-84.

⁵² Forbonnais, *Eléments du commerce*, II, 238. Cf. David Hume, 'Of Luxury', in *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, 4 vols (London and Edinburgh: Millar and Kincaid, 1753-1756), IV, 20-35 (p. 23). On the crucial role Hume played in the French Luxury debate, for the Gournay circle in general and for Forbonnais in particular, see John Shovlin, 'Hume's *Political Discourses* and the French Luxury Debate', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, ed. by Carl Wennerlin and Margaret Schabas (New York

instances which illustrate that by the 1750s Hume was an important presence in the luxury debate in France, and, together with the *Encyclopédie*, one of the main reasons Voltaire could feel that Rousseau was on the losing side.

Voltaire and Hume

Voltaire and Hume never met in person, but Voltaire greatly admired his historiography and essays and was of course firmly on his side in the Rousseau-Hume quarrel.⁵³ The fact that one of the leading philosophers quarrelled with Rousseau could only confirm Voltaire's view that Rousseau was no longer a member of the *philosophes*, and need not be taken seriously as an intellectual.

Hume supported him in this view in another way, too. Both as a philosopher and a historian he arrived at an image of civilisation much like Voltaire: he proposed a view of progress that was led by, and resulted in, commerce and luxury. This is perhaps best expressed in his *Essays* and *Political Discourses*, which had an enormous impact on the French, and indeed on the European luxury debate.⁵⁴ Voltaire owned two editions of

and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 203-222; and Loïc Charles, 'French "New Politics" and the Dissemination of David Hume's *Political Discourses* on the Continent, 1750-70', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, pp. 181-202.

⁵³ Not much has been written on the relationship between Hume and Voltaire. Some of the few good studies on the subject are Nicholas Cronk's 'Une lettre de Voltaire à David Hume', *Revue Voltaire*, 8 (2008), 369-375; and Haydn Mason's, 'Voltaire and Hume' in *Enlightenment and Revolution: essays in honour of Norman Hampson*, ed. by Malcolm Crook, William Doyle, and Alan Forrest (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 22-37.

For evidence of Voltaire's praise of Hume in his correspondence, see D7499 (6/12/1757) to d'Alembert, D7887 (3/10/1758) to Thieriot, D8881 (28/4/1760) to the marquis d'Argence, D15614 (28/4/1769) to Gabriel Henri Gaillard, D15758 (18/7/1769) to the marquise du Deffand, and D16183 (26/2/1770) to William Robertson.

In Voltaire's library, in order of publication, we find: *Essays and treatises on several subjects* (London, an edition of 1753 and another of 1758), *The history of Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1754), *Four dissertations* (London, 1757), *Histoire naturelle de la religion. Traduit de l'anglois* (Amsterdam, 1759), *Histoire de la maison de Stuart* (Londres, 1760), *The History of England [...] to the accession of Henry VII* (London, 1762), *Histoire de la maison de Tudor* (Amsterdam, 1763), *Histoire de la maison de Plantagenet* (Amsterdam, 1765), and the *Exposé succinct de la contestation qui s'est élevée entre M. Hume et M. Rousseau, avec les pièces justificatives* (London, 1766).

⁵⁴ On this see Shovlin, 'Hume's *Political Discourses* and the French Luxury Debate' and Charles, 'French "New Politics" and the Dissemination of David Hume's *Political Discourses* on the Continent'.

these in which he left several markers and comments.⁵⁵ Some of these are more relevant to the luxury debate than others, the page mark in pp. 8-9 of the first volume's second essay, 'Of the Liberty of the Press', (pp. 7-13) most likely simply indicates Hume's citation of the *Henriade* concerning Elizabeth I. Voltaire's markers in 'Of Liberty and Despotism', are more significant, however. They indicate the link Hume makes between commerce and free government. Hume concludes, just as Voltaire had done in his *Lettres philosophiques*, that the very nature of absolute government contains an element hurtful to commerce, namely that it is built on a society of ranks and in such a society commerce is not sufficiently respected to let it blossom.⁵⁶ Some essays were directly useful to Voltaire in refuting the enemies of luxury and commercial society. His marker in 'Of national characters' indicates a passage that disproves the Montesquieuan theory of climate, geographical, and dietary determinism. Most important perhaps were the two unmarked essays 'Of Commerce' and 'Of the Refinement in the Arts and Sciences', later renamed 'Of Luxury', and the essay 'Of the populousness of ancient nations', which Voltaire marked in several places in both editions. These works forms a triptych strongly defending luxury and modern commercial society.

'Of Commerce' argues not only in favour of luxury and commerce, but also for modern as compared to ancient societies; and this is important given that Voltaire seems to have considered Rousseau's philosophy as a simple return to ancient societies along the classical republican model. According to Hume, modern, commercial nations are in all respects superior to ancient ones. They are less violent and cruel, and do not require the no longer feasible and very hard to achieve mindset of self-denial that was necessary

⁵⁵ Most markers are in the earlier edition which is the one I shall refer to here: David Hume, *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, 4 vols (London and Edinburgh: Millar and Kincaid, 1753-1756). Volume 3 is missing in Voltaire's library, but of interest here are only volume 1 containing the *Essays, Moral and Political* and 4 containing the *Political Discourses*.

⁵⁶ Hume, 'Of Liberty and Despotism', in *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, I, 127-137 (132-133).

to sustain ancient republics. They are more attuned to human nature, as they positively encourage people to act on their self-interest, which through commerce and luxury is of benefit to the entire nation. By giving men incentives they eradicate laziness and are thus characterised by a strong work ethic and constant improvements. The advantages of commerce and luxury are summed up as raising men from their natural indolence, as material progress, the perfection of all arts, greater possibilities for enjoyment, and a more equal distribution of wealth, leading to greater happiness and diminishing the danger of political corruption. The essay provides a similar, though at times more sophisticated, argument to Voltaire's and as such it served both to bolster Voltaire's arsenal and to confirm him in his view that a consensus was building in which Rousseau was outmanoeuvred and no longer relevant.

This is even more true of Hume's next essay in the volume, 'Of Luxury'. The later renaming of the essay, entitled from 1758 onwards 'Of the Refinement in the Arts and Sciences', is programmatic. As in Rousseau, luxury and the arts and sciences are conflated, but they are strongly defended. Any reader of the essay who has also perused Saint-Lambert on luxury will realise how much the latter was indebted to Hume. Many of the arguments are the same: luxury was not the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire, and, in itself, is not pernicious. Its value depends on its conditions. Like Saint-Lambert after him, Hume distinguishes 'good' or 'innocent', from 'pernicious' luxury. Good luxury is simply a form of refinement and its consequences are unquestionably positive. It brings greater health and happiness; it leads to the perfection of all arts, mechanical as well as liberal; and being linked to greater sociability, politeness, urbanity, and female company, it results in better manners, increasing both humanity and virtue. Its public benefits are also threefold: greater military power through increased funds and the 'storehouse of labour' argument already made in 'Of Commerce';

a diminishing of superstition and instead better laws, police, order, and discipline; and finally a more moderate and humane government. According to Hume, luxury ultimately fosters virtue and humanity: '*industry, knowledge, and humanity, are link'd together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polish'd and luxurious ages*'.⁵⁷

Hume was important not only in confirming the general consensus Voltaire saw, but also in giving him further ammunition in the debate about luxury. The greatest impact, at least judging by the general importance of the debate for the defence of commercial societies and by the number of markers Voltaire left in the essay, was Hume's contribution to the question of population in the form of the essay 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations', (IV, 135-234). The eighteenth century was much preoccupied by the question of population growth. It was unanimously considered desirable and it was also seen as a benchmark for measuring the success of a certain type of society and government.⁵⁸ It was thus directly relevant to the debate about luxury and commercial societies: if their population levels were inferior to those of ancient or less commercialised nations, luxury was necessarily pernicious. This was precisely what enemies of luxury, and Rousseau prominently amongst them, argued.⁵⁹ Voltaire's interest in the matter is thus no surprise: the question of population growth was crucial to proving that modern civilisation was indeed successful – and of course, to demonstrating that Rousseau was wrong.⁶⁰ This, in all likelihood, is why he found

⁵⁷ Hume, 'Of Luxury', in *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, IV, 20-35 (24).

⁵⁸ For a good overview of the debate and its importance, with a focus on Montesquieu, Hume, and Rousseau, see Sylvana Tomaselli, 'Moral Philosophy and Population Questions in Eighteenth-Century Europe', *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 14, Supplement: *Population and Resources in Western Intellectual Traditions* (1988), 7-29.

⁵⁹ On Rousseau see especially *Du contrat social*, III, ix, which instates the criterion of population growth as the benchmark for judging whether a government is good or bad.

⁶⁰ Voltaire's interest in the question, however, was genuine and sustained and not limited solely to proving Rousseau wrong. See Hervé Hasquin, 'Voltaire démographe', *Etudes sur le XVIIIe siècle*, 3 (1976), 133-148.

Hume's analysis of modern versus ancient nations so useful. It proved the superiority of modern commercial civilisation both in terms of population growth and of happiness and prosperity.

It is perhaps disappointing to modern scholars to see how little Voltaire engaged with the Genevan and that he failed to recognise the importance, originality, and lasting impact of his thought, only reacting to him when he became a personal inconvenience. A study of the historical and intellectual context shows however, that Voltaire's dismissal is not solely based on a personal grudge – he seems to have felt that the intellectual vanguards of both Britain and France had come to agree on the topic of luxury, and that this agreement was very much along the lines of Voltaire's own conclusions. Classing Rousseau with nostalgic classical republicans and disgruntled puritanical Calvinists certainly helped Voltaire to represent him as overtaken by the intellectual movement in favour of commercial civilisation.

**V CONCLUSIONS AND FRAGMENTS:
VOLTAIRE ON LUXURY IN THE 1760S AND
1770S**

The conclusion that Voltaire was neither influenced by Rousseau's views on luxury or the arts and sciences, nor came to take a proto-Roussauvian anti-luxury stance, is borne out by two other works, the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770-1772). These works demonstrate that Voltaire remained interested in the question of luxury, which continued to form part of his views on society and civilisation. Both the *Dictionnaire* and the *Questions* touch on it in several articles and each devote an entry to luxury. Though identical in method, both assembling seemingly unrelated short articles in alphabetical order and posthumously amalgamated in a single edition,¹ the two works are written with very distinct audiences in mind; and the varying purpose explains a difference in tone and treatment.

The Dictionnaire philosophique

Any discussion of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* sooner or later cites Voltaire's statement made in a letter to d'Alembert two years after the first publication of his *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*: 'Jamais vingt volumes in-folio ne feront de révolution; ce sont les petits livres portatifs à trente sous qui sont à craindre. Si l'évangile avait coûté douze cents sesterces, jamais la religion chrétienne ne se serait établie' (D13235, 5 April 1766). The work was an 'oeuvre de combat'. Intended to

¹ Perhaps the best exposition of the texts' editorial history is found in Christiane Mervaud's introduction to the *Dictionnaire philosophique*: *OCV*, vol. 35, 45-60.

demolish the remaining bastions of the *infâme*, it was 'conçu comme une machine de guerre'.² As such it was designed to be persuasive, forceful, and didactic, not probing, questioning, or nuanced. What Pierre Rétat aptly summarises as the 'souci pratique d'allègement et de vulgarisation',³ is corroborated by Sylvain Menant's careful analysis of Voltaire's rhetoric: 'Il faut entraîner un lecteur mondain', he concludes, 'autrement dit, convaincre et non démontrer'.⁴ What Voltaire seeks to convince the reader of is his programme of 'Enlightenment'. Its primary target is of course the *infâme*: Christiane Mervaud's analysis reveals that three fifths of the work centre on a vigorous attack on Judeo-Christianity and that, despite a variety of other themes, most prominent amongst them politics and philosophy, the anti-religious sentiments pervade throughout.⁵ Whilst the focus here will be precisely on those two other themes, the intention behind the work is clear and must be taken into consideration.

Important in the context of luxury are the redefinition of vice and virtue, and the view of human nature or indeed self-interest, both of which are strongly reminiscent of the *Traité de métaphysique*. In line with this earlier work, self-interest is defined as the mainspring of humanity in the article 'Amour-propre': 'l'amour de nous-mêmes est la base de tous nos sentiments et de toutes nos actions'.⁶ Virtue is once again defined as contributing to the common good, and detached from considerations of motive.⁷ The

² Mervaud, 'Introduction', *OCV*, vol. 35, 46 & 30.

³ Pierre Rétat, 'Le "Dictionnaire philosophique" de Voltaire: concept et discours du dictionnaire', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 81 (1981), 892-900 (899-900).

⁴ Sylvain Menant, 'La rhétorique dans le *Portatif*', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 95 (1995), 177-186 (185).

⁵ Mervaud, 'Introduction', p. 31. Cf. her entry 'Dictionnaire philosophique' in the *Inventaire Voltaire*, ed. by Jean-Marie Goulemot, André Magnan, and Didier Masseur (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 411-413.

⁶ Voltaire, 'Amour-propre' in *Dictionnaire philosophique*, *OCV*, vol. 35, 334-336 (335). This could of course be read as a jibe at Rousseau; it is nevertheless also a reiteration of statements made in the 1730s both in the *Traité de métaphysique* (chapter v) and in the 5th *Discours en vers sur l'homme*. For a similar statement, an endorsement of La Rochefoucauld's stance on self-love, see 'Fausseté des vertus humaines', *OCV*, vol. 36, 112-116 (112).

⁷ 'Qu'est-ce que vertu? Bienfaisance envers le prochain.' in 'Vertu', *OCV*, vol. 36, 581-584 (581). As to the question of motivation, the article 'Fausseté des vertus humaines' concludes its attack on the Christian moralist Jacques Esprit with the words: 'Qu'est-ce que la vertu, mon ami? C'est de faire du bien. Fais-nous-en, et cela suffit. Alors nous te ferons grâce du motif' (pp. 114-115).

consequence is, as before, that luxury becomes a morally neutral concept, so that Voltaire can mount its defence in the eponymous entry.

Given the general objective of the work however, one is left to wonder why Voltaire included a section on luxury at all. Discussions of virtue and self-interest can be related to a general anti-religious thrust, especially as they are often set in direct contrast with their traditional Christian definitions. But the work contains no articles on commerce, political economy, trade, or merchants; and yet the entry 'Luxe' was not added as an afterthought: it formed part of the *Dictionnaire* from its first edition onwards.⁸ Moreover, even though it largely constitutes a defence of luxury against its detractors, these detractors are not Christian as the overall tone of the work would suggest: in this instance, the attack is focussed more on classic republican views of luxury. Such views were expressed in works Voltaire had previously criticised, Fénelon's *Télémaque*, Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*, and of course Rousseau.⁹ Including the article can thus be seen as testament to the continued importance of the debate. It was conceived several years after Rousseau's *Discours*, six years after the *Lettre à d'Alembert* on the theatre, and only two years after the publication of the *Contrat social* and *Emile*. It came a few years after Hume's *Essays* and just before the *Encyclopédie*'s article on the same subject. The debate was still alive in France and if, as it seems,

⁸ It was included in the 1764 edition and Voltaire stated his authorship of it in November of that year in a letter to the comtesse d'Argental (D12180).

⁹ Classic republicanism or republican humanism were by no means dead at this point, nor was Rousseau alone in defending virtue in the tradition of these: 'alongside the history of liberalism, which is a matter of law and right, there existed throughout the early modern period a history of republican humanism, in which personality was considered in terms of virtue': J.G.A. Pocock, 'Virtue, rights, and manners: A model for historians of political thought', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 37-50 (p. 45).

On eighteenth-century attacks on Classical Republicanists' views on luxury see Paul A. Rahe, 'Antiquity Surpassed: The Repudiation of Classical Republicanism', in *Republicanism, liberty, and commercial society, 1694-1779*, ed. by David Wootton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 233-269; and Iain Hampsher-Monk, 'From Virtue to Politeness', in *Republicanism: a shared European heritage*, ed. by Quentin Skinner and Martin von Gelderen, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), II, 85-105.

Voltaire felt that a consensus was building in favour of luxury he, who was considered one of its main champions, was certain to want to add his voice. The inclusion of the entry also emphasises the importance of commercial society and its shorthand, luxury, in Voltaire's view of civilisation and thus in the general programme of 'Enlightenment' as put forward in the *Dictionnaire*.

If including such an entry could be seen as an attack on classical republican views in general, and Rousseau in particular, it also allowed Voltaire to make another point: none of the arguments in it was new. Those who knew Voltaire as the author of the anonymously published *Dictionnaire* would recognise the references to his previous works, and even those who were unaware of his authorship were pointed towards Voltaire's earlier interventions in the debate by a citation from the *Défense du mondain*. This allowed him to make two points, albeit implicitly. Firstly, that Voltaire had pre-empted Rousseau. This once again relies on his favoured argument, that Rousseau's thought was not original, and permitted Voltaire to demonstrate that he had dealt with the latter's attacks on luxury long ago, prior to the publication of any of the Genevan's works. Secondly, it was designed to convince its readers that the luxury debate had been settled, and settled by none other than Voltaire, once more foregrounding the importance of the topic in his thought in general. Christiane Mervaud argues that one of the defining characteristics of the *Dictionnaire* is the presence of the 'déjà dit'. The article 'Luxury' proves one of the best illustrations of this.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. Mervaud's 'Introduction', pp. 83-96. Cf. her discussion of autocitation in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*: Christiane Mervaud, 'Réemploi et réécriture dans les *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*: l'exemple de l'article 'Propriété', *SVEC* 2003:01, 3-26; and Christiane Mervaud, 'De la réécriture dans les *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*', in *Poétique de la Pensée: études sur l'âge classique et le siècle philosophique: en hommage à Jean Dagen*, ed. by Béatrice Guion et al. (Paris: Champion, 2006), pp. 557-568. Nicholas Cronk also remarks on Voltaire's practice of self-quotation, especially in the later works: Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire and authorship', in *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 31-46.

The opening statement of the article exemplifies both points: 'On a déclamé contre le luxe depuis deux mille ans, en vers et en prose, et on l'a toujours aimé.'¹¹ It is reminiscent both of the charge of hypocrisy made in the *Défense du mondain* amongst others, and of the claim that those who, like Rousseau perhaps, complain about luxury only repeat the same old song. The first of the two illustrations offered also contains this double aspect. The example is that of ancient Rome, or, to be more precise, of the apparent loss of virtue when the early Romans became richer and more luxurious. Voltaire creates two binaries to ridicule this claim. The first runs as follows:

Que n'a-t-on pas dit des premiers Romains, quand ces brigands ravagèrent et pillèrent les moissons; quand pour augmenter leur pauvre village, ils détruisirent les pauvres villages des Volsques et des Samnites? c'étaient des hommes désintéressés et vertueux; ils n'avaient pu encore voler ni or, ni argent, ni pierreries, parce qu'il n'y en avait point dans les bourgs qu'ils saccagèrent. Leurs bois ni leurs marais ne produisaient ni perdrix, ni faisans, et on loue leur tempérance. (p. 324)

The link is clear: poverty and violence are connected to 'disinterestedness' and 'virtue'. Ergo, the detractors of luxury distort reason so much that they consider the most violent crimes virtuous and disinterested as long as they do not result in luxury. Not only does this illustrate the folly and wilful blindness of the enemies of luxury, it also makes an implicit link between poverty and violence; or between lack of luxury and lack of civilisation. This is borne out by the second binary. Before turning to this however, it ought to be pointed out that the above example is another instance of Voltaire's combination of attack on classic republican detractors of luxury – ancient Rome was, together with Sparta the standard topos – with self-reference: the close of the passage is strongly reminiscent of the *Défense du Mondain's* 'consuls en us': a critique of the idealisation of early Roman history that concludes: 'N'allez donc pas, avec simplicité, // Nommer vertu ce qui fut pauvreté.'¹²

¹¹ Voltaire, 'Luxe', in *Dictionnaire philosophique, OCV*, vol. 36, 324-329 (324).

¹² Voltaire, *Défense du Mondain, OCV*, vol. 16, 304-309 (308, lines 97-98).

The tactic of discrediting proponents of classic republican views of luxury is continued in the second binary, which associates enjoyment, the arts, pleasure, and civilising influences with lack of virtue:

Quand de proche en proche ils eurent tout pillé, tout volé du fond du golfe Adriatique à l'Euphrate, et qu'ils eurent assez d'esprit pour jouir du fruit de leurs rapines pendant sept à huit cents ans; quand ils cultivèrent tous les arts, qu'ils goûtèrent tous les plaisirs, et qu'ils les firent même goûter aux vaincus, ils cessèrent alors, dit-on, d'être sages et gens de bien. (p. 325)

The sarcasm of the passage hardly requires elucidation. What should be noted however, is that it provides yet another occasion for Voltaire to link luxury and enjoyment ('jouir', 'tous les plaisirs') with reason ('assez d'esprit') and with 'tous les arts' – the repetition of 'tou(te)s les' again denoting a connection between sensual and aesthetic pleasure – and even a certain civilising influence ('les firent même goûter aux vaincus'), reminiscent of the *Essai sur les mœurs*. He also takes the opportunity to stress once again that the fall of the Roman empire was not due to luxury: the Romans enjoyed luxurious living 'pendant sept à huit cents ans' before their influence waned; and after such a long time, the decline can hardly be blamed on luxury.

Against this perfectly distorted caricature of classic republican thought, Voltaire could set himself up as the embodiment of common sense: 'dites plutôt qu'il ne fallait pas voler. Condamnez les brigands quand ils pillent; mais ne les traitez pas d'insensés quand ils jouissent' (p. 325). Even more so if the riches were honestly gained, through military means, agriculture, industry, or commerce, it would simply be ridiculous to bury them and not enjoy ones just rewards in the enjoyment of what can be termed 'luxury' – a statement also to be found in the *Idées républicaines* (XXIV). Now that he has clearly set himself up as reasonableness incarnate, Voltaire can turn to the second favoured topos of classic republican thought – and one, like the decline of Rome due to luxury, that Rousseau had heavily drawn on in his *First Discourse*: the comparison of

Athens and Sparta as representations of luxury versus martial austerity. Voltaire's position is predictable and based on the same values of utilitarianism and civilisation, on the link between luxury and the arts: 'Quel bien Sparte fit-elle à la Grèce? Eut-elle jamais des Démosthène, des Sophocle, des Apelle, et des Phidias? Le luxe d'Athènes a fait des grands hommes en tout genre' (p. 326).

Voltaire had made his point. What follow are specifications on the nature and correct usage of luxury, all of which are implicit or explicit references to Voltaire's previous works on the subject. Two guidelines as to correct usage are offered, one falling more into the realms of economics, the other in that of ethics, both firmly grounded in common sense. Firstly, do not spend beyond your means. This applies to the individual as well as to states, and in this instance Voltaire can cite himself ('j'ai lu quelque part'), quoting the advice from the *Défense* that luxury, while beneficial to large nations, is detrimental to small states. Hence sumptuary laws, which would be inappropriate in large states where they curtail employment opportunities and deprive artisans and artists, are perfectly acceptable in small republics, such as Ragusa or the Swiss canton of Zug. The second guideline is Epicurean moderation. Strongly reminiscent of the *Usage de la vie*, Voltaire condemns excess and counsels a happy medium: 'Si par le luxe vous entendez l'excès, on sait que l'excès est pernicieux en tout genre, dans l'abstinence comme dans la gourmandise, dans l'économie comme dans la libéralité' (p. 327). And just to drive home the Epicurean message, Voltaire cites Horace's 'Est modus in rebus'.

As to the nature of luxury, it is, as one might expect, defined by its relativity and doubly so, since it is portrayed as both dependent on context and situation, and as

historically relative.¹³ Elaborating on the contextual element, Voltaire, though ostensibly anonymous, cannot forgo the opportunity once again to show himself in his favourite role as the patriarchal model landowner, whose peasants are well clad and shod, despite adverse conditions.¹⁴ However, if these farmers wore powdered wigs whilst working this would be considered outrageous luxury, just as inappropriate as if, conversely, a Londoner or Parisian attended the theatre dressed like a peasant. Not only is it dependent on context, what is considered luxury also changes over time; and illustrating this point permits Voltaire to reference many of his previous – and well known – statements on luxury. The examples are the only instance in the article when Christian thought on luxury is evoked and, of course, soundly ridiculed. The first is an allusion to the *Mondain* and to the scandal it caused by pondering how Adam and Eve's fingernails were probably long, dirty, and unappetising, their hair uncut and messy:

Lorsqu'on inventa les ciseaux, qui ne sont certainement pas de l'antiquité la plus haute, que ne dit-on pas contre les premiers qui se rognèrent les ongles et qui coupèrent une partie des cheveux qui leur tombaient sur le nez? On les traita sans doute de petits-maîtres et de prodiges qui achetaient chèrement un instrument de la vanité, pour gâter l'ouvrage du Créateur. Quel péché énorme d'accourir la corne que Dieu fait naître au bout de nos doigts! C'était un outrage à la Divinité. (p. 328. Cf. *Le mondain* lines 50-52)

The following example is that of the invention of shoes and shirts, both of which, Voltaire surmises, must have caused outrage at first. These are examples he had previously used in his *Sur Messieurs Jean Law, Melon, et Dutot* and which figured in Mme Du Châtelet's translation of the *Fable of the Bees*, examples taken from Melon's *Essai politique* which she chose in preference over Mandeville's own.¹⁵ Ending with an echo of the complaints of the imaginary contemporaries of these 'luxurious' inventions, Voltaire references the similar complaint he attributed to La Flamma in the *Essai sur les*

¹³ The argument is most probably Mandevillian, Voltaire would have been familiar with it at the very latest since Madame Du Châtelet translated the *Fable of the Bee's* 'Remark L' on luxury. The same relativist argument is already made in *Sur Messieurs Jean Law, Melon, et Dutot*, *OCV*, vol. 18A, 239-255 (245).

¹⁴ On Voltaire's use of his role as landowner and patriarch, see below.

¹⁵ On this see chapter 1.

moeurs.

The article thus closes on the same satirical note that opened it, and the mention of Christian condemnations of luxury at the end set the entry at least partly in the context of the general work. But it figures in the *Dictionnaire* for reasons other than its partially anti-Christian thrust. Luxury has once again been shown to be an important constituent of Voltaire's view of Enlightened civilisation. It has to have its place in a work that sets out the groundwork of what the *philosophes* and all enlightened *honnêtes gens* should stand for – at least in Voltaire's mind. It serves one further purpose, too. Autocitation and almost constant allusions to his previous work, particularly to the *Mondain* and its companion pieces, are intended to convince the reader that Voltaire was the authority on the matter. And that he had settled the debate, long before critics such as Rousseau pronounced on the subject.

The Questions sur l'Encyclopédie

The *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* were written with an altogether different intention. Much more substantial than the *Dictionnaire*, containing 442 articles in the quarto edition as opposed to the 118 articles of the dictionary's last edition as the *Raison par alphabet*, they were conceived as a critical dialogue with Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* and as an extensive exposition of Voltaire's own thought. Conceived less as a weapon and intended for a smaller and more elite audience, they are more nuanced and probing than the earlier work and boast a much enlarged choice of subjects. In her meticulous comparison of the two works, Christiane Mervaud finds five newly extended fields of interest: literature and the arts; linguistics and lexicography; natural history; history and geography; and, what she calls the 'entrée en force' of economic

topics.¹⁶ Predictably, it is the latter that will be the focus here. Despite these changes, the treatment of luxury in the work remains largely unchanged. The basis is the same: the article 'Amour propre', extended with two further paragraphs, is taken over from the *Dictionnaire*, and even though the article 'Vertu' is newly written, in its opposition of the 'Honnête homme' to the 'Excrément de théologie', it follows both in tone and substance the old 'Fausseté des vertus humaines'. Thus self-interest is still the motor of human behaviour, and whilst both theological and cardinal virtues are useful, the only 'true' virtue is *bienfaisance*, regardless of its motive. The groundwork for the defence of luxury remains in place.

The article 'Luxe' follows the same line of reasoning as the previous one, but the topic seems to have been important enough to Voltaire to merit a new article. The entry itself is short, but in its brevity it repeats most of the points made in the one of the *Dictionnaire*, though the references to Voltaire's previous publications on luxury involve no direct citations and, largely due to the reduced length of the entry, are less extensive than in that of the *Dictionnaire*.

The terseness of the article is most likely due to the original *Encyclopédie* article to which it responds, rather than to any loss of interest in the topic. The article 'Luxe' of the original *Encyclopédie* was written by Saint-Lambert and contained in volume nine, dated 1765 but printed in 1764 and also published separately as *Essai sur le luxe* in the same year.¹⁷ Despite a token effort of showing both sides of the debate, the article is clear in its defence of luxury, more strongly so than Forbonnais' 1754 *Eléments du commerce*, on which it is largely based.¹⁸ Luxury is defined as 'l'usage qu'on fait des

¹⁶ Mervaud, 'De la Réécriture', p. 558; for a more general comparison of the two works, see pp. 557-562.

¹⁷ On the dating see François Moureau, 'Le manuscrit de l'article *Luxe* ou l'atelier de Saint-Lambert', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 1 (1986), 71-84.

¹⁸ Moureau offers a comparative study of the two texts and finds that most changes were designed to be

richesses & de l'industrie pour se procurer une existence agréable',¹⁹ and characterised as both natural and necessary, its origin lying in the 'ce desir d'être mieux, qui est & doit être dans tous les hommes' (p. 763). The material effects of luxury are growth of the arts, sciences, and industries, as well as of commerce, all of which entail new means of subsistence for the population, which in turn results in an increase in population number (pp. 765-766). Its moral effects vary according to the type of society: in ancient, frugal, and egalitarian societies luxury would be harmful, whilst in modern societies which are governed by civil laws luxury is greatly beneficial; a point with which Voltaire, who, in the *Défense du Mondain* already, had differentiated between forms of states, would have agreed. Also like Voltaire, Saint-Lambert differentiates between a bad and unjust kind of luxury, which he links to 'faste', and a type of 'good', middle-class luxury, the 'luxe de bienséance', characterised by 'une certaine recherche de commodités' and the 'aisance du grand nombre' (p. 769). This type of luxury encourages all industries and as such provides incentives for all, which in turn lead to a better life for rural communities, too. And, which will have pleased Voltaire particularly, he calls this 'le projet du grand Colbert' (p. 769). All in all Voltaire must have been content with this entry and this most likely explains why he has few corrections to offer. His response was designed as an endorsement as well as a reminder of his own importance in the debate, hence once again the frequent use of self-reference.

Voltaire's entry comprises three sections of only a few lines each: the first a reiteration of the historically relative nature of luxury and of the outrage with which it is received every time; the second a fictional conversation set in ancient times, in the context of a classic republic, between Cato and Lucullus; the third another fictional

more unequivocally positive in the evaluation of luxury. We may surmise that, when luxury once again became a more contentious subject after Rousseau's intervention, Saint-Lambert felt the need to take sides: Moureau, 'Le manuscrit de l'article *Luxe*', pp. 78-79.

¹⁹ Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, 'Luxe', *Encyclopédie*, vol. 9, 763-771 (763).

conversation set in modern times, in the context of a commercial republic, between a Dutch merchant and a Norwegian citizen. The examples in the first section are once again those of the invention of shoes, of shirts and of the bleaching and ironing of the latter. Examples that serve to make a point: when those wearing them were accused of 'corrupting' and 'effeminating' the nation, the readers are meant to realise that the same accusations made in the eighteenth century were as groundless; for after all, the idealised counter examples invoked by the opponents of luxury in those days, the frugal Spartans and Roman republicans, were already wearing shoes and nicely bleached togas and tunics. The following section makes this link explicit by situating itself in the days of the late Roman republic. The point made here is the same as in the *Idées républicaines* XXII combined with a reminiscence of the article 'Luxe' of the *Dictionnaire*: Cato is made to adopt the same stance as the anonymous 'déclamateurs' of the Dictionary's entry:

Gardez-vous du luxe, disait Caton aux Romains; vous avez subjugué la province du Phage; mais ne mangez jamais de faisans. Vous avez conquis le pays où croit le coton, couchez sur la dure. Vous avez volé à main armée l'or, l'argent et les pierreries de vingt nations, ne soyez jamais assez sots pour vous en servir. Manquez de tout après avoir tout pris. Il faut que les voleurs de grand chemin soient vertueux et libres.²⁰

Lucullus' response on the other hand evokes the pragmatism of the *Idées républicaines*, which serves at the same time to insinuate once again that the decline of Rome cannot have been due to luxury:

Mon ami, souhaite plutôt que Crassus, Pompée, César et moi nous dépensions tout en luxe. [...] Rome doit être asservie, mais elle le sera bien plus tôt et bien plus sûrement par l'un de nous si nous faisons valoir comme toi notre argent, que si nous le dépensions en superfluités et en plaisirs. Souhaite que Pompée et César s'appauvrissent assez pour n'avoir pas de quoi soudoyer des armées. (p. 99)²¹

The last section transports the same opposition into the present time: a Norwegian is made to represent nostalgic opposition to luxury: 'Qu'est devenu, disait-il, cet heureux

²⁰ Voltaire, 'Luxe' in *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* [QE], Cramer, vol. 24, 99-100 (99).

²¹ Cf. The *Idées républicaines par un membre d'un corps*, XXII: 'Une loi romaine qui eût dit à Lucullus: Ne dépensez rien, aurait dit en effet à Lucullus: Devenez encore plus riche, afin que votre petit-fils puisse acheter la république.' Moland, vol. 24, 413-432 (417-418).

temps [...] ? Où sont vos cuillers de bois et vos fourchettes de fer? n'est-il pas honteux pour un sage Hollandais de coucher dans un lit de damas?' (p. 99). The Dutch merchant's reply is laconic, and an echo of the *Mondain's* 'Quel idiot, s'il avait eu pour lors // Quelque bon lit, aurait couché dehors'²² : 'Va-t'en à Batavia, lui répondit l'homme d'Amsterdam; gagne comme moi dix tonnes d'or, et vois si l'envie ne te prendra pas d'être bien vêtu, bien nourri et bien logé' (p. 99).

If the article 'Luxe' is thus a very straightforward defence of luxury, other articles are more probing and nuanced. The entry 'Economie' is perhaps the most interesting of the work in terms of the luxury debate. Its first section, devoted to domestic economy, opens with the praise of agricultural or rural economy:

La première économie, celle par qui subsistent toutes les autres, est celle de la campagne. C'est elle qui fournit les trois seules choses dont les hommes ont un vrai besoin, le vivre, le vêtir et le couvert [...] Toutes les trois bien entendues donnent la santé, sans laquelle il n'y a rien.²³

This does not necessarily imply any critique of luxury or urban life in itself. If agriculture and the needs it fulfils are compared to good health, the metaphor could imply that health is the basis of a happy life, providing in Epicurean terms the absence of pain and hence katastematic pleasure, and that all else added to it, luxury in material terms, or aesthetic, intellectual and sensual pleasures in non-material terms, would provide kinematic pleasures as an additional bonus. However, after a digression on the unpleasant and errant life of the Biblical patriarchs, there follows an outright condemnation of urban luxury. The life of a French 'cultivateur' is defined above all as independent and self-sufficient, as 'l'état le plus naturel de l'homme, le plus tranquille, le plus heureux, et malheureusement le plus rare' (p. 593) and set in direct contrast with that of his son who runs off to Paris to lead a life of luxury, which inevitably ends in

²² Voltaire, *Mondain*, *OCV*, vol. 16, 295-313 (lines 44-45).

²³ Voltaire, 'Economie', in *QE*, *OCV*, vols 37-43, vol. 40, 589-607 (590).

ruin and misery, so that his son in turn will end up a domestic servant. The conclusion: 'Telle est la différence entre l'économie de la campagne et les illusions des villes' (p. 593). This seems to be a clear condemnation of luxury, very much along the lines of *Jeannot and Colin*, a *conte* which also depicts the dismal fate of a country boy and his parents who are ruined in Paris.²⁴ Yet what follows appears to question this conclusion in turn. First of all, the relativity of the notion of luxury is maintained: 'le luxe ordinaire qui est devenu nécessaire et qui n'est plus luxe' (p. 596). And perhaps most interesting, it seems that whilst life in the cities leads to ruin more easily due to the constant price rises, the 'cultivateurs' or 'terriens' are exposed to the same danger of ruin; and this danger, Voltaire clearly states 'est dans eux-mêmes': 'Leur luxe et leur inattention non moins dangereuse encore, les conduisent à la ruine' (p. 597). Is luxury to blame then? It seems that it isn't quite. The problem is not luxury itself but the universal tendency to spend beyond one's means. Luxury, at least in the form of industry, is, according to Voltaire, precisely what helps the grand families of Paris eschew poverty. The conclusion of this section makes this quite clear: 'C'est une circulation perpétuelle d'élévation et de décadence; le tout faute d'une économie raisonnable qui consiste uniquement à ne pas dépenser plus qu'on ne reçoit' (p. 597). It seems the answer, as so often, lies in a combination of common sense or reason – do not spend beyond your means – and of Epicurean philosophy – maintain a certain independence and do not become enslaved to luxury.

The second section, entitled 'De l'économie publique', maintains the same critically nuanced attitude to luxury. Again when describing the make-up of the English economy, the most positive role is given to the farmer whose existence is independent

²⁴ It ought to be said that, much like the *QE* entry, the *conte* is also much more nuanced and ambiguous and by no means a straight-forward condemnation of urban luxury or praise of the rural idyll. On this, see especially Christiane Mervaud, '« Jeannot et Colin » : illustration et subversion du conte moral', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 85 (1985), 596-620.

and peaceful as opposed to that of the merchant who stakes his existence on uncertain ventures against the entire universe, but who despite all this still seems less appalling than the idle stock-brokers and investors who 'ressemblent parfaitement aux oisifs de la France qui achètent des effets royaux, et dont le sort dépend de la bonne ou mauvaise fortune du gouvernement', and who spend their useless lives 'trafiquer la crainte et l'espérance' (pp. 598-599). This constitutes a marked change from the positive portrayal of brokers in the *Lettres philosophiques*, even if the latter were depicted as a counter example to religious fanatics and sectarians, which would provide enough of a motive for Voltaire to give them a positive image. However, he had lauded traders and merchant banking not only in the *Lettres* but also in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, and since then the profession must have suffered a severe blow in his esteem. Whilst before they were model citizens, now they are all depicted as gamblers, except for the farmer who provides what they can subsequently gamble with. And yet luxury and its corollary, commerce, still appear to have some advantages: the king's vast expenditure 'revient tout entier au peuple par la consommation' (p. 598); and 'le grand avantage d'un pays commerçant' (p. 600), is its political system, where taxes are imposed by the people themselves through their representatives, where all is regulated by positive laws, and public credit for the financing of wars is readily available (pp. 599-601). It seems, moreover, that luxury and its symbols, flourishing cities and trading vessels, are still something to admire and to take pride in. They appear the very criterion that differentiates European civilisation from the 'savage' and natural state of parts of Africa and the Americas:

Nous ne sommes supérieurs à tous ces hommes-là que d'environ quarante écus par an. Mais ces quarante écus font une prodigieuse différence; c'est elle qui couvre la terre de belles villes, et la mer de vaisseaux. C'est avec nos quarante écus que Louis XIV eut deux cents vaisseaux, et bâtit Versailles. (p. 605)

It is luxury, the 'superflu', the 40 *écus* extra,²⁵ that allow for the grandeur of civilisation,

²⁵ As Christiane Mervaud points out, Voltaire takes the calculation leading to the forty *écus*, which also

once again exemplified by the achievements of Louis XIV. Thus, despite the human tendency to abuse it, to spend beyond ones means, and to grow dependent on it, luxury remains a force for human betterment, both materially in that consumption creates employment; politically, in that commercial nations have more transparent and just governments; and culturally, in that it permits human civilisation and the arts and sciences to develop, a point made once again in the article 'Arts, Beaux-Arts'.

It is thanks to the less polemic nature of the work that Voltaire can maintain a more nuanced and critical view of luxury's potentially harmful effects on the individual whilst at the same time extolling its wider benefits for humanity. The question of luxury was still relevant, but in several respects Voltaire seems to have considered it settled – and settled of course by none other than himself: in the realm of economy (article 'Economie'), in the realm of civilisation (article 'Arts, Beaux-Arts'), and in the realm of morality (articles 'Abeilles' and 'Envie'). The article 'Arts', dedicated to Frederick the Great, establishes a strong link between the arts and luxury, and, much like the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, lauds the Sun King's achievements as combining patronage of the arts with the encouragement of commerce and manufacture. Moreover its terse statement: 'les hommes et les autres animaux peuvent très bien subsister sans boulangers, sans romanciers, et sans théologiens',²⁶ not only contains the inevitable swipe at the inessential role of the clergy, it also implies once again that the difference between humans and animals, thus the very essence of humanity, lies in what is superfluous, what is not of immediate necessity for survival, in short, in luxury, be this in terms of better food than is strictly necessary (the 'boulangers'), in the arts and letters (the

form the leitmotif of the conte, *L'Homme aux quarante écus*, from Dutot's *Réflexions politiques sur les finances* ('Economie', p. 605, note 36). He had already commented on this text in his 1738 *Observations sur MM. Jean Lass, Melon et Dutot sur le commerce, le luxe, les monnaies, et les impôts* (OCV, vol. 18A, 239-255).

²⁶ Voltaire, 'Arts, Beaux-Arts', *QE*, OCV, vol. 39, 107-112 (111).

'romanciers') or in man's deplorable tendency to speculate on metaphysics (the 'théologiens' – and, given Voltaire's highly ambiguous attitude to 'romans', perhaps the 'romanciers' as well). The economic and cultural aspects of luxury thus covered, now only remained moral objections; and moral arguments against luxury have been settled by Voltaire long ago, and he likes to recall that in the articles 'Abeilles' and 'Envie'.

Both these articles discuss Mandeville and both correct him to fit Voltaire's own thought. 'Envie' contains the rather straightforward example of Mandeville's claim that envy is a useful passion, both natural to all men and helping the progress of the arts. Voltaire corrects this, arguing that either Mandeville mistook emulation for envy or that emulation itself was perhaps a kind of envy maintained within the bounds of decency.²⁷ The more interesting transformation of Mandeville occurs towards the end of the article 'Abeilles'. After a long and meandering discussion of bees in general, Voltaire turns to the *Fable of the Bees*. And he makes it his own. The 'petit précis' he gives of the *Fable*, apparently a citation from the poem at the origin of the *Fable*, entitled *The Grumbling Hive*, is all Voltaire and no Mandeville. Mandeville's poem summarised the vices necessary to make a nation rich and prosperous and the economic decline that would follow if all adhered to strict old-fashioned virtue. Voltaire's poem, though pretending to be a summary of the former, is a Voltairian story about the introduction of evil drones, i.e. priests, into the hive, about the misery they cause, and ending with an enlightened king bee coming to the rescue, chasing away the priestly drones, and permitting its new swarm to live in Enlightened prosperity.²⁸ Though interesting in that it makes a link once again between prosperity and Enlightened minds, a reversal of the usual link between economically inactive and parasitical fanatics, i.e. monks and priests, it has little to do with the moral problems Mandeville's *Fable* poses to anybody seeking to

²⁷ Voltaire, 'Envie', *QE*, Cramer, vol. 23, 42-44 (43).

²⁸ Voltaire, 'Abeilles', *QE*, *OCV*, vol. 38, 39-46 (45).

defend luxury. To this, Voltaire dedicates three short paragraphs which serve to solve the Mandevillian paradox to his satisfaction.

After the anticlerical poem which Voltaire ingeniously attributes to Mandeville, he claims that 'Mandeville va bien plus loin' (p. 45), and explains the latter's claim that prosperity is only possible in the context of vice. Yet the examples he gives are unproblematic, at least in the context of vice and virtue as defined by Voltaire, namely as either *bienfaisance* or as harming others. The three examples are taken from the realm of luxury and the arts and sciences. Firstly, take away the vanity of great ladies, i.e. their luxury, and the result would be 'plus de belles manufactures de soie, plus d'ouvriers ni d'ouvrières en mille genres; une grande partie de la nation est réduite à la mendicité' (p. 45). Secondly, take away the merchants' avarice or greed and the navy would be annihilated; thirdly take away artists' envy and 'l'émulation cesse; on retombe dans l'ignorance et dans la grossièreté' (p. 45). The results of all these 'vices' are those of luxury: military power, general employment and prosperity; flourishing of the arts, of manufacture, commerce and thus of 'civilisation' in general, which, as in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, is opposed to ignorance and coarseness. Yet in this instance we do not face any moral dilemma: as Voltaire had argued in other articles, motivation plays no role in virtue, self-interest is at the root of all our actions and as long as these have beneficial results for others they are to be applauded.²⁹

Voltaire hesitates to approach the actual paradox. He claims that Mandeville 's'empporte jusqu'à dire, que les crimes mêmes sont utiles', but even now the explanation remains Voltairian rather than Mandevillian: crimes are useful in that they 'servent à établir une bonne législation' (p. 45). Legal justice was one of Voltaire's great concerns,

²⁹ See the articles, 'Vertu', 'Amour propre', and 'Intérêt'.

but not one of Mandeville's, who explicitly stated that justice was often corrupt without harming the general whole. Voltaire goes on to enumerate how a highway robber makes money for those who denounce and arrest him, those who watch him in prison, judge him in court and execute him on the gallows. Again, this is an uncontroversial point, it does not require Voltaire to endorse highway robbery in general. Only one point, tucked away in one short sentence evokes an actual example from the *Fable*: 'Enfin, s'il n'y avait pas de voleurs, les serruriers mourraient de faim' (p. 46). This leads Voltaire to pass his final judgement on Mandeville: even if there are some benefits society derives from vices, those vices are not essential to its well-being: 'On fait de très bonnes remèdes avec des poisons, mais ce ne sont pas les poisons qui nous font vivre' (p. 46).³⁰ The *Fable*'s paradox does not worry him, and he concludes: 'En réduisant ainsi la fable des abeilles à sa juste valeur, elle pourrait devenir un ouvrage de morale utile' (p. 46). He probably thought he had just done so, and must have felt strengthened in this claim by Madame Du Châtelet's work on the *Fable*, which he had kept with him all this time.³¹

In the *Questions*, Voltaire does more than simply recycle old materials however. In fact, the 'entrée en force de mises au point sur l'économie' that Mervaud notices, is only partially concerned with luxury. Three fields predominate: the physiocratic doctrine, the potentially problematic nature of public debt, and the question of mercantilism in general and of the export of grain in particular. The entries 'Economie',

³⁰ This is another instance of Voltaire's agreement with La Rochefoucauld. The quotation seems an echo of Maxim 191 of the 1665 edition: 'Le vices entrent dans la composition des vertus comme les poisons entrent dans la composition des remèdes de la médecine. La prudence les assemble et les tempère, et elle s'en sert utiliment contre les maux de la vie.' François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes suivies des Réflexions diverses*, ed. by Jacques Truchet (Paris: Garnier, 1967 [based on the 1665 edition]), p. 326.

³¹ Voltaire kept several drafts of her translation and preface until his death so that they eventually found their way into Catherine the Great's library at Saint Petersburg. On the fate of Du Châtelet's manuscript, see Judith P. Zinsser, 'Entrepreneur of the "Republic of Letters": Emilie de Breteuil, Marquise Du Châtelet, and Bernard Mandeville's Fable of the Bees', *French Historical Studies*, 25 (2002), 595-624 (621-622).

'Agriculture', and 'Bled ou Blé' form a triptych, which refer together to the articles 'Agriculture' by Diderot, 'Défricher' by d'Argenville, and particularly 'Grains' and 'Fermiers' by Quesnay.³² There is no comment or allusion to Rousseau's article on political economy. Instead, Voltaire's 'Blé' and 'Agriculture' in particular, which are one of the few examples of his use of cross-referencing to link them together, are an attack on the physiocratic doctrines expounded in the articles by Quesnay, which are explicitly mentioned by Voltaire in 'Agriculture'.³³ He agrees with the physiocrats on certain points, most strongly on the fundamental importance of agriculture and on the liberalisation of the grain trade, however, he still maintains that manufacture and commerce are important wealth creators, so that a unique tax on agriculture would be unfair.³⁴ Most of all, he took issue with the dogmatic, systematised, rigid, and purely theoretical nature of their thought. What better to put against them than a work, which by its very nature eschews all attempts at systematising?³⁵ And not only does he propose an anti-systematic, alphabetically ordered work, he sets his own practical experience against the physiocrats' theoretical systematizing. For once at least, Voltaire's self-portrayal as patriarch and 'cultivateur' comes in supremely useful. When attacking physiocratic thought, he insists on his own practical knowledge even more than usual; and whilst he delights to point out factual errors in their writings, most notably in Quesnay's articles 'Fermiers' and 'Grains', his most powerful accusation is their total lack of practical experience: in a postscript to the article 'Agriculture', he makes a thinly veiled reference to the *Encyclopédie*, quoting an obvious mistake in the article 'Grains', and flatly states: 'ce qu'il dit de l'agriculture ressemble assez à la manière dont en

³² As so often with Voltaire's marginalia, none of these articles is annotated in his copy of the *Encyclopédie*. 'Fermier' and 'Grains' have markers in them, but no comments: *Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire*, 6 vols (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, and Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1979-), III, 360-417.

³³ Voltaire, 'Agriculture', *QE, OCV*, vol. 38, 133-147 (134-135 and 138-140).

³⁴ Cf. his conte *L'homme aux quarante écus*, on the unfairness and rigidity of the physiocratic tax proposals.

³⁵ On the link between the alphabetical order of the *Dictionnaire* and his own anti-systematic metaphysics, see Rétat, 'Le "Dictionnaire philosophique" de Voltaire', pp. 898-899.

parlent plusieurs Parisiens qui n'ont jamais vu de charrue' (p. 146). And, just to drive home the point, he concludes the article with a cross-reference to the entry 'Bled ou Blé' and the comment: 'Heureux Parisiens, jouissez de nos travaux, et jugez de l'opéra comique!' (p. 147). The article 'Blé' then continues to attack those who tend to 'balbutier en économie politique' and who, 'au sortir de l'Opéra comique', think they can make informed decisions on the grain trade.³⁶ The physiocratic doctrine is thus roundly condemned – by one, as Voltaire likes to stress, who has the practical experience to know what he is talking about.

A second area of interest lies in the liberalisation of trade, of the grain trade in particular.³⁷ Voltaire had a personal interest in this: he was much annoyed by the prohibition to export the grain produced on his lands in Ferney.³⁸ In the *Questions* he advocated the freedom of grain trade – with certain limitations and guarantees for bad harvests. The article 'Agriculture' devotes a small section 'De l'exportation des grains' to make precisely this point, and the entry 'Blé' does so more extensively by summarising the debate on the grain trade that arose in the 1750, the problems of the liberalisation imposed in 1764, which led to too extensive exports so that now there seems to arise a tendency to go from one extremity to the other and stop it again altogether (pp. 412-413). Voltaire clearly endorses and lauds Galiani's *Dialogues sur le commerce des blés*, squarely siding with him in the debate (p. 414). Against the example of France, Voltaire once again sets that of Great Britain and the highly profitable way in which they managed to encourage and control the grain trade and export (pp. 415-417). Just as it did forty years earlier, England still provides a highly idealised but effective counter-

³⁶ Voltaire, 'Bled ou Blé', *QE, OCV*, vol. 39, 402-421 (405 and 413).

³⁷ For other aspects of trade restrictions Voltaire opposed, see the article 'Argent', which argues against restrictions on the export of bullion: 'Argent', *QE, OCV*, vol. 38, 581-590 (588-589).

³⁸ Cf. his letters on the subject: D8164 (9/3/1759) to the Duc de Choiseul, D8762 (17/2/1760) to Fabry, and D16673 (28/9/1770) to de Chabanon. Cf. his defence of Turgot's policies liberalising the grain trade: D19529 (29/6/1775) to Turgot, D19624 (24/8/1775) to D'Alembert.

example to the less commercially developed France.

The third new field of political economy the *Questions* includes is the increasingly important question of public debt. Voltaire remains opposed to the Church's opposition to private credit and money lending, which he considers useful to trade.³⁹ His position on public debt, best expressed in the article 'Economie', is more ambivalent. National debt became an important issue in the late Enlightenment,⁴⁰ and in some ways Voltaire admired England's system of public debt management in particular what he considered the exemplary role of the Bank of England, which in a rather un-Mandevillian fashion managed to combine private and public benefits:

La banque de l'Etat en produisant des avantages immenses aux directeurs, est utile à la nation; parce qu'elle augmente le crédit, que ses opérations sont connues, et qu'elle ne pourrait faire plus de billets qu'il n'en faut sans perdre ce crédit et sans se ruiner elle-même. (pp. 600-601)

He is obviously interested in the question, setting up complicated calculations on how Britain manages to attract, reschedule, and repay its public debt. Nevertheless it seems to remain a doubtful practice to him, calling 'raffinement' and 'excès' and summarising it as:

cet art de rendre la moitié d'une nation débitrice de l'autre; de faire passer avec du papier les fortunes de main en main, de rendre l'Etat créancier de l'Etat, de faire un chaos de ce qui devrait être soumis à une règle uniforme. (p. 607)

And yet his conclusion is laconic: 'Cela n'est pas trop sage; mais qui l'est? les petits qui n'ont pas le pouvoir de se ruiner' (p. 607).

The statement encapsulates the tensions running through the views on commerce and luxury expressed in the *Questions*. On the one hand, though open to new

³⁹ Voltaire, 'Intérêt', *QE*, Cramer, vol. 23, 521-524.

⁴⁰ On the Enlightenment debate about public debt in general and Hume's very influential stance in particular, see Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade : International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), especially the Introduction, pp. 1-156 (pp. 77-88) and chapter 5, 'The Rhapsody of Public Debt: David Hume and Voluntary State Bankruptcy', pp. 325-353.

developments in the field of political economy, Voltaire remains attached to the values and symbols that directed his original thought on luxury: economic prosperity; freedom, including freedom of trade; England as the model commercial nation; the usefulness of a reformed and tamed Mandeville; and the figures of Melon and the 'grand Colbert'.⁴¹ Luxury is still linked to economic growth, commerce, prosperity, to better manners, the arts and sciences, a new conception of virtue, and as such to Voltaire's view of 'civilisation' and 'Enlightenment' in general. On the other hand, however, Voltaire seems more critical than ever before of luxurious city life in general and of merchants, investors, and stock-brokers, in particular. To understand the reasons behind this shift to a more critical attitude, it is necessary to turn to a work written shortly after the *Questions*, one that voices the perhaps strongest condemnation of luxury and commerce in Voltaire's entire *oeuvre*, the *Fragments sur l'Inde*.

Fragments sur l'Inde

The *Fragments sur l'Inde et sur le général Lally*, an often ignored text, were written in 1773 to further the last of Voltaire's *causes célèbres* in his fight to right miscarriages of justice, the so-called Lally affair. Thomas Arthur Lally, the French-born son of an exiled Irish Jacobite, had been given the command of the French forces in India during the Seven Years war (1756-1763), following a brilliant career in the French army. After the disastrous fortunes of the French there, in particular the capitulation of Pondicherry in January 1761, Lally was relieved of his generalship and tried in France. The prosecutor was the same Pasquier who had earned the hatred of the philosophes when he had de la Barre executed. Lally was charged with high treason, for which, despite his undoubted

⁴¹ These are invoked for instance in the articles 'Economie' ('le grand ministre Colbert', p. 606), and 'Agriculture' ('le grand Colbert', p. 136), and 'Bled', which calls Melon 'le premier homme qui ait raisonné en France, par la voie de l'imprimerie, immédiatement après la déraison universelle du système de Lass [i.e. Law]' (p. 406).

blunders, there was no evidence, and was brutally executed in May 1766. Voltaire had already commented on the case in the 1768 edition of the *Précis du Siècle de Louis XV*, but it was only in 1773, at the request of Lally's son, that he made the case his own and composed the *Fragments*.

The work is, however, much more than a simple defence of Lally. As Cynthia Manley and John Renwick point out in the introduction to their critical edition, the *Fragments* are 'a summation of over thirty years of reading about this country and its civilisation and peoples.'⁴² The text is organised in two parts of twenty and twenty-six articles each. The first part focusses on the contemporary situation of India with particular emphasis on the fortunes of the British and French trading companies and armies there. Several articles are devoted to the life, character, and fate of general Lally. The second part gives a more general account of the history, cultures, and religions of India and ends with the state of India in 1770. Of particular interest here are the first two chapters of the first part, which contain several withering remarks on commerce and the luxury trade. The work opens with the following remarkable passage:

Dès que l'Inde fut un peu connue des barbares de l'Occident et du Nord, elle fut l'objet de leur cupidité; et le fut encore davantage, quand ces barbares, devenus policés et industriels, se firent de nouveaux besoins. [...] Les Albuquerque et leurs successeurs ne purent parvenir à fournir du poivre et des toiles en Europe que par le carnage. Nos peuples européens ne découvrirent l'Amérique que pour la dévaster, et pour l'arroser de sang; moyennant quoi ils eurent du cacao, de l'indigo, du sucre.⁴³

The condemnation seems an echo of that expressed by the mutilated Negro slave in *Candide*, who pays the price for the Europeans' enjoyment of sugar. Together with the classic example of sugar, the objects in questions are typical of the international luxury trade at the time. They link the fate of India and the East Indies to that of America and the West Indies in one sweep: at this time most of the cocoa and sugar consumed in

⁴² Cynthia Manley and John Renwick, 'Introduction to the *Fragments sur l'Inde et sur le général Lalli*', *OCV*, vol. 75B, 5-43 (25).

⁴³ Voltaire, *Fragments sur l'Inde et sur le général Lalli*, *OCV*, vol. 75B, 55-262 (59).

Europe came from Central and South America and the West Indies,⁴⁴ whilst indigo, spices, pepper in particular, as well as fine fabrics, calico, high-quality cotton, and silk, were imported from India and the East Indies.⁴⁵ What links all these places is that they suffer so that Europe can enjoy. The stress is not laid on the pleasures and sophistication resulting from luxury, but instead on the pain it causes, on greed and violence. The suffering caused is gratuitous in the double sense. Luxury objects are not gained by commerce but by war, the produce in question is 'bought' by devastation and bloodshed, Europe receives its pleasures without giving back benefits of any form, they obtain them gratuitously. The injustice is exacerbated by the fact that these are 'nouveaux besoins', they are not necessary for survival, only sought out of greed, which makes the suffering itself gratuitous. Human life and happiness are 'traded in' for trivial consumer goods, the barbarity of which is underlined by the contrast of blood and devastation with sugar and cocoa.

The blame for this does not lie with the few 'Albuquerques' of this world, it lies squarely with those who benefit from luxury, either through the profits from selling it, or through desiring and enjoying it: 'Presque tous ces vastes domaines, ces établissements dispendieux, toutes ces guerres entreprises pour les maintenir, ont été le fruit de la mollesse de nos villes et de l'avidité des marchands, encore plus que de l'ambition des souverains' (p. 60). The condemnation falls on the same bourgeois luxury with its traditional links to urbanity, 'mollesse', and merchants, that Voltaire had previously extolled. In what seems a complete volte face of Voltaire's earlier position, the merchant no longer 'contribue au bonheur du monde' as he had done in the *Lettres philosophiques*. Instead his greed immediately contributes to global misery. Trade no

⁴⁴ On this see J. H. Parry, *Trade and Dominion: The European Oversea Empires in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Cardinal, 1974), pp. 59-61 and 66-70.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-100 and 374.

longer leads to the peaceful and mutually beneficial interaction of equals, it results in war, devastation and enslavement. It is debasing, hence it is humiliating for sophisticated Indians to become 'nos acteurs, nos négociateurs mercenaires': 'Les successeurs des bracmanes, de ces inventeurs de tant d'arts, de ces amateurs et de ces arbitres de la paix, sont devenus nos facteurs, nos négociateurs mercenaires. Nous avons désolé leur pays, nous l'avons engraisé de notre sang' (Ibid., p. 62). Unlike in the earlier defences of commerce, where it was seen to foster peace, liberty, and the arts and sciences, it is now divorced from all three, indeed directly opposed to them: the successors of the bracmanes have to give up the arts and love of peace to accept a position of servitude in commerce ('nos acteurs' and 'nos facteurs'). Their actions are no longer their own, and engaging in commercial activities, which Voltaire had advocated as a certain way to personal independence and development during his English years, had turned into the very opposite.

The anti-luxury argument is made most strongly in the following section:

C'est pour fournir aux tables des bourgeois de Paris, de Londres et des autres grandes villes, plus d'épicerie qu'on n'en consommait autrefois aux tables des princes: c'est pour charger des simples citoyennes de plus de diamants que les reines n'en portaient à leur sacre: c'est pour infecter continuellement ses narines d'une poudre dégoûtante, pour s'abreuver, par fantaisie, de certaines liqueurs inutiles, inconnues à nos pères, qu'il s'est fait un commerce immense toujours désavantageux aux trois quarts de l'Europe; et c'est pour soutenir ce commerce que les puissances se sont fait des guerres, [...] nous n'avons jamais réfléchi que le plus grand et le plus rude des impôts est celui que nous imposons sur nous-mêmes par nos nouvelles délicatesses qui sont devenues des besoins, et qui sont en effet un luxe ruineux, quoiqu'on ne leur ait point donné le nom de luxe. (p. 61)

The section condemns precisely the type of bourgeois luxury Voltaire had previously extolled, the kind that had passed from the exclusive domain of 'princes' and 'reines' to the 'bourgeois' and 'citoyennes', a development outlined in the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. And even though some of it, such as jewellery, is perhaps

ostentatious luxury, some is clearly the luxury of comfort and enjoyment: condiments, alcohol, tobacco, the type that is 'superflu', or as it is put here 'inutile', but which engenders both sensual pleasure and immense commercial activity; just what Voltaire had applauded in the *Mondain* and its *Défense*. As in his previous statements on the topic, Voltaire still maintains that the definition of luxury changes over time, and as habits and needs change, that what was considered a luxury a generation ago, is now accepted as a need. However, this is now seen as a pernicious development. Voltaire adopts the terminology and arguments of the adversaries of luxury: the confusion of ranks, the greedy social climbing of the bourgeoisie, which Fénelon amongst others castigated, and the enslavement to artificial desires, to luxuries disguised as 'needs', a point most famously put forward by Rousseau.

Why this about-turn? Given the polemic intention of the text it could be strategic, defending Lally by spreading the guilt, showing that Lally tried to make the best of an ugly situation for which everybody shared responsibility through their eagerness to obtain luxury goods. However, even if this were part of the intention, these criticisms are more than a mere tactical move. Why else would there be similar criticisms of commerce and luxury in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, a work that just pre-dated Voltaire's involvement with the Lally case? The reasons for this become clearer in the *Fragments'* second article, which opens: 'Le commerce, ce premier lien des hommes, étant devenu un objet de guerre, et un principe de dévastation, les premiers mandataires des compagnies anglaise et française [...] furent bientôt des espèces de généraux d'armée' (I.ii, p. 65). At the root of Voltaire's critique is a genuine disappointment with the contemporary conduct of commerce. As he had argued in the *Traité de métaphysique* some forty years earlier, commerce remains, even now, 'le premier lien des hommes'. Commerce ought to be a mutually beneficial exchange and as

such was after family love the second principle of sociability, and formed the basis of the first communities that exceeded the single family unit. It was this basis of mutually beneficial exchange that gave rise to the arts and sciences, and to luxury. Commerce as *conceived* by Voltaire not only promotes human sociability but through it also progress and refinement. Commerce as *witnessed* by Voltaire in his later years, especially in India during the Seven Years War, was no longer mutually beneficial and a principle for human betterment, it was exploitative and a principle for human debasement. In the *Mondain*, luxury trade had 'réuni l'un et l'autre hémisphère' (line 23), now it seemed to destroy one to satisfy the greed of the other, and even in Europe itself it encouraged warfare, ruin, and wilful miscarriage of justice.

Peter Gay was right when he described Voltaire as a 'realist'. Voltaire's stance in the luxury debate seems to be in line with his general anti-ideological, empirical thrust. For him, commerce, like luxury, are not in and of themselves either good or bad. His redefinition of vice and virtue were designed to make them morally neutral concepts without intrinsic value. As such, they have to be judged on their effects. In the first few decades of his intervention in the debate, he considered these effects as beneficial overall, as leading to prosperity, religious tolerance, moderate government, better manners, all in all to improved civilisation and greater happiness and enjoyment. These were dampened by the danger of over-indulgence, dependency, and financial ruin, but he maintained that, as in the case of alcohol, these could be avoided by correct usage, by an Epicurean enjoyment of luxury, rather than a purely hedonistic addiction. Recent events however had impressed on him the ugly aspects of the luxury trade: war, slavery, injustice, conquest, and cruelty. He changed his evaluation accordingly. It is worth noting that the reasons for this shift were not the anti-luxury and anti-commerce attitudes that John Shovlin finds associated with the rise of French patriotism at this

period.⁴⁶ Voltaire's conscience was global, rather than national in this case, and it was the suffering the luxury trade engendered globally that caused him to rethink his originally supportive stance

However, it ought to be borne in mind that according to Voltaire, both commerce and luxury are inherent to any form of human society: they come into existence as soon as the first communities are formed and commerce remains 'le premier lien des hommes'. Similarly, luxury can, as set out in the nearly contemporary *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* entry, still be an entirely positive experience. Commerce and luxury can still contribute to advancing overall progress and happiness, but growing dependence on them, their abuse, as seen in the colonial conquests, have disastrous effects. There is thus no contradiction when, in the same work, the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, he defends them in the entry 'Luxe' and criticises them in the article 'Economie', both are evidence of his pragmatic and nuanced attitude. It may be dissatisfying to students of the debate to find neither complete change, nor complete continuity in Voltaire's thought on luxury; but his willingness to keep an open mind, not to persist on one rigid opinion but to factor in new developments, be those contemporary events or new approaches to economic theory as developed by the physiocrats, deserve our respect.

⁴⁶ On the link between the rise of French patriotism and anti-luxury polemics see John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). For shorter accounts, see his 'Emulation in Eighteenth-Century French Economic Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36 (2003), 224-230; and his 'Hume's *Political Discourses* and the French Luxury Debate', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, ed. by Carl Wennerlin and Margaret Schabas (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 203-222.

CONCLUSION

Two conclusions clearly emerge from the preceding chapters. They are firstly the originality and importance of Voltaire's contribution to the luxury debate, and secondly, the continuing significant influence of the debate on Voltaire's entire *oeuvre*.

The importance of the luxury debate for Voltaire's *oeuvre*

If historians have neglected Voltaire's role in the debate due perhaps to a tendency not to take him seriously as a thinker and intellectual, the reasons for which literary scholars have rarely picked up on the importance of luxury in Voltaire's work itself, might be to do with the word 'luxury' itself. The term as such is of less importance in Voltaire than the concept which includes the related fields of commerce, politeness, and the arts and sciences. It is not the word 'luxury' that matters, it is its centrality as a notion; and whilst the term itself is used sparingly, strongly prominent only in the *Mondain*, the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, the conceptual understanding of luxury underlies much of his writing and ought to be taken into account to help our understanding of Voltaire's *oeuvre*.

The notion of commercial society helps to identify the coherence of the *Lettres philosophiques*, a question that has puzzled many a scholar. It particularly explains the link between the primarily 'English' letters and the last letter on Pascal, whose addition has led to many unsatisfactory conjectures. Any scholar interested in Voltaire's social theory thus has to take luxury into account, not only because it is a distinguishing

feature of Voltaire's model nation, England, but also because it underlies his theory of social development as expounded in the *Traité de métaphysique*, where luxury, commerce, and the arts and sciences are depicted as inherent to any human society and explicitly justified by a recourse to voluntarist Deism. This is important since, as numerous scholars have pointed out already, the fundamental opinions expressed in the *Traité* do not change and continue to represent the basis of Voltaire's social and political thought.¹

Luxury as a concept, albeit not frequently as a word, is also crucial to Voltaire's definition of civilisation as developed in his major historical works, most notably the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. Voltaire's representation of civilisation consists of a cluster of interconnected conditions, almost all of which are linked to the notion of luxury. As depicted in these historiographical works civilisation is a culture benefiting from a just legal framework and government which allow it to pursue peaceful trade and productivity. It is defined by *bon goût*, and reason, *police* or *politesse*, *mœurs douces*, flourishing arts and sciences, pleasure, and sociability, all terms associated with the notion of luxury. Despite strongly encouraging agriculture whenever possible, such a culture has strong urban and commercial elements. It is characterised both by enlightened views and material welfare, since commerce and bourgeois luxury provide an alternative to religious fanaticism as well as an incentive to make profits, thereby increasing overall wealth; and, as he had already pointed out during his English years, since commerce and luxury strengthen individual as well as national liberty, artistic and intellectual creations will flourish, too. Luxury is in fact at the core of what constitutes civilisation and humanity, which are defined by the

¹ The influence of, and parallels with, the *Traité* have been pointed out throughout this thesis. See also Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p. 226; René Vaillot, *Avec Madame Du Châtelet 1734-1749* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1988), pp. 37-39; and W. H. Barber's introduction to his critical edition of the text in the *OCV*, vol. 14.

transcendence of the necessary.

As the figure of the *patriarche* which Voltaire adopts in his later years is that of a benign and wise 'civiliser', luxury continues to play a crucial role here, too. The poetry which serves as the main vehicle for the dissemination of this persona sets out to link Voltaire's attempts at wealth creation and improvement of living conditions in his own lands with his importance in the intellectual and artistic circles in Paris. The posture of the *patriarche* is a variation of that of the Epicurean sage adopted in the *Mondain's* companion pieces, and once again links moderate enjoyment of luxury to happiness, prosperity, religious tolerance, and flourishing arts and sciences. The nuanced apology for luxury remains part of his 'combat' throughout his life. With its links to religious tolerance, happiness, and the civilising process, it is part and parcel of his vision of Enlightenment. This explains why in a much later and largely polemical and anti-Christian work like the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, which sets out his programme of Enlightenment, Voltaire included an entry on 'Luxe'.

Thus establishing the centrality of the topos of luxury throughout Voltaire's *oeuvre* leads to two further conclusions. Firstly it should change the way we read and understand these non-fictional texts, and should increase our appreciation for the coherence of Voltaire's view of 'Enlightenment' and 'civilisation'. It should also fruitfully contribute to the interpretation of works of fiction and theatre, which did not form part of this study. Several plays, such as the *Scythes* and the *Orphelin de la Chine*, and numerous *contes*, among them *Jeannot et Colin*, *Le Monde comme il va*, *L'Homme aux quarante écus*, *L'Ingénu*, and not least *Candide*, present interesting explorations of the concept of luxury with all its connotations, and the nuanced thought on luxury

corresponds well to the inherent ambiguity of literary texts.² It is hoped that this work might contribute to further study of these in the light of the importance of luxury in Voltaire's work.

The importance of Voltaire in the luxury debate

Voltaire is usually given credit for having given prominence to the luxury debate in France with his *Mondain* in the 1736, though he is generally considered as following in the footsteps of Melon, who published his *Essai politique sur le commerce* earlier, in 1734; both are seen as followers of Mandeville.³ However, Voltaire's first important statement in favour of a new commercial society was made earlier than this, in his 1734 *Lettres philosophiques*. They show no influence of either Melon or Mandeville, arising instead from Voltaire's previous experience of such a type of society in the Netherlands, from his connections to the English merchant community, and his avid reading of the *Spectator*.⁴ Apart from certain strictly economic publications, such as those by Boisguillebert and Vauban, they are the first French defence of the new model of a

² On the ambiguous depiction of the urban-rural or luxury-frugality dualism in *Jeannot et Colin* for instance see Christiane Mervaud, '« Jeannot et Colin » : illustration et subversion du conte moral', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 85 (1985), 596-620.

³ For the standard examples of this by now classic narrative of the debate see Marie Rose de Labriolle-Rutherford, 'L'Evolution de la notion du luxe depuis Mandeville jusqu'à la Révolution', *SVEC*, 26 (1965), 1025-1036 (especially 1026-1029); Renato Galliani, 'Le Débat en France sur le luxe: Voltaire ou Rousseau?', *SVEC*, 161 (1976), 205-217 (especially 205 and 212); Ellen Ross, 'Mandeville, Melon and Voltaire: The Origins of the Luxury Controversy in France', *SVEC*, 155 (1976), 1897-1912 (especially 1905-1912); Pierre Rétat, 'Luxe', *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, 26 (1994), 79-88 (especially 79-80); Christopher J. Berry, *The idea of luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 136. In *La France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1993) Daniel Roche makes the same argument, but mentions earlier French economists (Boisguillebert and Cantillon) and Bayle as predecessors of Melon whom he considers to have passed on his Mandevillian influences to Voltaire: pp. 510-514. Hont's analysis is more nuanced, taking into account various writers from both sides of the channel and the *Traité de métaphysique* as well as the *Mondain*: Istvan Hont, 'The Early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury' in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. by Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 379-418.

⁴ On this see chapter I. Particularly on the the influence of the *Spectator*, especially on the depiction of trade and merchants in Voltaire's *Lettres* see Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire rencontre Monsieur le Spectateur. Addison et la genèse des Lettres anglaises' in *Voltaire en Europe – Hommage à Christiane Mervaud*, ed. by Michel Delon, Catriona Seth (Oxford: VFO, 2000), pp. 13-21.

meritocratic and liberal bourgeois society that underlay the luxury debate, and their arguments remain in use throughout the century.⁵ Voltaire's apology as offered in the *Lettres* was comprehensive, covering the social, cultural, and religious realms in Letters I-XXIV, and the ethical and philosophical underpinnings in the final letter, 'Sur les *Pensées* de M. Pascal'. The work is also the beginning of a brand of luxury defence that is peculiar to Voltaire: the apology for luxury and commercial activity as replacements for religious fanaticism, an argument still made to this day.

If the first chapter thus shows the early and incisive nature of Voltaire's intervention in the debate, the second chapter reveals its originality and nuance. To defend a bourgeois society based on luxury, Voltaire, in co-operation with Madame Du Châtelet, transformed Mandeville with the aid of classical Epicureanism and a version of Lockean Deist voluntarism into a coherent theory of social development that freed luxury from any connotations of immorality, and placed it together with the arts and sciences at the core of human society. The Epicurean influence visible in the social theory is also at play in the poetry written to extol luxury in the 1730s. The *Mondain* and its companion pieces reveal a much more nuanced and moderate endorsement of luxury than they are generally given credit for. This differentiated Epicurean attitude remains characteristic of Voltaire's judgement and poetry on luxury throughout his life and proves its continuity and coherence.

The originality of Voltaire's writing on luxury also comes to the fore in his historiography. Before, and in the case of Hume, independently of, the other great Enlightenment historians of the rise of commercial societies, such as David Hume,

⁵ On the use of England as a model commercial nation in the French discourse on luxury in the following decades of the eighteenth century, see John Shovlin, 'Emulation in Eighteenth-Century French Economic Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36 (2003), 224-230 (especially 225-226).

Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson, Voltaire narrated and analysed the development of modern bourgeois societies and their links to commerce, luxury, and the arts and sciences. Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson published their works on the subject years after the *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1752) and the *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), and whilst Voltaire much appreciated Hume's historiography, it is impossible to find any direct influence of Hume in the revisions to Voltaire's work, which were effected after the Frenchman had read Hume's work.⁶ Voltaire was the first of a kind.

Voltaire's writing on luxury was independent, original, and coherent, backed up by a theory of social and historical development. It remained distinct from contemporary trends, both by defending commercialism from the 1730s onwards before this became commonly accepted, and by refusing to endorse a negative stance towards luxury when Rousseau's writings became popular and when luxury was linked to the critique of the French financial system after the Seven Years War.⁷ Nevertheless, Voltaire's contribution to the debate was marked by a willingness to evolve and to take

⁶ Adam Smith's the *Wealth of Nations* which contains the famous four stages theory was published in 1776, and Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* in 1767. David Hume published the *History of England* (volume one being entitled *The History of Great Britain*) between 1754-1762. The *History of Natural Religion* was published as one of the *Four Dissertations* in 1757. Voltaire owned copies of Hume's historiography in both English and French editions, the earliest of these being the 1754 *History of Great Britain*. However, the first mention of Hume in Voltaire's correspondence dates from December 1757 (D7499 to d'Alembert includes Hume in the list of contemporary *philosophes* together with d'Alembert, Diderot, and Bolingbroke), and the next reference, albeit as enthusiastic, comes nearly a year later (D7887 to Thieriot, 3 October 1758). It is hence highly unlikely, and in case of the *Siècle* even impossible, that Voltaire made use of Hume in the period leading up to the publication of the first editions of the *Essai* and *Siècle*, in 1752 and 1756 respectively. On the lack of influence in the subsequently revised edition of these works, see: Paul H. Meyer, 'Voltaire and Hume as Historians: A Comparative Study of the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *History of England*', *PMLA*, 73 (1958), 51-68.

For the best study of Voltaire's contribution in the context of other Enlightenment historians, see Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of the Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a concise overview of Hume's and Voltaire's relationship more generally, see Nicholas Cronk, 'Une lettre de Voltaire à David Hume', *Revue Voltaire*, 8 (2008), 369-375.

⁷ On the increasingly negative attitude to luxury linked to financiers and the French performance in the Seven Years War, see especially John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 49-79 and his 'Hume's *Political Discourses* and the French Luxury Debate', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, ed. by Carl Wennerlin and Margaret Schabas (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 203-222.

both historical and intellectual developments into account. A study of Voltaire's library reveals his determination to keep up-to-date with publications on economics, and whilst he ultimately rejected the physiocratic system *qua* system, he nevertheless showed a detailed interest in their theory and endorsed some of its elements. Events, both personally witnessed and relayed, influenced the evaluation of luxury in Voltaire's writings. Long before Rousseau's intervention, he showed a certain reserve towards the possible alienating and addictive qualities of consumerism; and the development of colonialism, trade wars, exploitation, and slavery, which were inextricably linked to the international luxury trade, became a target for his criticism, ultimately leading to a more critical attitude to luxury in his late writings.

Hence it is hoped that this thesis will have made clear any future scholarly narrative and analysis of the debate must include Voltaire's important contribution, which predates and outlasts the brief period of the *Mondain* and its companion pieces. The study also reveals how much scope there is for exploring the perception of Voltaire's role in the debate and it is hoped that this will provide an impetus for further study. For Voltaire's contribution to the luxury debate was not only nuanced and original, it was also crucially important. This thesis limited the space allocated to contemporary reactions, but even the few instances mentioned demonstrate the contemporary awareness of Voltaire's importance. When Diderot commented on luxury in his *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, he discusses Voltaire as a matter of course.⁸ When Rousseau publishes his first *Discours*, on the arts and sciences, the one living person named is Voltaire.⁹ When contemporaries depict Rousseau as the adversary of

⁸ Denis Diderot, 'Du luxe', in *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, X, 529-807 (668-681).

⁹ The exact quotation is: 'Dites-nous, célèbre Arouet, combien vous avez sacrifié de beautés mâles et fortes à notre fausse délicatesse, et combien l'esprit de la galanterie si fertile en petites choses vous en a coûté de grandes.' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes and Discours sur les sciences et les arts*,

commercial society and representative of natural man, the figure they oppose to him is Voltaire.¹⁰ He is evoked, though not explicitly named, in Saint-Lambert's entry 'Luxe' in the *Encyclopédie* (1765), and his defence of the effects of the arts and sciences is still emphasised in Condorcet's *Vie de Voltaire*:

Il croyait que les arts et les lettres adoucissent les mœurs, préparent à la raison une route plus facile et plus sûre; il pensait que le goût des arts et des lettres dans ceux qui gouvernent, en amollissant leur coeur, leur épargne souvent des actes de violence et des crimes, et que dans des circonstances semblables, le peuple le plus ingénieux et le plus poli sera toujours le moins malheureux.¹¹

The quotation has the merit not only of confirming the importance of Voltaire's contribution, but also of revealing his strategy and method, which in turn explains the partial failure of his positioning on luxury, almost unique amongst Voltaire's usually very effective manipulation and control of his public image. Condorcet uses Voltaire's own terminology here, demonstrating the important part Voltaire played in fixing the terminology of the luxury debate. Whilst it is usually Montesquieu who is credited with linking luxury and commerce with 'douceur' and 'adoucir', Voltaire also claimed these terms, and in the *Mondain* already (1736) reversed the value connotations of 'luxe', the 'superflu', and of 'mollesse', or as it is used here 'amollir'. Against Christian asceticism and civic humanist views of luxury as driving decline, Voltaire posited 'refinement', linking luxury and commerce to bourgeois society, happiness (or as it is expressed here, less unhappiness), 'raison', 'politesse' and the arts and sciences from the 1720s and 1730s onwards, long before this became common currency in the defence of luxury.

However, as pointed out in the introduction, ultimately his innovative and

ed. by Jacques Roger (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pp. 23-68 (p. 45).

¹⁰ On this and other visual depictions of Rousseau and Voltaire together, see Samuel S. B. Taylor, 'Public awareness of the Voltaire-Rousseau quarrel: the iconographical and bibliographical evidence' in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: essays in memory of R. A. Leigh*, ed. by Marian Hobson, John T. A. Leigh, Robert Wokler (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1992) pp. 209-223.

¹¹ Condorcet, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de, *Vie de Voltaire*, Kehl, vol. 92, 3-227 (177-178).

nuanced stance was not recognised as such, even by many of his contemporaries, Diderot prominently amongst them. The reason for this lies in Voltaire's method. What Pocock or Skinner would call the 'moves' he performed, were not effected through reasoned argument or what they term 'second-order language'. 'These moves', Pocock writes in his methodological essay, 'may be rhetorical and implicit, performed without advertisement, and left to work their effects, or they may be explicit and theoretical, explained and justified in some critical language designed to vindicate and elaborate their character'.¹² Voltaire's 'moves' were almost exclusively rhetorical and implicit, and whilst, as we have seen, effective in reversing value connotations, affecting and changing the discourse on luxury, and certainly 'working their effects' even to this day, they did hardly ever allow for any explicit argument that could defend and define his stance. Whilst the persuasive power of his position as expressed for instance in his historiography, might thus be greater, foregoing the opportunity to clarify his exact stance, except perhaps in some of his poetry which by its very nature remains open to varied interpretations, ultimately led to the simplification and misconstruction of his attitude to luxury, an instance almost unique for 'a man who had so triumphantly imposed his image and authority on the eighteenth-century public'.¹³

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¹² J. G. A. Pocock, 'The state of the art', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1-34 (p. 16).

¹³ Geoffrey Turnovsky, 'The making of a name: a life of Voltaire', in *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 17-30 (p. 29). On Voltaire's creation of his self-image see also Nicholas Cronk's 'Voltaire and authorship' in the same volume (pp. 31-46), and the essays collected in *Les Vies de Voltaire: discours et représentations biographiques, XVIIIe-XXIe siècles*, ed. by Christophe Cave and Simon Davis, *SVEC* 2008:04, especially the contributions by Christophe Cave, Simon Davis, and Jean Goldzink. On the authorial construction of the self-image in the correspondence especially, see the Christophe Cave in *Les Vies de Voltaire* and Christiane Mervaud in the *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*.

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