



# Hidden in Plain Sight: The *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* in the Nineteenth Century

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L'ÉCRITURE EST LA  
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## ABSTRACT

The question of Voltaire's influence on the nineteenth century is famously thorny. The task is all the more complicated when considering a work like the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, Voltaire's longest and perhaps least-known masterpiece. For various editorial reasons, the *Questions* all but disappeared after their initial publication in the 1770s, a period during which they nonetheless had become a bestseller. Although no longer referred to using their rightful title, excerpts from the *Questions* proliferate in the print culture of postrevolutionary France, used and reused across an impressive swathe of texts of all stripes and sizes. The presence of these reuses would seem to corroborate the assertion that one important, if perhaps overlooked, aspect of Voltaire's influence is his role as an agent of transmission. This role emphasises what might be called Voltaire's aesthetic of reuse, and suggests a powerful new way of understanding this essential element of his participation in the Enlightenment project. This essay attempts to understand this particular version of Voltaire as an agent of transmission in the promulgation of Enlightenment ideas, while, at the same time, exploring the impact of his turn towards alphabetical works as a weapon of choice in the last decades of his life, as he engages in the larger arena of philosophical warfare opened up by the publication (and suppression) of the *Encyclopédie* in the 1750s. The embedding of questions so fundamental to the Enlightenment (religious toleration, philosophical and political liberty, human rights, fair treatment under the law, etc.) into Voltaire's later dictionary works can perhaps help explain the immense success of the *Questions*, at least in the immediate years following their publication, and perhaps even in the postrevolutionary era, as these same questions will traverse the entire nineteenth century. With this in mind, our aim is to re-evaluate and reposition the *Questions'* place (or absence) in literary history using current digital humanities methods and corpora to unearth references to Voltaire's 'hidden' masterpiece of Enlightenment thought.

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## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Morrissey, Robert and Glenn Roe 2024 Hidden in Plain Sight: The *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* in the Nineteenth Century. *L'Écriture est la peinture de la voix: Essays in honour of Nicholas Cronk. Modern Languages Open*, 2024(1): 24 pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.517>

The question of Voltaire's influence on the nineteenth century is famously thorny. [Gustave Lanson](#), for one, thought it almost impossible to address precisely: 'L'influence de Voltaire sur son siècle et sur le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle est certaine, mais impossible à déterminer avec quelque précision. Je ne sais s'il sera jamais possible de le faire' ([Lanson 202](#)). The task is all the more complicated when considering a work like the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, Voltaire's longest and perhaps least-known masterpiece (*OCV* 37–43). For various editorial reasons, the *Questions* all but disappeared after their initial publication in the 1770s, a period during which they nonetheless had become the number 3 overall bestseller and the number 1 non-religious work according to the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN; see [Figure 1](#)). Although no longer referred to using their rightful title, excerpts from the *Questions* proliferate in the print culture of postrevolutionary France, used and reused across an impressive swathe of texts of all stripes and sizes. The presence of these reuses would seem to corroborate Lanson's assertion that one important, if perhaps overlooked, aspect of Voltaire's influence is his role as 'un agent de transmission qui met la puissance contagieuse de sa passion et la puissance séductrice de son talent au service des idées qu'il sert et qu'il n'a pas créées' ([202](#)).



**Figure 1** Bestsellers from the STN online database, FBTEE (see [fbtee.uws.edu.au/main/](http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/main/)).

Lanson's remark forcefully emphasises what might be called Voltaire's aesthetic of reuse, and suggests a powerful new way of understanding this essential element of his participation in the Enlightenment project. The following study thus attempts to understand Voltaire as an agent of transmission, and, in particular, to assess the impact of his turn towards alphabetical works as a weapon of choice in the last decades of his life, as he engages in the larger arena of philosophical warfare opened up by the publication (and suppression) of the *Encyclopédie* in the 1750s. The embedding of questions so fundamental to the Enlightenment – religious toleration, philosophical and political liberty, human rights, fair treatment under the law and so forth – into Voltaire's later dictionary works can perhaps help explain the immense success of the *Questions*, at least in the immediate years following their publication, and even in the postrevolutionary era, as these same questions will traverse the entire nineteenth century. With this in mind, our aim was to re-evaluate and reposition the *Questions'* place (or absence) in literary history using current digital humanities methods and corpora, thus responding, in our own way, to the methodological challenge Lanson first elaborated in [1906](#).

In order to address the above questions, we availed ourselves of two digital resources developed by our respective research centres: the *Très Grande Base (TGB)* corpus of 130,000 digitised texts created by the Labex OBVIL (Sorbonne) and the Bibliothèque nationale de France,<sup>1</sup> and the TextPAIR sequence alignment system developed by the ARTFL Project at the University of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Luckily for us, much of the preliminary hard labour required to marshal such a massive collection of texts had already been largely tackled, thanks to a Mellon-funded transatlantic project between the Sorbonne and Chicago in 2017–2018.<sup>3</sup> The resulting database of some

1 See [api.bnf.fr/fr/documents-de-gallica-produits-au-format-tei-par-obvil](http://api.bnf.fr/fr/documents-de-gallica-produits-au-format-tei-par-obvil).

2 See [github.com/ARTFL-Project/text-pair](https://github.com/ARTFL-Project/text-pair).

3 On the 'Use and Reuse' project, see [obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/projets/use-and-reuse](http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/projets/use-and-reuse).

300,000 aligned passages between the *TGB* and pre-nineteenth-century texts from the ARTFL-Frantext database was made available to researchers in 2019.<sup>4</sup> With these alignments in hand, we aimed to dive deeper into Voltaire’s particular presence in this mass of aligned passages – underscoring, we hoped, both his importance to nineteenth-century writers in general and his evolving status as an authority in the latter part of the century.

As it turns out, Voltaire alone accounts for almost 10 per cent of the 294,560 aligned passages between the ARTFL-Frantext database and the *TGB*, followed by Bossuet and La Fontaine (see Table 1).

AUTHOR	# OF REUSES	% OF REUSES
Voltaire	29,296	9.95%
Bossuet, Jacques Bénigne	12,670	4.30%
La Fontaine, Jean de	11,592	3.94%
Bonaparte, Napoléon	11,021	3.74%
Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de	10,554	3.58%
Saint-Simon, Louis de Rouvroy, duc de	10,519	3.57%
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques	10,164	3.45%
Sévigné, Marie de	9906	3.36%
Racine, Jean	9883	3.36%
Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe-	8738	2.97%

**Table 1** Top 10 ARTFL-Frantext authors reused in the *TGB*.

These numbers should be taken with an appropriate measure of salt, however, since there are undoubtedly many identified ‘reused’ passages that come from shared sources – Voltaire citing Montaigne for instance – that are treated here as one-to-one alignments. This phenomenon, however, should be fairly uniform in distribution across authors, so the broad strokes of these results (i.e. Voltaire being reused more than twice as much as any other author) would seem on the whole accurate. To substantiate this hypothesis, we note that Voltaire is also the most cited author in Émile Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1873), again pipping Bossuet for first place, though this time only by a factor of 1.5, or 18,025 citations for Voltaire versus some 12,626 for the bishop of Meaux.<sup>5</sup>

Given what we know about Voltaire’s legacy and reception in the nineteenth century, in particular his early status as a literary model and last vestige of French classicism, these results are hardly unexpected (see for example Paillard; Morel). What was surprising, however, at least to us, was Voltaire’s most reused work: the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie* (1772–1774). Indeed, along with six (if we include the *Henriade* in this category) of his historical works, a work on the Bible that generated multiple alignments for obvious reasons and two philosophical works, the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie* are a strong first in the top ten most reused Voltaire texts in the *TGB* (see Table 2).

At first blush we assumed that the *Questions* might simply have benefited from the ‘dictionary’ or ‘encyclopedia’ effect inherent to reference works and the early modern culture of text reuse: a situation in which dictionaries by their very nature extensively cite other dictionaries, or draw on the same common sources, creating an ‘echo effect’, the result of reverberations of often-cited passages, reprised and bouncing from one dictionary to the next (see Edelstein et al.; Morrissey et al.). Yet, in this case, the dictionary form was moulded towards the very nature of Voltaire’s philosophical project. Furthermore, in the context of this study, the overwhelming presence of the *Questions* in our results proved much more consistent, and decidedly more complex, than its mere alphabetical organisation or reliance on earlier sources would seem to suggest. Organising reuses of Voltaire’s works by decade, for instance, we note that in all but one, 1800–1809 – when the *Essai sur les mœurs* took top billing – the *Questions* were reliably the most reused Voltaire text (see Appendix). What are we to make of this? On the surface

<sup>4</sup> Consult the ‘Legacies of Enlightenment’ databases at [artfl-project.uchicago.edu/legacy\\_eighteenth](http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/legacy_eighteenth).

<sup>5</sup> Littré quotation statistics come from [littre.org/statistiques](http://littre.org/statistiques).

these results are at odds with explicit references to the title of the work in other data sources: it is mentioned only twice in all 1333 of ARTFL-Frantext’s nineteenth-century texts; a mere ninety occurrences of ‘Voltaire’, ‘questions’ and ‘Encyclopédie’ occur together over the entire *TGB*, primarily in bibliographic notices; and, perhaps most surprisingly, Littré makes no reference to the *Questions* whatsoever for any of his more than 18,000 Voltaire citations. How is this possible? How can a work be preponderant in terms of textual presence, and at the same time all but absent in terms of citation and referencing? How is it, finally, that as a source of reused and recycled text this hidden masterpiece came to overshadow Voltaire’s better-known works?

TITLE	# OF REUSES
<i>Questions sur l’Encyclopédie</i>	6571
<i>Le Siècle de Louis XIV</i>	4342
<i>Essai sur les mœurs</i>	2740
<i>La Henriade</i>	2184
<i>Histoire du Parlement de Paris</i>	902
<i>Histoire de Charles XII</i>	859
<i>La Bible enfin expliquée</i>	778
<i>Précis du siècle de Louis XV par M. de Voltaire</i>	771
<i>Éléments de la philosophie de Newton</i>	680
<i>Dictionnaire philosophique</i>	636

**Table 2** Most reused Voltaire titles in the *TGB*.

In order to address and contextualise the above questions, we needed first to understand better the complex editorial history of the *Questions* and their relationship to, on the one hand, the great mid-eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* of [Diderot and D’Alembert](#), and, on the other, Voltaire’s own previous alphabetical works, in particular the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764) and the various texts later subsumed under the general title *Dictionnaire philosophique* in the first posthumous edition of Voltaire’s complete works, the so-called Kehl edition led by Beaumarchais and Condorcet (1785–1789).<sup>6</sup>

## VOLTAIRE’S ALPHABETICAL TURN

Voltaire’s relationship with the *Encyclopédie* is often thought of as having been somewhat distant and tenuous. ‘Ils me donnent quelquefois des articles peu intéressants à faire,’ he complained to his friend Thiriot in a well-known letter dated 5 January 1758, ‘mais tout m’est bon, et je me tiens trop heureux et trop honoré de mettre quelques cailloux à ce magnifique édifice.’<sup>7</sup> And indeed he wrote at least forty-five articles for the *Encyclopédie*, some of which were significant: ‘Éloquence’, ‘François, ou Français’, ‘Histoire’ and so on. The subject of his article ‘Idole, idolâtre, idolâtrie’, for example, lies at the very heart of his fight for religious toleration. While here we find ourselves still very far from the importance that the practice of idolatry will take on in his struggle against *l’infâme* in the 1760s, Voltaire nevertheless cross-references to the yet-to-be-written article ‘Superstition’ by the chevalier de Jaucourt, who will in turn cross-reference to the article ‘Fanatisme’; the Encyclopedists’ web is already clearly being spun. Voltaire also authored the article ‘Imagination, imaginer’, as well as ‘Fornication’, which he concludes in a quintessentially Voltairean manner:

On a remarqué avec raison ci-dessus, que la *fornication* se prend dans l’Écriture non-seulement pour une union illégitime, mais encore pour signifier l’*idolâtrie* & l’*hérésie*, qui sont regardées comme des *fornications spirituelles*, comme une espece de copulation, s’il est permis de parler de la sorte, avec l’esprit de ténèbres. Cette

<sup>6</sup> An exhaustive treatment of the subject can be found in Christiane Mervaud’s masterful ‘Introduction’ to the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*, *OCV 37*: 1–224. For more on the Kehl edition, see [Gil](#).

<sup>7</sup> D7559. All references to [Voltaire’s correspondence](#) are taken from [Electronic Enlightenment](#).

distinction peut servir à expliquer certains passages de l'Écriture contre la *fornication*, & à les concilier avec d'autres. (Diderot and D'Alembert 7: 189)

Voltaire's correspondence is peppered with hundreds of references – direct and indirect – to the *Encyclopédie*, and the tone is by and large positive:

Je regarde d'ailleurs l'entreprise de l'Encyclopédie comme le plus beau monument qu'on pût élever à l'honneur des sciences; il y a des articles admirables, nonseulement de mr D'Alambert, de mr Diderot, de mr le Chevalier de Jocrout, mais de plusieurs autres personnes, qui *sans aucun motif de gloire ou d'intérêt*, se sont fait un plaisir de travailler à cet ouvrage. Il y a des articles pitoyables, sans doute, et les miens pourraient bien être du nombre, mais le bon l'emporte si prodigieusement sur le mauvais, que toute l'Europe désire la continuation de l'Encyclopédie. (D8958, emphasis added)

Larissa Albina has forcefully demonstrated that Voltaire was indeed an attentive and active reader of the *Encyclopédie*; his personal edition abounds in place-markers indicating the absence of an article that should have been included, or marginalia criticising the content of one that was. In the margins of the article 'Athée' by the abbé Yvon, a particular target of the *philosophe's* withering criticism, Voltaire responds to Yvon's arguments concerning the social necessity of religion to incite virtuous conduct with the note: 'Tout cela peut estre aisement combatu par le plaisir reel qu'on sent a faire une action vertueuse, cette peine horrible à etre juste est une chimere, en mille occasions. Quelle peine eprouve un Roy a recompenser des services & quel tourment éprouvons nous a donner laumone a secourir un homme blessé?' For his part, Olivier Ferret has used the ARTFL digital edition of the *Encyclopédie* to demonstrate convincingly that Voltaire is not simply a contributor who grows in stature from a simple *garçon de boutique*, but a major presence in the *Encyclopédie* itself, albeit a stature limited mostly to grammar, literature and history.

In the letter to Thiriot quoted above, Voltaire notes that '[c]e sera un ouvrage immortel et si les entrepreneurs avaient mieux choisi leurs ouvriers ce serait un ouvrage parfait' (emphasis added). When he speaks of an 'immortal work', it is, of course, an indirect manner of raising the issue of glory. In eighteenth-century France, the notion of glory – a foundational aristocratic value – is rethought and reconceptualised in the context of Enlightenment ideals. The spirit of glory offers an attractive and powerful alternative to the spirit of commerce. Most notably, it offers a means of reconciling self-affirmation and self-abnegation. The need for a certain disinterestedness, so central to the notion of glory, is at the heart of the very idea of working for the good of humanity, which in turn becomes a fundamental element in the construction of French universalism.<sup>8</sup> Voltaire's taste – and quest – for glory is well-known. But we believe that a closer look at his article on the subject, namely 'Gloire, glorieux, glorieusement, glorifier', which appears in volume 7 of the *Encyclopédie*, provides an excellent point of departure for understanding Voltaire's subsequent alphabetical turn in the 1760s, eventually leading him to conceive of a work in a manner that is, in many ways, striking in its ambiguous modesty: the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.

In this short article, Voltaire runs – with flair and virtuosity – through the definitions and uses of the noun, the adjective, the adverb and the verb: *gloire, glorieux, glorieusement, glorifier*. Glory is reputation, esteem, even admiration that results from great actions, great virtue and overcoming great difficulties. Voltaire provides examples: Caesar, Alexander, Charles XII of Sweden, Henri IV, but not Socrates whose memory is rather more worthy of veneration, pity and indignation for his enemies. Voltaire also quickly distinguishes between true glory and vainglory. But the real meat of the matter is left to Marmontel, who, in a much longer article, explores the subject in depth from the perspective of moral philosophy and goes well beyond simple word definitions to try to understand what glory represents in the age of Enlightenment, its meaning in its political, moral and aesthetic dimensions (see Morrissey 87–88). By contrast, Voltaire's admixture of virtuosity combined with what might be taken for a wilful off-handedness or lack of depth, leaves the reader wondering what is really going on in his contribution to the subject. The question is all the more compelling in that Voltaire's personal drive to attain the very thing he is describing is no secret to anyone. His first tragedy, *Œdipe*, was performed

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<sup>8</sup> On the question of glory in the eighteenth century, see Morrissey. Concerning Voltaire, see Iverson.

when he was just twenty-three (1718), and his national epic poem, *La Henriade*, appeared in 1723. Clearly, from the very beginning, Voltaire was shooting for the stars. But in the two sentences he devotes to glory in the fine arts, he suggests that it is limited to those great talents practising in the ‘sublime arts’: ‘La gloire est aussi le partage des inventeurs dans les beaux Arts; les imitateurs n’ont que des applaudissemens. Elle est encore accordée aux grands talens, mais dans les arts sublimes. On dira bien la gloire de Virgile, de Cicéron, mais non de Martial & d’Aulugelle’ (Diderot and D’Alembert 7: 716). The path to glory, he seems to conclude, does not pass through the small towns of epigrams (Martial), nor through the meanderings of compilation (Aulus Gellius), but through epic poetry and philosophy. It is almost as if he were saying: why am I even bothering to write this little, oh so unimportant article?

But, on second thought, maybe there is something more at stake. Something more like the vague expression of a feeling that maybe he has fallen into a trap, more along the lines of: who asked me to do this anyway? Is this some kind of a trick? Perhaps, even, a realisation that the whole endeavour might well be a means of putting Voltaire the glory hound into a bit of a doghouse. From the *société des salons* to the *salles de théâtre* and even in his [correspondence](#), Voltaire’s all too evident pursuit of recognition perhaps places him in the ironic position of being branded as a particular instantiation of the *glorieux*, a glorymonger whose presence intrudes, as it were, into Voltaire’s own article on the subject: ‘homme *glorieux*, esprit *glorieux*, est toujours une injure; il signifie celui qui se donne à lui-même ce qu’il devoit mériter des autres.’ It is perhaps to avoid being identified as too avid for glory – a *glorieux* – that, in the last paragraph of the article, Voltaire turns to the ambiguities of the reflexive verb *se glorifier* as a means of pirouetting self-referentially out of danger by pointing subtly, abstractly – in an impersonal example of the use of the word – to how he himself had been the victim of injustice: ‘Il se *glorifie* d’une disgrâce qui est le fruit de ses talens & l’effet de l’envie’ (Diderot and D’Alembert 7: 716). Time well spent in the Bastille, or well compensated... in the currency of glory. But Voltaire escapes from the prison-house of language to write on!

Perhaps this foray into the insignificant role assigned to him in the *Encyclopédie* served as an inspiration for Voltaire. After all, everyone was talking about the great collective work of the *philosophes*, and the project ambitiously aimed to represent the sum of all human knowledge. So there was clearly enough glory to go around. Maybe the grammarian and compiler Aulus Gellius was onto something after all. And, as for Martial, we will see Voltaire return to him in the early 1770s, when his alphabetical turn takes on a much sharper bent. But for the moment, 1757 was, as we know, a fateful year for the *Encyclopédie* and its editors, beginning with the attempted assassination of Louis XV in January, leading to the 21 April edict by the Parlement de Paris prescribing the death penalty or service in the galleys for authors and publishers of tendentious and clandestine works. Polemics around the publication of volume 7 of the *Encyclopédie* exploded even before it appeared. Attacks in the press multiplied, and the critiques continued to intensify. In January 1758 a discouraged D’Alembert abandons the enterprise, never to return; in March the royal *privilège* is withdrawn. The front of the *anti-philosophes* amplifies. In short, the *Encyclopédie* had become more than a mere work of compilation, and found itself transformed into a symbol of the Enlightenment project, wherein redefining words became the order of the day. Reuse and redefinition came to be of a pair... intellectually, ideologically and aesthetically. Seen in this light, Voltaire’s alphabetical turn takes on a kind of self-evidence. Small was often better. Different weapons for different campaigns, and the *machine de guerre* that was the *Encyclopédie* was perhaps no longer fit for purpose. It is along these lines that the publication of the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, first appearing in 1764, can be seen as a lighter – more modern, less classical – arm developed for use in this same philosophical war.

The taste for the *petit* can be situated on the one hand in the context of the rococo in art. Voltaire develops this taste early on; his first *conte*, *Zadig*, dates from 1747. But it is in the 1750s, with his *Mélanges* composed of ‘petits chapitres’ (see Cronk in [OCV 45B: xx–xxv](#)), and then in the 1760s, in the context of the ‘war’ against injustice, that Voltaire makes of small arms fire a fine art. The ‘Assembly of Monosyllables’, responding to Le Franc de Pompignan’s broadside aimed at the *parti philosophique* in his acceptance speech before the Académie française in 1760, marks the opening of hostilities. From verbal pranks and *moqueries* to his more serious polemical pieces and his alphabetical works, Voltaire’s taste for the *petit* aligns

itself with his taste for combat. At the same time, his taste for ‘sublime art’ transforms itself into a taste for radical action. Starting with Calas (‘Écrasez l’infâme’), Voltaire’s involvement in a series of high-profile judicial *causes célèbres* culminates with the particularly horrific case of the judicial torture and execution of the chevalier de La Barre in 1765–1766. It is this last, supremely emblematic case that forever links together Voltaire’s crusade for judicial reform, his polemical pamphlets, his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie* and, perhaps surprisingly, the French Revolution.

The chevalier de La Barre stood accused of having defaced a crucifix on a bridge in the town of Abbeville, of having mocked a religious procession and, lastly, of having read an ungodly work, namely Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, a copy of which was found among his books. He would be condemned to judicial torture, to have his tongue cut out, to be executed by decapitation and, finally, his body would be burned on a pyre along with his copy of Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Like the *Encyclopédie* before him, and, in this case, manifestly through his alphabetical turn, Voltaire himself had in the 1760s clearly become a symbol of the impious and blasphemous philosophical movement. In his fight to save the young chevalier, he would in turn make of La Barre a symbol of the arbitrary and barbaric practices of the *Ancien Régime* system of justice and a martyr to the Enlightenment cause. For our purposes, it is important to note that his scathing denunciation of the toxic mixture of religious prejudices, judicial practices, local politics and completely disproportionate punishment – the *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* published in 1767 – would come to constitute almost the entire article on ‘Justice’ in the *Questions*. In this article, justice is thus defined by Voltaire’s antinomic reuse of this emblematic story of flagrant injustice. It would not be until after the fall of the Bastille and the establishment of the First Republic that, in 1793, the Convention would vote to rehabilitate La Barre.

Voltaire’s heroic, grandiose judicial crusades – Calas, Sirven, La Barre – are thus melded into a work that is in turn assimilated, however modestly, back to the *Encyclopédie*, itself an object of persecution: ‘L’*Encyclopédie* est un monument qui honore la France; aussi fut-elle persécutée dès qu’elle fut entreprise’ (OCV 38: 4). More than a mere reference work, it was itself both an emblem of the philosophical movement and a *machine de guerre*. Aesthetically, this complex set of motivations works to Voltaire’s advantage. He somehow makes possible the admixture of the grandiose, the sublime, his offhanded lightness and a pronounced taste for the *petit*. How does this melding process unfold? In his article ‘Gloire’ in the *Questions*, he reprises his previous article from the *Dictionnaire portatif* in which he tells a little tale – a vignette – of a wise *derviche* who mocks the pretentiousness of humans claiming to work for the glory of God, as if God somehow had anything to do with what humans perceive as glory. But, in the *Questions*, he adds a new twist to his definitional play. First, he praises such great leaders as Cicero, Frederick II and Catherine II, placing them in a category all their own. Persons of this ilk can pretend to glory and even take pleasure in achieving it. Then he adds that any claim ‘un bourgeois d’une ville nommée Paris’ might try to lay to glory – even if it is validated by the likes of a well-known university professor – should be unceremoniously booed off stage (OCV 42A: 89). But the question arises: despite all his immense fame and fortune, can Voltaire himself not be seen in this image of the bourgeois from Paris? Viewed from this perspective, the article ‘Gloire’ in the *Questions* could be seen as Voltaire’s final word on the matter: glory is ultimately not for him, and he renounces any claim to it.

Perhaps. But, in the article ‘Cicéron’, Voltaire rushes heroically to the defence of Cicero, who himself has fallen victim to yet another *anti-philosophe* cabal. In a work published in 1769, Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet accuses Cicero of having been too avid for glory (Linguet 349–50), ‘d’avoir trop aimé la gloire’ (OCV 40: 108). Voltaire responds that, on the contrary, the great Roman statesman and patriot was exemplary in his love of glory – ‘Voilà comme il faut aimer la gloire’ – and quotes his own play *Rome sauvée* (V, ii), in which he has his hero proclaim:

Romains, j’aime la gloire et ne veux pas m’en taire;  
 Des travaux des humains c’est le digne salaire:  
 Ce n’est qu’en vous servant qu’il la faut acheter.  
 Qui n’ose la vouloir n’ose la mériter. (OCV 40: 109)

Voltaire then goes on to quote an epigram by Martial to drive home his point:

*Quid prosunt sacrae pretiosa silentia linguae?  
 Incipient omnes pro Cicerone loqui.*

Ta prodigue fureur acheta son silence,  
 Mais l'univers entier parle à jamais pour lui. (OCV 40: 111)

No better arm in a good fight than a pointed epigram! As such, even Martial is amalgamated and enlisted into the ranks of the *philosophes* and the Enlightenment camp, and one is left to wonder if the compiler Aulus Gellius is not too far behind the epigrammatist.

To understand the profound importance Voltaire comes to attribute to the 'supplemental' skills of the compiler and pamphleteer – those of Aulus Gellius or Martial – rather than those of the epic poet, one needs to recognise their essential role in the fine, if not glorious, art of philosophical warfare. Indeed, we should remind ourselves that the *Questions* themselves began as a modest project to 'supplement' their revolutionary predecessor.<sup>9</sup> And, as its title suggests, this new dictionary was indeed presented, at least superficially, as a response to certain articles in the *Encyclopédie*. But the reality is much more complex. To wit, the *Questions* are at the same time much more and much less than a mere supplement to the *Encyclopédie*, and can be seen as of a piece with Voltaire's other alphabetical works, which operate similarly vis-à-vis their more famous predecessor: recasting their subject matter and philosophical tone much more in the image of Voltaire himself – the lone 'amateur' par excellence as opposed to Diderot's *société de gens de lettres*. While comparisons in nomenclature between these alphabetical works can be telling, they nonetheless speak little about the actual contents of the articles the headwords introduce, even in the most clear-cut of cases. In the article 'Enfer', for example, which occurs in all three dictionaries (*Encyclopédie*, *Dictionnaire portatif* and *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*), we are confronted by three completely distinct articles. Likewise, the article 'Gens de lettres', written initially by Voltaire for the *Encyclopédie*, has nothing whatsoever to do with its namesake in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, which is, moreover, a modified version of the article 'Lettres, gens de lettres, ou lettrés' included in the *Dictionnaire portatif*; clearly this is an act both of refutation and of reclamation concerning Voltaire's previous vocation as an *Encyclopédiste*. But, for all this, we are still no closer to answering the question as to what happened to the *Questions* in the nineteenth century, when mentions of the work seem so few and far between. The answer, it seems, lies with Voltaire's posthumous editors.

## THE QUESTIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

As we now know, the disappearance of the *Questions* as an independent, titular work – separate from the *Dictionnaire philosophique (portatif)* and its various successors – was the result of editorial decisions enacted for the Kehl edition of Voltaire's complete works published by the Société littéraire typographique between 1785 and 1789 (Gil; see also OCV 37: 453–59). In essence, the Kehl editors folded all of Voltaire's alphabetical works into one amalgamated work, the *Dictionnaire philosophique*: 'Nous avons réuni sous le titre de *Dictionnaire philosophique* les *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, le *Dictionnaire philosophique* réimprimé sous le titre de *la Raison par alphabet*, un dictionnaire manuscrit intitulé *l'Opinion par alphabet*, les articles de M. de Voltaire insérés dans *l'Encyclopédie*; enfin plusieurs articles destinés pour le *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*' (Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes* 37: 2). Thus the conversation between the *Questions* and the *Encyclopédie*, unambiguously announced by Voltaire's title, was effectively silenced in the first major edition of his complete works following his death in 1778. As most nineteenth-century editors followed the Kehl editors' lead, the *Questions* as a stand-alone work ceased to exist for all intents and purposes after 1785. Such is the case for Adrien-Jean-Quentin Beuchot, for example, editor of Voltaire's complete works during the Restoration, who nevertheless underscores the independent nature of the *Questions*, all the while following the Kehl precedent of textual amalgamation: 'Quelques personnes ont cru que les *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* n'était qu'une nouvelle édition du *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Voltaire n'avait reproduit dans les *Questions* qu'un petit nombre d'articles du *Dictionnaire*. À cela près, les deux ouvrages n'ont de commun que la distribution par ordre alphabétique' (*Œuvres de Voltaire* 26:

<sup>9</sup> For a full analysis of the *Questions*' genesis and relation to their predecessor, see Mervaud in OCV 37.

iv). Tracing the afterlife of the *Questions* in the nineteenth century is thus akin to writing the biography of a silenced book; one that is everywhere present, but nowhere acknowledged. The passages we were able to identify, however, attest to the multiple uses and reuses of his work across an incredible variety of contexts and genres throughout the nineteenth century. As early as 1800, we often find text from the *Questions* conflated with that of the *Encyclopédie* itself. For example, in Henri-Gabriel Duchesne's *Dictionnaire de l'industrie, ou Collection raisonnée des procédés utiles dans les sciences et dans les arts* (vol. 6, 1800),<sup>10</sup> the article 'Statues' follows verbatim Voltaire's twenty-point how-to guide on casting a metal statue – marshalled as a means to challenge dubious historical references to miraculous statues – found in the article 'Fonte' from the *Questions*. Duchesne cites the eighth volume of the *Encyclopédie* plates as a reference, and certainly Voltaire himself admits that 'J'omets beaucoup d'autres préparations que messieurs les encyclopédistes, et surtout M. Diderot, ont expliquées bien mieux que je ne pourrais faire' (*OCV* 41: 476), but the text itself is a pure Voltairean distillation.

In form and in content, then, the *Questions* lend themselves to ample borrowing and reuse in later texts, especially in the particular genre of the *ana*, those collections of anecdotes and other *bons mots* that proliferated in early modern France (see Wild). One such collection, the *Encyclopédiana, ou l'Abeille de Montmartre* (1801),<sup>11</sup> borrows an anecdote from the article 'Charlatan' in the *Questions*, which itself is a commentary on the chevalier de Jaucourt's *Encyclopédie* article on medical charlatans. Here, Voltaire's first-person anecdote – 'J'ai connu un médecin de Londres nommé Broun, qui pratiquait aux Barbades' (*OCV* 40: 38) – becomes a stand-alone passage in the *Encyclopédiana* – 'Un médecin de Londres, nommé Broswn, établi au Barbadet' (85) – in a modified form that incidentally appeared already in 1775 as part of the *Esprit des journaux étrangers et français* (vol. 7), a monthly journal that compiled the best articles from French and foreign newspapers. Neither publication mentions Voltaire or the *Questions* as a source for the anecdote, whose trajectory of reuse will continue on well into the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

A major vector of reception then for Voltaire, for assuring his posthumous 'glory' as it were, is through his work as a compiler, as someone who participates in the vast culture of citation and re-citation in much the same way as Aulus Gellius did in late Antiquity. But more than just circulating the quotations of others (as he does, abundantly), he is also, as we have seen, the peddler of historical anecdotes, some invented, some not – a master of the *ana* genre into which the *Questions* might in fact fit better than that of a simple dictionary or reference work. The overwhelming presence of the *Questions* in our database of reuses is thus primarily due to their nature as a work of compilation, one that engages productively in the literary economy of citation, and that will in turn become common currency for the compilation of later works such as *Le Guide des humanistes, ou Premiers Principes de gout* (1828),<sup>13</sup> *Le Citateur républicain, recueil de principes, de liberté* (1834),<sup>14</sup> the *Dictionnaire des antonymes ou contremots* (1842)<sup>15</sup> and the wonderfully titled *Dictionnaire infernal: répertoire universel des êtres, des personnages, des livres, des faits et des choses qui tiennent aux esprits, aux démons, aux sorciers, au commerce de l'enfer, aux divinations, aux maléfices* (1863).<sup>16</sup> Voltaire's embrace of the *petit* genre, of the alphabetical, anecdotal and polemical – as opposed to the grand tradition of epic or tragic poetry – would thus seem a successful parry in the war of ideas that followed the publication of the *Encyclopédie*, daring to take a smaller, narrower path to glory, as it were.

With regard to the sheer number of literary reuses we find in the *TGB*, Voltaire is also, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century, a decidedly 'classical' figure, one of the last vestiges of the *siècle de Louis XIV* he helped valorise. Here, it is Voltaire the national poet who takes centre stage, rather than the historian of the modern world; his texts are recycled for pedagogical purposes – models of classical expression and eloquence to copy and emulate. In

10 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6388020c](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6388020c).

11 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64657728](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64657728).

12 We find it used as late as 1926 in Cabanès.

13 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64741599](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64741599).

14 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5564998x](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5564998x).

15 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6342438g](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6342438g).

16 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5754923d](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5754923d).

this environment, the *Questions* function as a vehicle for circulating the French classics so dear to Voltaire (Racine, Corneille, La Fontaine, Molière, etc.) as well as a venue for promoting his own status as a classic-in-the-making. Such is the case when he cites the final section of his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* in the article ‘Bien, tout est’, or similarly when he ends the article ‘Livres’ with an excerpt from *chant 4* of his *Guerre de Genève*:

Tout ce fatras fut du chanvre en son temps,  
 Linge il devint par l’art des tisserands;  
 Puis en lambeaux des pilons le pressèrent,  
 Il fut papier. (OCV 42B, 67)

The provenance of this passage is given by Littré (somewhat erroneously) as the *Dictionnaire philosophique* – a misattribution that persists even today, taking on new life as part of the *Dictionnaire des citations* website maintained by *Le Monde*.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, both of the above reuses – examples of Voltaire’s penchant for ‘self-plagiarism’ or ‘auto-citation’ (see Cronk) – were found in what could be considered a nineteenth-century predecessor to today’s online ‘quotation farms’, F.-L. Marcou’s *Morceaux choisis des classiques français des XVI<sup>e</sup>, XVII<sup>e</sup>, XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (1885).<sup>18</sup> Far from an isolated incident, this sort of reuse of the *Questions* is prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, occurring in a host of works of a similar bent: *Rhétorique française, extraite des meilleurs auteurs anciens et modernes* (1825),<sup>19</sup> *Essai sur l’éloquence de la chaire, panégyriques, éloge et discours* (1828),<sup>20</sup> *Beautés de la poésie française, ou Leçons et modèles de littérature en vers, extraits des auteurs modernes* (1843),<sup>21</sup> and *Rhétorique appliquée, ou Recueil d’exercices littéraires dans tous les genres de composition française* (1850),<sup>22</sup> among others.

Finally, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Voltaire the poet and Voltaire the historian give way to a new, modern Voltaire, that of the engaged intellectual, or, to borrow a contemporary term, Voltaire the social justice warrior. In the years leading up to the centenary of Voltaire’s death, the socialist Édouard de Pompéry illustrates the refashioning of Voltaire’s glory, this time as a proto-republican champion of reform and social justice:

L’aspect le plus remarquable de l’auteur du *Dictionnaire philosophique* et du sauveur des Calas, est celui sous lequel il est le moins connu. Pour la plupart des lecteurs, le poète facile, léger et badin, l’écrivain spirituel, alerte, beau rieur, jettent une ombre sur l’âme splendidement humaine du philosophe; le critique incisif, le polémiste infatigable, cachent le penseur. Voltaire est célèbre à bon droit comme poète, historien, conteur, auteur dramatique, etc., mais ce qu’il y a de meilleur et de plus grand en lui, c’est l’homme. (*Vrai Voltaire* 1–2 and *Vie de Voltaire* 7–8)<sup>23</sup>

The image of *this* Voltaire, the social justice warrior *avant la lettre*, establishes itself gradually from the end of the Second Empire into the first decades of the Third Republic,<sup>24</sup> appearing through a network of reuses of the *Questions* in titles such as the *Nouvelle encyclopédie nationale* (1870),<sup>25</sup> the *Catéchisme philosophique républicain* (1889)<sup>26</sup> and *Les Caractères et l’éducation morale* (1896).<sup>27</sup> The real Voltaire, then, according to Pompéry, is not in fact the author of

17 See [dicocitations.com/](http://dicocitations.com/) and in particular [www.dicocitations.com/citations\\_littr%C3%A9/citation-164370.php](http://www.dicocitations.com/citations_littr%C3%A9/citation-164370.php).

18 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5418127q](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5418127q).

19 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6342456d](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6342456d).

20 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5748301q](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5748301q).

21 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6128171w](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6128171w).

22 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6437589n](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6437589n).

23 See also [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6354964k](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6354964k) and [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64573015](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64573015).

24 The proto-republican nature of this version of Voltaire is clear for Lanson, writing in 1906: ‘Il [Voltaire] forme, par ses innombrables écrits, l’esprit qu’on appelle alors *patriotique* ou *républicain*, et qui consiste dans l’intérêt que prend le citoyen, le simple particulier, à tous les objets d’utilité commune, à tous les moyens de la prospérité publique, dans sa participation active, même en monarchie absolue, aux affaires de l’État, par la critique incessante des abus et l’infatigable recherche des améliorations pratiques’ (213–14).

25 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k58147352](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k58147352).

26 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5698509v](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5698509v).

27 See [gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5526457s](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5526457s).

classical emulations such as *Œdipe* or *La Henriade*, but rather the philosophical compiler of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* – or, more precisely, of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.

In highlighting Voltaire's crusade for social justice, Third Republic reuses of the *Questions* also bring us back to the curious case of the article 'Justice' mentioned above, whose editorial history in many ways mirrors that of the *Questions* themselves. Having published the *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* in 1767, following La Barre's judgement and execution, Voltaire, as noted above, chooses to republish a slightly modified version of this text as the article 'Justice' in the *Questions*, including several new introductory and concluding paragraphs. Rather than reprinting what they considered a simple *reprise* of an earlier text, the Kehl editors publish the first three paragraphs of the article 'Justice' and then refer readers to the *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* published in another volume. While Voltaire reuses his text on La Barre – itself composed under the pretext of a letter to the Italian jurist Beccaria – the Kehl editors, after their footnoted cross-reference to the *Relation*, simply substitute a completely different letter from Voltaire to Beccaria on a completely different judicial affair, that of the comte de Morangis (Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes* 41: 200)! The article 'Justice', then, in the Kehl *Dictionnaire philosophique* is in effect an editorial fabrication, and betrays not only Voltaire's intention of including a contextualised version of the *Relation* as the substantive meat of his lexical and philosophical definition of 'justice', but also the very essence of the aesthetic of reuse.

As all nineteenth-century editors of Voltaire's works followed the Kehl model, the article 'Justice' in its entirety has been effectively lost to history since the late 1770s. In particular, Voltaire's final words on the matter of justice, and the unjust treatment of the chevalier de La Barre at the hands of a cruel and outdated French judicial system, were effectively excised by the Kehl editors' heavy-handedness: 'Altri tempi, altre cure; ajoutons d'autres temps, d'autres malheurs, et ces malheurs s'oublieront pour faire place à d'autres. Soumettons-nous à la Providence qui nous éprouve tantôt par des calamités publiques, tantôt par des désastres particuliers. Souhaitons des lois plus sensées, des ministres des lois plus sages, plus éclairés, plus humains' (*OCV* 42A: 514). Here, in a clear allusion to his previous poem on the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire demonstrates those overtly 'human' qualities of the Enlightenment that Pompéry and the republicans of the late nineteenth century will come to most appreciate. It is no small irony, then, that Voltaire the historian is quite literally betrayed by history, his voice removed from the historical record by an accident of editorial intervention and a complete tone-deafness to his aesthetic of reuse. Thankfully the Voltaire Foundation's recent edition of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, deftly established by Nicholas Cronk and Christiane Mervaud, and supplemented in 2019 by the first-ever paperback edition, restores this important text to its full and former glory, re-establishing the philosophical and textual conversations between Voltaire and the *Encyclopédie* that had been all but silenced for the past two and half centuries. Seen from this point of view, these works, both of which in their own way privilege the art of redefinition (or reuse), now seem to reappear for us as two aesthetically distinct arms in the same struggle for fundamental Enlightenment values.

## APPENDIX: TOP TEN TITLES BY NUMBER OF CITATIONS OVER DECADES IN THE TGB DATABASE

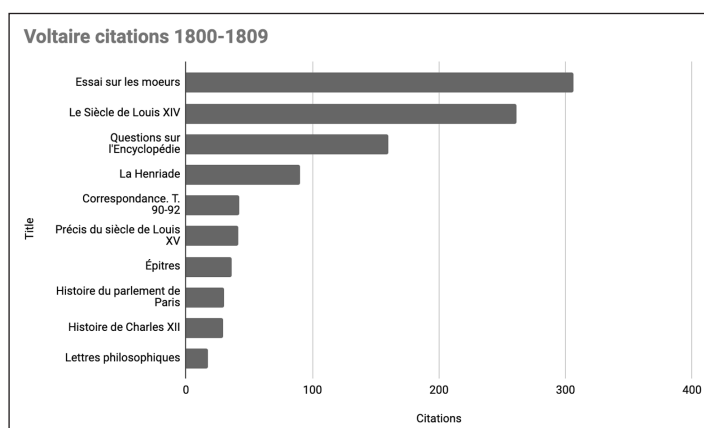


Figure 2 1800–1809.

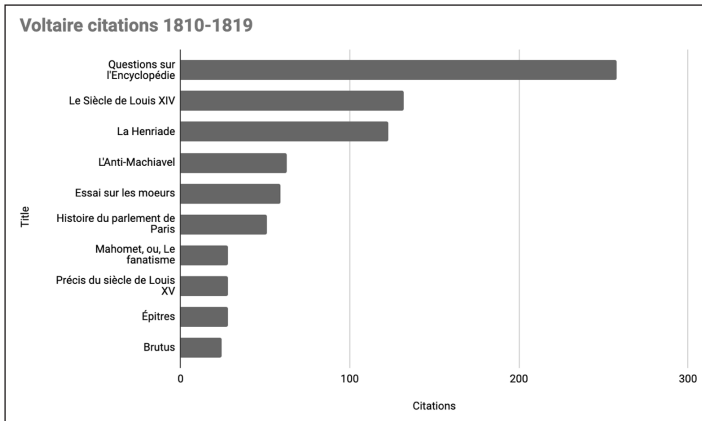


Figure 3 1810–1819.

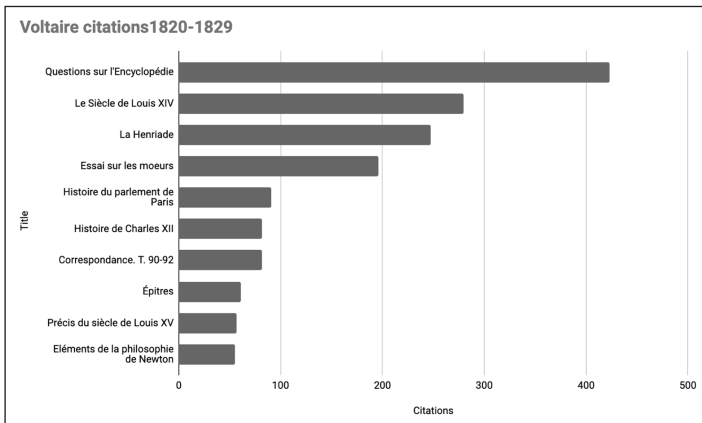


Figure 4 1820–1829.

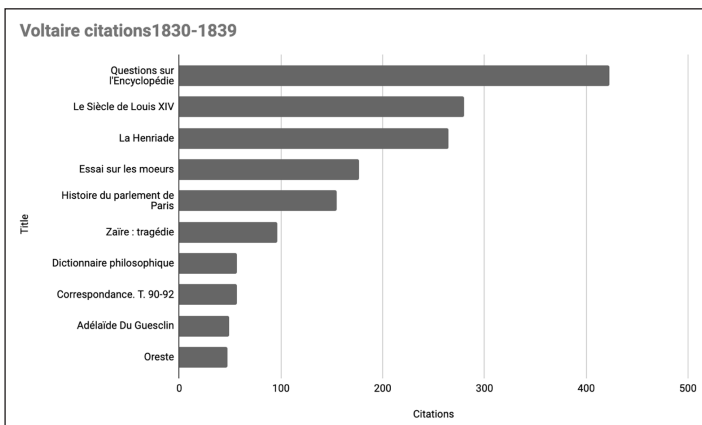


Figure 5 1830–1839.

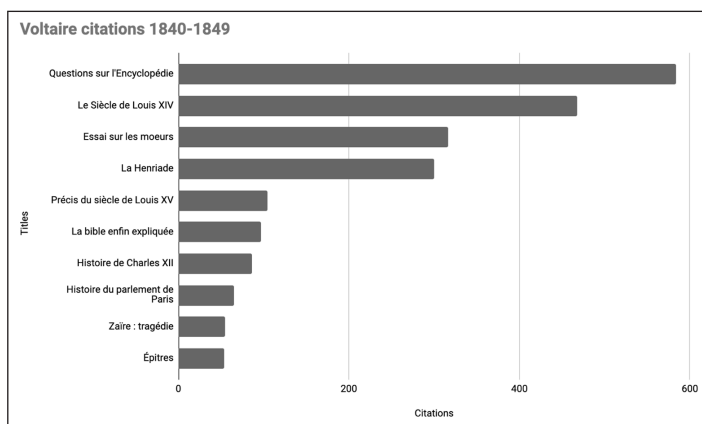


Figure 6 1840–1849.

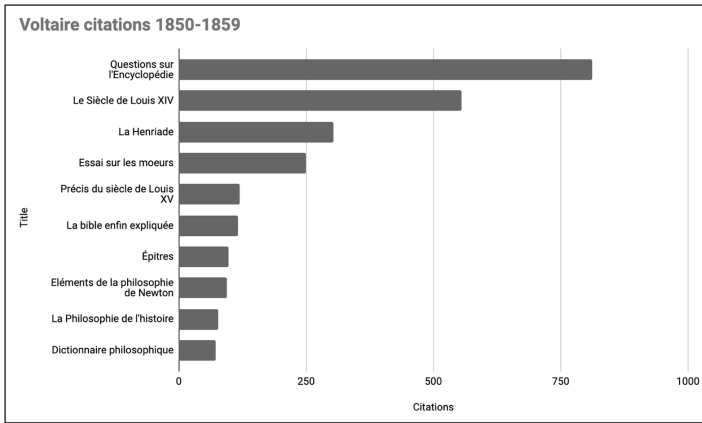


Figure 7 1850-1859.

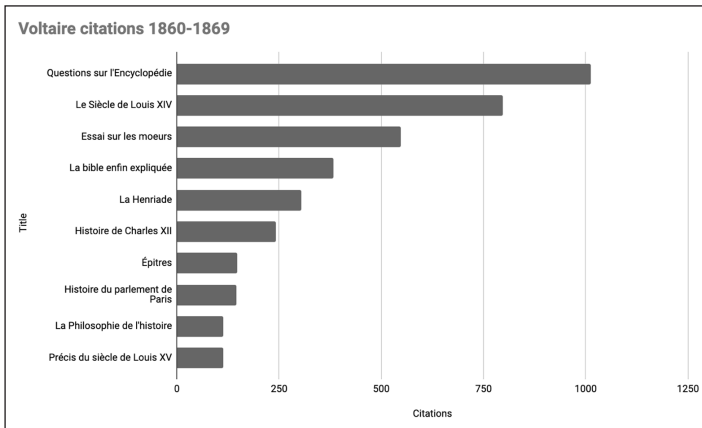


Figure 8 1860-1869.

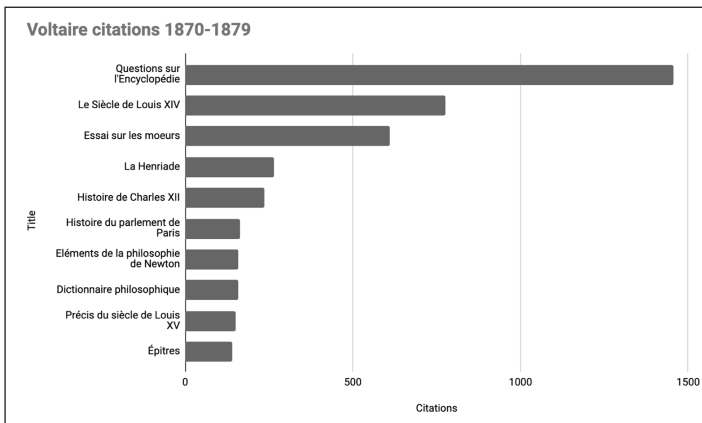


Figure 9 1870-1879.

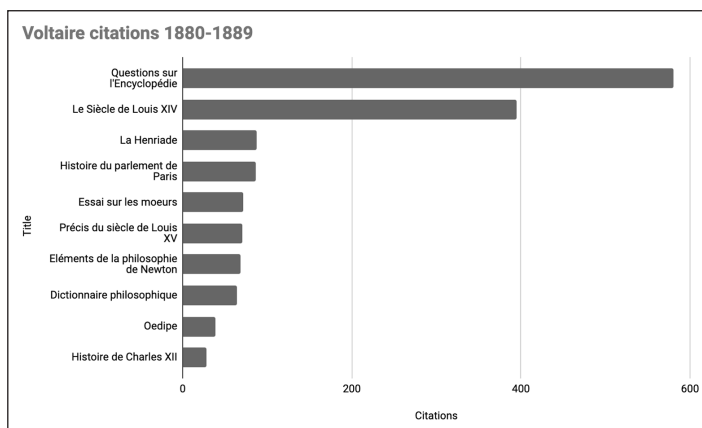


Figure 10: 1880-1889

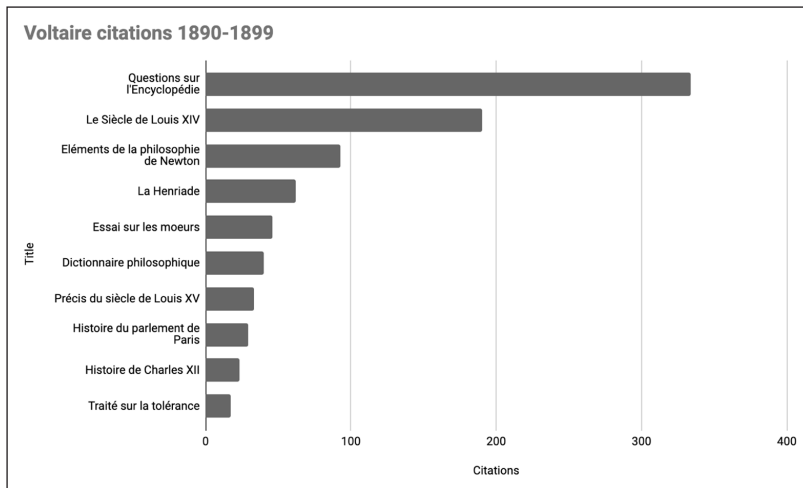


Figure 11 1890–1899.

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*Modern Languages Open*  
DOI: 10.3828/mlo.v0i0.517

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#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Morrissey, Robert and Glenn Roe 2024 Hidden in Plain Sight: The *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* in the Nineteenth Century. *L'Écriture est la peinture de la voix: Essays in honour of Nicholas Cronk*. *Modern Languages Open*, 2024(1): 24 pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.517>

**Published:** 28 November 2024

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