

**VOLTAIRE'S ESSAY ON
EPIC POETRY: A
STUDY AND AN
EDITION, A DISSERTATION**

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Voltaire's Essay on Epic Poetry: A Study and an Edition, a Dissertation by Florence Donnell White

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W. L. Dana
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Voltaire's Essay on Epic Poetry

A STUDY AND AN EDITION

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of Bryn Mawr College in partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

BY
FLORENCE DONNELL WHITE
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FOREWORD

The subject of this dissertation was suggested to me in 1906 by Mr. Lucien Foulet, at that time professor of French in Bryn Mawr College. Under him the work was begun. I wish to express my warm appreciation of his stimulating advice and interest.

I worked upon the subject in Paris and in London in the summers of 1907 and 1911. In 1913, since Mr. Foulet had left America some years before, Professor A. Schinz, now head of the Department of French at Smith College, under whom I had worked in another field at Bryn Mawr, was kind enough to take over the direction of my dissertation at the request of the Graduate Committee of Bryn Mawr. I am the more appreciative of his courtesy in doing so since he is not a specialist in Voltaire. In the direction of this work he has given his attention particularly to form and presentation of the subject-matter. I have to thank him for unfailing kindness and much helpful criticism. I am also indebted to Dr. S. C. Chew Jr. of the Department of English of Bryn Mawr for valuable suggestions.

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PREFACE

In the year 1727, while Voltaire was living in England, a small volume was issued by a London book-seller, under the title: *An Essay upon the Civil Wars of France, extracted from curious Manuscripts and also upon the Epick Poetry of the European Nations, from Homer down to Milton, by Mr. de Voltaire*. It passed through several editions in England and Ireland between 1727 and 1761. Despite the use of the singular "Essay," the title makes it clear that there were two distinct pieces of work. Both were translated into French and published, the *Essay on Epic Poetry* in Paris in 1728, that on the civil wars of France at The Hague in 1729.

The French translation of the *Essay on Epic Poetry* was reprinted with Voltaire's *Henriade* in an edition of his works, Amsterdam, 1732. The following year, however, when he published the *Henriade* separately, the author replaced the translated essay by a French version of his own making, which he announced as quite different from the English and adapted to the taste of the French public. This version, together with the original translation of the *Essay upon the Civil Wars*, is to be found in standard editions of Voltaire's works immediately after the *Henriade*.

In their English form the essays are difficult of access and therefore little known. That they were even more inaccessible in the past may be seen from the fact that three scholars writing in London or in Paris in 1778, 1807 and 1828 respectively, discussed in detail a point in the English *Essay on Epic Poetry* which a glance at the text in question would have elucidated.¹ One of them, Beuchot, the accomplished editor of the 1828 edition of Voltaire, felt called upon to adduce evidence that an English version of the two essays had actually appeared.² Although these essays have been not infrequently cited, and even quoted by a few modern writers, notably Ballantyne,³ no study of them has been made.

¹ Cf. p. 96, note 5, *post*.

² Cf. *Oeuvres de Voltaire*, Garnier frères, VIII, pp. 234, 302, note 4. All references to Voltaire's works other than the letters of the years 1726-1729 and the *Lettres philosophiques* are to this edition, unless otherwise specified.

³ Ballantyne, *Voltaire's Visit to England*, pp. 123 ff.

Written by a Frenchman who had been in England but a year and a half and at a period when few Frenchmen learned English, their most obvious interest is linguistic. Less evident but in reality more important than the question of the language is that of the content. In this respect the *Essay on the Civil Wars*, a brief historical treatise, although of considerable interest, has naturally less to offer. Furthermore it can be read in the French translation in Voltaire's works, whereas the translation of the *Essay on Epic Poetry* has, like the English original, become very rare. The latter is therefore the more interesting of the two essays and it is to it that our discussion will be confined.

Many critics, aware of the existence of the English *Essay*, have assumed that the French and the English versions were in the main identical. As a matter of fact they differ markedly in places and furnish an unusual opportunity for the comparison of certain of Voltaire's views in 1727, the period when he was becoming acquainted with English ideas, with those he held on the same subjects several years after his return to France, as well as of the forms under which he thought best to present those views to two different nations.

The ideas in the *Essay* are in themselves of real importance. We have here an early example of what Joseph Texte has called literary cosmopolitanism: brief and informal criticisms of Homer, Virgil, Lucan and of certain modern poets, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and English, at a time when the study of comparative literature was rare in France.

Moreover, the essays, both English and French, are intimately connected with the author's own epic, the *Henriade*, which was his chief interest for many years and was long considered his foremost claim to immortality.

This dissertation concerns itself with the circumstances of the publication of the English essays, chapter I; with Voltaire's use of English, chapter II; with the French translation of the *Essay on Epic Poetry*, chapter III; with Voltaire's French version of the *Essay*, chapter IV; with the content of the English version, chapter V. It also includes the republication of the text of the *Essay on Epic Poetry* according to the edition of 1727, with notes and an appendix.

For any investigation having to do with Voltaire's stay in England the way has been paved by the work of Baldensperger, Ballantyne, Churton Collins, Foulet and Lanson, dealing with that significant part of the French author's life of which little was known in former years. In this field Gustave Desnoiresterres may be called a pioneer.

For the complete titles of all the works to which reference is made in this dissertation see the bibliography following the appendix.

