



PRIMARY SOURCE READING 10

Of the *Encyclopedia*

Voltaire was one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment. A man with a sharp tongue and an even sharper pen, he was twice imprisoned in the Bastille for his comments. He spent two years in England, where he was impressed by England's greater freedom of thought. Back in France, he wrote philosophy and satire and, through the influence of Madame de Pompadour, was made a member of the French Academy.

In the passage below, Voltaire ridicules French responses to Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, to which Voltaire himself was a contributor.

Guided Reading *In this selection, read to learn why Diderot's Encyclopedia was banned in France and why it should not have been.*

A servant of Louis XV told me that while his master, the king, was dining one day at Trianon with a small group, the conversation turned first on hunting and then on gun powder. Someone said that the best powder is made with equal parts of saltpeter, sulphur and coal. The Duke de La Vallière, who knew better, argued that to make good gun powder all you needed was one part of sulphur and one of coal to five parts of saltpeter that had been well filtered, well evaporated, and well crystallized.

"It is funny," said the Duke de Nivernois, "that we amuse ourselves daily by killing partridges in the park at Versailles, and sometimes by killing men or by being killed ourselves at the frontier, without knowing exactly with what we kill."

"Alas! We are reduced to that state for most things of this world," answered Madame de Pompadour; "I do not know what the rouge I put on my cheeks is made of, and I should be very much embarrassed if someone asked me how the silk hose I am wearing is made."

"It is a pity," the Duke de La Vallière then said, "that His Majesty confiscated our encyclopedic dictionaries, each of which cost us a hundred gold pieces: there we would quickly find the answer to all our questions."

The king justified the confiscation: he had been warned that the twenty-one folio volumes that were found on all the ladies' dressing tables were the most dangerous thing in the world for the French kingdom; and he wanted to know for himself if this were true before allowing anyone

to read this work. At the end of the dinner he sent three of his servants for a copy, each of whom returned carrying seven volumes with great difficulty.

They saw at the article "Powder" that the Duke de La Vallière was right; and soon Madame de Pompadour learned the difference between the old Spanish rouge that the ladies of Madrid used to color their cheeks, and the rouge of Parisian ladies. She learned that Greek and Roman ladies were painted with purple that came from seashells, and that consequently our scarlet was the purple of the ancients; she learned that there was more saffron in Spanish rouge, and more cochineal in the French.

She saw how her stockings were manufactured; and the operation of this process delighted her with wonder. "Oh, the fine book!" she exclaimed. "Sire, did you confiscate this storehouse of useful things so as to possess it alone and be the only wise man of your kingdom?"

They all jumped at the volumes like the daughters of Lycomedes at Ulysses' jewels; every one found at once what he was looking for. Those who had lawsuits were surprised to find there the judgment of their cases. The king read all the rights of the crown. "But really," he said, "I don't know why I was told so many bad things about this work."

"Well, don't you see, Sire," said the Duke de Nivernois, "it's because it is very good? Men do not attack the mediocre and the dull of whatever sort. If women try to ridicule a new comer, it is



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certain that she is prettier than they.”

All the while the others kept leafing through the pages, and the Count de C . . . said aloud: “Sire, you are too fortunate that there should be under your reign men capable of knowing the arts and of transmitting them to posterity. Everything is here, from how to make a pin to how to make and direct your canons; from the infinitely small to the infinitely great. Thank God for having made men born in your kingdom who have thus served the entire universe. Other nations must either buy the *Encyclopedia* or copy it. Take all my property if you like; but give me back my *Encyclopedia*.”

“Yet they say,” replied the king, “that there are many faults in this so necessary and so admirable work.”

“Sire,” rejoined the Count de C . . . , “there were two spoiled sauces at your dinner; we did not eat them, and we ate very well. Would you like to have the whole dinner thrown out the window because of these two sauces?”

The king felt the strength of reason; every one recovered his property: it was a happy day.

Envy and ignorance did not hold themselves beaten; these two immortal sisters continued their outcries, their schemes, their persecutions: ignorance is very learned in these matters.

What happened? Foreigners brought out four editions of this French work, banned in France, and made about eighteen hundred thousand gold pieces.

Frenchmen, try henceforth to understand your interests better.

INTERPRETING THE READING

Directions Use information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why did King Louis XV ban Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*?

2. After King Louis XV read the rights of the crown, he stated, “I don’t know why I was told so many bad things about this work.” Give three reasons why his guests argued not to ban the *Encyclopedia*.

3. What did Voltaire mean by “Envy and ignorance did not hold themselves beaten”?

Critical Thinking

4. **Synthesizing Information** In one of Voltaire’s letters, he states, “Twenty *in-folio* volumes will never cause a revolution; it’s the little portable 30 cent books which are to be feared.” Discuss why a smaller, less expensive book could have a greater effect on peoples’ ideas and beliefs and how it might lead people to revolt against their country.
