

THE REIGN OF LOUIS XV

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Introduction – The reign of Louis XV

Louis XV's reign is very long since it extends from 1723 to 1774. In terms of intellectual history, it is the time of the Enlightenment's development, set during a relatively stable 50-year political framework. French monarchy is then marked by a certain number of constant features which are as many sources of internal tensions: conservative political absolutism on the one hand and desire for modernisation of the State on the other hand; affirmation of the uniqueness of the Catholic faith on one side, reminding us that it isn't a secular state, and support for the sciences, arts and letters, including sometimes evolutions incompatible with too severe religious orthodoxy, on the other side.

Part 1 – 1723-1743

In 1723, when the regent dies, Louis XV is declared of the age of majority, but he quickly passes over the reins of power to his preceptor, Cardinal de Fleury, whose long ministry from 1726 to 1743 marks a relatively stable period in the kingdom's history. Fleury restores order to the nation's finances thanks to more favourable economic circumstances. His rule is authoritarian and severely represses Jansenists and the parliamentary opposition, which is linked to them. He monitors Protestants and generally tries to control publications more firmly than the regency did. A remarkable and significant episode of one of these attempts to win back control is what has been called the "proscription of novels".

In 1738 and perhaps as early as 1737, Chancellor d'Aguesseau, under the influence of an anti-novel campaign led by the Jesuits, decides to refuse to most of the texts that appear to be novels the authorization necessary to publication, which translates into them being immediately published abroad, in Switzerland, England and Holland.

It is certain that this novel proscription is also a reaction to an unprecedented expansion of the novel genre, both quantitatively, meeting a growing public demand for reading, and in terms of literary innovation. And that is where lie difficulties, because this rise marks the spread of a secular, worldly morality, which escapes the control of spiritual directors and educators that traditionally are the clergy. Hence their concerns about what they perceive as a hazardous movement of secularisation of morals and an out-of-control diffusion of norms of life that escape their Magisterium.

It is in the thirties that Marivaux's great novels, such as *The Life of Marianne* and *Le Paysan Parvenu*, are published, and that appear Crébillon's novels, like *Tancredi et Néadarné*, *Strayings of the Heart and Mind* or the delightful *Sopha*. It is in the thirties that the great novels of the Abbot Prevost come out, like *Memoirs of a Man of Honour*, which is a tale in eight volumes, the last volume having become Abbot Prevost's most famous work, *Manon Lescaut*. But he also publishes in those same years *The English Philosopher or History of Mr. Cleveland, natural son of Cromwell*, which probably is his most famous novel at the time, and *The Dean of Coleraine* where he invents a form of family saga.

Part 2 – 1743-1757

After Fleury's death in 1743, Louis XV, emulating his great-grandfather Louis XIV, decides to rule alone. He relies on the advices of Madame de Pompadour, who favours the demands of the financial community and protects philosophers. In a famous portrait by Quentin Latour, she is depicted with Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and the *Encyclopaedia*, which is a way to publicly display her support for the Enlightenment.

Indeed, we must not, contrary to a cliché that catches on too easily, we must not imagine the philosophers as a force of opposition and resistance to a monarchy that, in return, would systematically persecute them. Inside the French monarchy there are, throughout the 18th century, partisans of philosophers and reforms and, on the other side, partisans of the devout party, more conservative. These two opposing forces, depending on the moment, exert more or less influence.

This period can be seen as the blossoming of French Enlightenment per se, although the term Enlightenment is often used to name the entire 18th century. It is marked by the publication of innovative and important philosophical texts such as Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* in 1746, La Mettrie's *Man a Machine* in 1747, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* in 1748, Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* in 1749, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences* in 1750, and above all the publication of the *Encyclopaedia*'s first volume, under the direction of Diderot and D'Alembert, in 1751.

But in 1757, the assassination attempt on Louis XV by Damiens allows the devout party to win back control and to demand inflexibility towards philosophers, accused of sowing looseness of morals, impiety and revolt against all established authorities. Politically, it is a time of parliamentary agitation, amplified by conflicts between clergy and Jansenists, parliamentarians often being deemed as Jansenists. Royal authority is undermined, forced to make compromises.

From 1756 to 1763, international relations are marked by the ruinous Seven Years' War, which is mishandled and results in the loss of part of the French colonial empire, especially Canada.

Part 3 – 1757-1774

The Duke of Choiseul governs from 1758 to 1770. He works to reconstitute the army and the fleet. He is considered favourable towards philosophers, and he gets in the good books of Jansenist parliamentarians by expelling Jesuits from France in 1763, which does not prevent the parliamentarians from regularly demonstrating their resistance to the power's demands, in particular concerning taxes. From 1770 to 1774, Maupeou, Terray and Aiguillon brutally reform the parliamentary system, eliminating venal offices, providing free justice and undertaking restoration of the nation's finances.

Louis XV's death ends the too long reign of a king who has become unpopular. On a literary level, the major names that dominated his reign, in addition to those already mentioned, are those of Voltaire, whose prestige and fruitfulness in all genres really marks the whole period. Voltaire composes theatre, philosophy, poetry, history, novels, tales, etc. Voltaire's intellectual influence, through his correspondence, his debates, his campaigns for tolerance and better justice, makes him a fundamental reference for the next generation.

The second major name is that of Rousseau, whose works are in an original and critical position in relation to the Enlightenment, and Rousseau will immediately experience considerable successes both for his philosophical work like the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* in 1755, *Emile* in 1762 or *The Social Contract*, still in 1762, and in literature, since its novel *Julie or the New Heloise*, in 1761, is an unparalleled success.