

# TRAGEDIAN VOLTAIRE: THE *ZAÏRE* EXAMPLE

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## Part 1 – *Zaïre*'s charms

FM: Hello Pierre Frantz, you're a specialist in 18<sup>th</sup> century theatre and incidentally you recently gave an edition on *Zaïre*, a tragedy by Voltaire that you've chosen to speak to us about today. So, to start off, we really want to ask you why you chose *Zaïre* from among the other thirty tragedies that Voltaire wrote?

PF: Voltaire was someone who was really passionate about tragedy. His contemporaries saw him as one of the four great tragic poets of modern times, along with Racine, Corneille and Crébillon. It is his play *Zaïre* which notably aroused the keenest admiration among whole generations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, who we all know felt a stubborn hatred towards Voltaire, even wrote that: "Of all the tragedies of the theatre, no other shows with more charm the power of love and the empire of beauty".

This tragedy, neglected today, even forgotten, demonstrates, more than any other dramatic work by Voltaire, a perfect balance between romantic poetry and philosophy. Our age should find food for thought in a play which opposes the Christian and Muslim worlds, the Islamic world; a play which recounts to us the tragic love story of a Muslim man and a noble Christian woman.

## Part 2 – The creative context of *Zaïre* the play

FM: So, before coming to the play's plot, can you briefly remind us of the creative context of this tragedy?

PF: Voltaire gained himself a reputation ever since his first tragedy *Œdipe* in 1718. It's a great tragedy that was often played in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, practically disappearing only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Voltaire reinterpreted, in his own way, the myth of *Œdipe* by giving it a modern, philosophical meaning. In this play, we can decipher a young writer's feelings of revolt and incomprehension when faced with the idea that a man can be guilty without being fully aware of his actions, that's to say when faced with a Christian awareness of guilt. However, in this first tragedy, the love plot was not easily linked to the tragic action and that's one of the reasons why this play probably no longer attracts much attention today.

Theatrical works that followed would know lesser success than the first and Voltaire's career as a man of letters continued along other paths, paths in parallel with this same period at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was punished for several plays written in verse, which were libertine and irreverent, and then his quarrel with the knight of Rohan made a great racket. Voltaire was forced to exile himself for a time in England. He discovered Shakespeare, which he'd import to France among the first, before reacting very vigorously later, in the 1760s/1770s, against what he called "English taste".

It's true that it was also a time where France knew many military defeats against England and that Voltaire made himself the spokesperson of national French taste and rejected this English taste. However, *Zaïre* bears the mark of Shakespeare and we can sometimes conjure an Othellian influence on this tragedy's plot. It was towards the end of the month of May 1732 that Voltaire launched himself into writing *Zaïre*, which he'd finish feverishly in 22 days, and his play was performed on 13 August 1732 at the French Comedy.

## Part 3 - Plot

FM: So, Pierre Frantz, what is *Zaïre*'s plot?

PF: Well, Voltaire truly opened up French tragedy which had, up until then, been devoted to subjects pulled from the Antiquity. It opened this tragedy up to national subjects, to subjects pulled from medieval chivalry. It placed the action of this tragedy in Jerusalem at the time of the Crusades and Saint-Louis. The holy city had fallen back into the hands of the Muslims. The old sovereign of the Frankish kingdom, Lusignan, finds himself captive, like numerous other knights in Jerusalem.

A young sultan has just taken power. He is called Orosmane; he is in love with one of his captives, Zaïre, who he wants to make his wife and queen in the more modern sense of the word. She reciprocates his love. We discover very quickly in the second act, in a very, very moving throwback, that Zaïre is a Christian slave brought up under Islamic laws but that she is Lusignan's daughter and sister of the young knight Nérestan, who was once freed by Orosmane, and who returns to France to fetch a ransom.

Under Zaïre's well-meaning influence, the chivalrous sultan accepts to free 100 knights. The old Lusignan learns that Zaïre confesses the Christian religion and he makes her swear to keep her family tie to him a secret. The father and son, appalled at the idea that their daughter and sister could marry a Muslim, forbid her to marry this sultan. They pressure the young girl into being secretly baptised.

And even with everything ready for the wedding, Zaïre suddenly refuses to marry the man she passionately loves and respecting her faith, does not give him any explanation. Jealous, crushed, Orosmane, following the discovery of an ambiguous letter, kills his lover over a misunderstanding.

## Conclusion – A tragedy with a social or political message?



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FM: So to conclude, we understand by listening to you how much the theme of religion is at the heart of Voltaire's remarks, even at the heart of the philosophical message put forward by the play, and we have for a long time justly reproached Voltaire for writing these tragedies with a social or political message. When reading *Zaïre*, how do you think this link between philosophical message and purely dramatic poetry is made?

PF: *Zaïre* is a play, a tragedy which undeniably bears the mark of Enlightenment's philosophy. Marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, between a noble French woman and an Arab is, of course, unimaginable. And yet, Voltaire gave Orosmane all the knightly qualities, all the qualities which are associated with a noble knight, not only a medieval knight but a nobleman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Rejecting the tradition of a harem, Orosmane wants to make Zaïre his only wife. He wants to reign more wisely than the other Western monarchs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century do. In short, it is he who embodies the spirit of the Enlightenment. If he kills the young girl, it's a tragic move done blindly, it is also driven by the coalition of as much Muslim as Catholic conservatisms.

As for religion itself, in the play it is not a religion that is portrayed like a revealed religion. Zaïre says religion is a local custom, it is linked to education. As for virtue, Orosmane could emulate all the crusading Christians around him. So fundamentally, the dramatic construction of tragedy reveals a thought which is active in religious tolerance. This thought inextricably mixes itself with the love story of Zaïre and Orosmane.

FM: Well, thank you Pierre Frantz for your clarifications and remarks on the tragedy which played such a big role at the time, and which is still, and maybe especially today, of a topicality as burning perhaps as the passion of these two lovers.