

# CLANDESTINITY AND PHILOSOPHICAL MANUSCRIPTS

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## Part 1 – The discovery of manuscripts

Let's discuss a misunderstood and relatively recent aspect of Enlightenment studies. In 1912, little more than a century ago, the founding father of literary history, Gustave Lanson, wrote a fundamental article in which he reported on a major discovery. Effectively, he points out that a number of ideas and criticisms which insured the success of Enlightenment figureheads during the second half of the century, and of Voltaire in particular, already existed in the first half of the century and had as unidentifiable reference written manuscripts, that's to say written by hand. They escaped the censorship which pertained to the printed word.

Circulation methods should also be noted. Copies of these works spread very discretely, profiting from certain already established networks. These were often circles of privileged sociability, entourages of aristocratic characters like the Count of Boulainvilliers for example, for whom nonconformity of thought was also a way of demonstrating one's superiority over the common folk. But there were also intellectual circles; a lot of these manuscripts were found among the members of Parisian or provincial academies. Some academics played a significant part in the production and circulation of these manuscripts. One might think of Nicolas Fréret, for example, secretary in the very erudite Academy of Inscriptions and Humanities and author of a famous and very violent manuscript from the 1720s, the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*.

Nowadays, these texts are held in the old vaults of libraries. The Mazarine library in particular has an impressive collection, since what is discussed in these texts, religion and its critique, cannot be cited in official debate. All the possible positions from deism to atheism, with numerous intermediary nuances, are depicted. A whole long-standing stance of opposition towards religion is gathered and held in these texts.

## Part 2 – An anti-religious stance

We draw notably on the example in England where debate is more open, albeit more managed, and we're inspired by their attacks on the Catholic religion and by their stance on the delicate question of peaceful coexistence of different faiths within the same state. But we also look for long-standing critiques on the invasive character of Christianity in societal and governmental administrations. Finally, we recycle and adapt the line of argument from the previous century, dominated by what we're used to calling "learned libertines". The distinctive trait of this way of criticising religion was that it depended on a method of circulation, the manuscript, which allowed for a certain flexibility of versions in circulation.

## Part 3 – The volatility of texts

To put it another way, contrary to a printed document, which exists on the ideal of a version which is authoritative and which we can often also link back to an author, the texts we're talking about do not necessarily have fixed versions and adapt themselves ever so slightly according to the channels they borrow. One can shorten them or, on the contrary, develop them, personalise them or crop them, according to the needs of the time.

This is what makes identification of these versions so important. We're talking about a generalised use of copy and pasting and the most important text, according to its influence, for example, is not necessarily the first or last, neither the one wanted by its author, when there is one, since some texts are simply a collage of quotes whose origins are lost. Here, we find methods of network circulation which to us are very contemporary. Let's take a look at another example, without a doubt one of the most fascinating.

## Part 4 – An atheist curate!

A country curate left, upon his death in 1732, a thick, autobiographical manuscript in which he admits, rather unbelievably, to having never believed in God. And he backs this up through a demonstration in what's called *Mémoire des pensées et sentiments de Jean Meslier*. The manuscript was obviously seized and confiscated by those in power, but its originality would attract the most curious of people who would have had access and who'd make often incomplete and partial copies.

In one generation, the manuscript would become a classic in the tradition of clandestine, philosophical manuscripts, whose success was almost as important as the famous *Treatise of the Three Impostors*, written in Holland at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which presented the three founders of the great monotheisms, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, as three men profiting from popular credibility. Coming back to the *Mémoire des pensées et sentiments de Jean Meslier*, it attracted attention for its rationalism. From a seminary background, this simple curate forged an atheist and materialist philosophy, and even communist before its time, which was based on an intransigent rationalism inherited from Descartes and a refusal of the credulity fed by Montaigne. Yet, the most surprising is seeing what distortion this unclassifiable piece of work was subjected to.

## Part 5 – Meslier... Rehashed by Voltaire!

In fact, the most well-known version of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was very late and has little to link it with the original violent and dense text which spread out over nearly 1000 pages. No, it's a very reworked and shortened version, printed clandestinely in 1762, ensuring a larger circulation by relying on a tradition of distinctive manuscript circulation. Yet, the editor of this text in 1762 was no other than Voltaire, who used this cleric to serve in his own fight against the dishonourable. He wrote an introduction and used a version which only retains "the criticism of false religions", to quote the words of the *Mémoire*.

He even managed to make a deist and anti-Christian pamphlet from this atheist text in the same way he published those he wrote himself at the time. By the bye, he concluded the work with a *Prayer to God*, which owes nothing to Meslier, of course, but is a typical feature of Voltaire's work. Finally, he had great publicity thanks to the title he gave to this edition. He called it *Testament de Meslier*. This is how the most corrosive text came to be an instrument of the deist version, which was voluntarily unfaithful to the original. It was typical of changes permitted by the circulation of manuscripts.

## Part 6 – Minor texts?

Of course, one might think of it as secondary literature, read by a small minority. But the study of this circulation is not as black and white as it seems. In this tradition, there are unknown illustrators and even texts whose author is unknown and will remain so, while others, as we've already spoken about, are none other than collages of quotes. But there are authors who deserve special mention. I spoke of Meslier whose harsh and ill-tempered prose is not an example of the good times.

We could say as much about other particularly brilliant authors like Fréret who I've already mentioned, or maybe Dumarsais, the grammarian writer of "Philosopher" taken from the *Encyclopaedia*, but also the author of the work entitled *Examen de la religion* which is one of the big successes of this tradition, and which was also edited by Voltaire. Finally, it's worth recognising texts by great authors and authors, incidentally, whose importance we're reevaluating. Here, I'm thinking especially of Robert Challe, the author of the *Illustres françaises*, a fabulous novel from the beginning of the century. He is also the author of *Difficultés sur la religion proposées au père Malebranch*, which would only become famous in 1768, in a shortened and distorted version by the Baron d'Holbach under the title *Militaire philosophe*. It is without a doubt one of the most passionate questionings of Christianity at the beginning of the century.

It's only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the paternity of this work would be discovered. It shed light on this character who until then was little known and who now constitutes a major reference in the study of the nascent Enlightenment. Let us conclude, therefore, by remarking on how the critical state of mind of the Enlightenment made use of very discrete networks and we're only just rediscovering that its authors, more or less well-known, are not so minor after all.