
Finding aid for the Voltaire correspondence 6006

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Language of Material: French

Contributing Institution: USC Libraries Special Collections

Title: Voltaire correspondence

creator: Voltaire

creator: Frederick, King of Prussia, II

Identifier/Call Number: 6006

Physical Description: 0.21 Linear Feet1 box

Date (inclusive): 1741-1777

Abstract: A collection of correspondence to and from Voltaire, as well as three pages of poetry written by Voltaire. Many letters in the collection are either to or from Frederick the Great, who was the King of Prussia from 1740-1786. The correspondence between Voltaire and Frederick, as well as all the other correspondence in the collection covers such topics as freedom of expression in 18th Century France and wars which were going on in Europe at the time. Voltaire was sick and apparently bed-ridden while he wrote some of the later letters. Voltaire incorporated some poetry directly into his letters, but in this collection there are also three pages of poetry dedicated to various people.

Scope and Content

There are 32 items in this collection, the majority of which are correspondence between Frederick the Great of Prussia and Voltaire. In the letters between Frederick and Voltaire, they discuss such topics as religious freedom and freedom of expression in France, the Catholic Church, the Seven Years War, the War of Austrian Succession, the health of Voltaire, and the talent and skill of both men in writing poetry. There are also some other letters from Voltaire to various friends including the Derrey de Rocqueville, who was a lawyer in the Parliament of Toulouse. These letters again discuss religious matters, certain legal cases where a French citizen was unjustly prosecuted for being of the wrong faith, and the health of Voltaire. Three pages of poems are also included in this collection, all written by Voltaire, and which include flowery language, many metaphors, and references to mythological characters and gods. Several of the letters are signed by Voltaire. All of Frederick the Great's letters are signed by him.

Biographical note

Voltaire, who wrote and received the letters in this collection, was born in 1694 and died in 1778. Voltaire was a pen name; his full name was Francois Marie Arouet. Voltaire is known for his defense of the separation of church and state, and his advocacy for freedom of religion and expression, topics which are all discussed in the correspondence within this collection. Many of the letters in this collection were between Voltaire and Frederick the Great, who both seemed to admire each other immensely. Frederick the Great was King of Prussia during the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War, and he wrote several letters to Voltaire describing aspects of the wars. Several of the letters also mention and discuss a couple of cases of Protestants in France who were being unjustly punished solely because of their faith. The cases mentioned include Jean Calas and Pierre-Paul Sirven, both of whom were eventually exonerated thanks to Voltaire's efforts. Calas was executed, however, before he was exonerated.

Acquisition

Purchased; transferred from the Hoose Library of Philosophy.

Preferred Citation

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Subjects and Indexing Terms

Philosophers -- France -- 18th century -- Archival resources

Correspondence

Poetry

Voltaire

Frederick, King of Prussia, II

Voltaire -- Correspondence
Calas, Jean -- Archives
Frederick, King of Prussia, II -- Correspondence
Peter, I (Emperor of Russia) -- Archives
Peter, III (Emperor of Russia) -- Archives
Sirven, Pierre-Paul -- Archives

Box 1, folder 1

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...1 1742 March 23

Physical Description: 3 items

Scope and Content

In the letter, Frederick tells Voltaire about his battles with Austria-Hungary, his alliance with Poland, and other military observations. Also included in the folder are two transcriptions of the letter in French. The letter is signed by Frederick.

Box 1, folder 2

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...2 1742 January 8-April 12

Physical Description: 3 letters

Scope and Content

These three letters were difficult to read and translate so a detailed summary is not available. In the letter of January 8, Frederick mentions (and probably expands upon), varied topics such as Machiavellian tactics, marriage contracts, and Mexico. In the letter of February 3, he proposes devoting the century (the 18th century) to Louis le Grand and asks what Voltaire thinks of it. The letter of April 12 includes some lines of poetry. All three letters are signed by Frederick.

Box 1, folder 3

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...3 1758 January 16

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter Frederick wishes that the "hot fever" of Europe would recover soon. He tells Voltaire that he himself is no longer sick in body or mind. The end of the letter turns political as Frederick addresses the Austrians directly, telling them that their ambition and their desire to dominate everything actually created more enemies for them, and that there will always be defenders of German and European liberties. This is probably a reference to the Seven Years War, which was fought from 1754-1763. The letter is signed with a large and elegant letter "F".

Box 1, folder 4

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...4 1766 August 7

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter, Frederick the Great talks about how his nephew had the pleasure of listening to Voltaire. Frederick mentions that he is envious of his nephew. He also discusses Voltaire's idea of establishing a "colony of philosophers" in Clèves, and says that he does not oppose the idea. Towards the end of the letter, he compliments Voltaire on his genius, a theme that is common in many of Frederick's letters. The letter is signed with a large and elegant letter "F".

Box 1, folder 5

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...5 1766 August 13-1766 September 3

Physical Description: 2 letters

Scope and Content

The August letter in this folder discusses the injustice of the execution of Jean Calas because he was not a Catholic. Frederick complains about how Calas had no proof or evidence against him, and also did not have a witness. He writes how he thinks that the law should punish people in proportion to their faults, but that in the case of Calas, it didn't happen that way because the magistrates used their own judgment instead. The letters are signed with a large and elegant letter "F".

Box 1, folder 6

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...6 1766 September 1

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter Frederick talks about how he lives in a province where people value the physical (such as cultivating fields, building houses, and having children) above the metaphysical. Later in the letter he discusses the fact that the "sparks of religious hatred" which were present before the war are now extinct and tolerance wins in the thought of the people. Finally, Frederick mentions that Voltaire's works are in the hands of everyone; there is no portion of society where his name is not known or where his reputation does not shine. The letter is signed with a large and elegant letter "F".

Box 1, folder 7

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...7 1766 September 13

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter, Frederick talks of his own faith being "lukewarm", and cites that as the reason why he is able to tolerate the faiths of all others. He also discusses and expands upon his belief that "superstition is a weakness of the human spirit". The letter is signed with a large and elegant letter "F".

Box 1, folder 8

Frederick the Great to Voltaire...8 1770 January-1770 July

Physical Description: 6 letters

Scope and Content

In these 6 letters, Frederick the Great compliments Voltaire on his genius, and discusses topics common throughout many of his letters, including such topics as freedom of religion and of opinion, theology, superstitions, the Vatican, and the philosophers. Three of the letters in this folder include a poem in the body of the letters. The poems appear to be written by Frederick.

The letter dated May 24, 1770 contains an interesting line which may be a genuine compliment or a sarcastic criticism of the Catholic Church, it is difficult to tell. "Among all the saints of the Church, I don't know anyone who is comparable, and I will begin by saying, Saint Voltaire, pray for us."

Each letter is signed by Frederick.

Box 1, folder 9

Voltaire to Frederick the Great...1 1741 August 29

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter, Voltaire mentions how he has been ordered to rest in his bed, and so will begin to transcribe Mohammed during the coming days. He discusses different routes that can be used to go to Aix la Chapelle.

He thanks Frederick for the "beautiful compliments" he paid Voltaire in his last letter. The letter begins and ends with a poem, assumedly written by Voltaire. He uses many metaphors and flowery language in his poetry. He mentions some mythological characters/ ideas in the poetry as well, such as Appollo and Parnassus. The letter is not signed.

Box 1, folder 10

Voltaire to Frederick the Great...2 1742 May 19

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

It is clear from this letter that Voltaire thinks very highly of Frederick. Toward the beginning of the letter he says that Frederick is "counted among the kings" but is "more than them". Voltaire compliments Frederick on performing big actions, and being wise, and writing poetry and music with ease. He writes of his hope that Frederick will "strengthen Europe, as it has shaken." The letter ends with Voltaire saying- "The philosopher king is exactly what the philosopher who is not king tried in vain to become."

Box 1, folder 11

Voltaire to Frederick the Great...3 1769 October 9

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

Voltaire begins this letter with several lines of poetry, and then goes on to talk about Alexander the Great of Macedon. He tells Frederick about how Alexander the Great had a love for the fine arts. Alexander was a skilled writer of poetry, something which surprised the Macedonians, because they only knew him as a "brave warrior". Voltaire mentions a scholar/foreigner who apparently retired in the Caucasus Mountains after serving in the court of Alexander. Voltaire "would give all the Caucasus Mountains in order to see this foreigner for two days in the Court of Alexander."

Box 1, folder 12

Voltaire to Frederick the Great...4 1770 March 9

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

This letter begins with a poem which Voltaire wrote for Frederick the Great. The poem talks of Frederick's greatness- "In your achievements, in your writings; astonish the great and wise; who before you are too little." Other interesting stanzas in the poem are as follows- "I had too much hope in my youth; and in the middle age, too much trouble; but in the old age where I am; alas, I have too little wisdom....In France...we do not have too many scholars; we have too few geniuses." After the poem, Voltaire writes a short personal letter, in which he mentions how Frederick "beat us in Thuringia, and create[s] poetry better than we do!"

Box 1, folder 13

Voltaire to Frederick the Great...5 1770 June 8

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

This letter was difficult to translate and summarize. It begins with several lines of poetry written by Voltaire, which briefly mention some religious topic such as excommunication, the Holy Father, friars and monks. The rest of the letter continues on these religious topics. Saint Francis and Saint Ignatius are mentioned. At the end Voltaire asks Frederick to have pity on his old prejudices against the Curia. Voltaire signs the letter- "The old, ill hermit, V"

Box 1, folder 14

Voltaire to Monsieur de Cideville 1762 Mai 24

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter, Voltaire updates his "dear old friend" on his condition and what he is doing with his life. He begins by saying "We have both begun to be up in age, where it must be carefully addressed to save the rest of the machine." He then jokes that "I bet that you are drinking wine and champagne while I am drinking milk." For the remainder of the letter Voltaire talks about how he is translating a Spanish work, he talks of his commentaries on certain works, and he shares some gossip about mutual friends. At the end, after a signed "V." he says "Forgive me for not writing in my hand; I am extremely weak."

Box 1, folder 15

Voltaire to M. D'Argental 1764 April 25-1769 August 30

Physical Description: 3 letters

Scope and Content

These three letters are all addressed to "My dear angel" or "My divine angels". In the letters, Voltaire talks of his ailing health. In the letter of April 25, 1764, he mentions his dealings with foreign contacts from Italy and Spain. In the two letters from 1769, he talks of his ailing health and hopes that Madame D'Argental is in good health. In both letters from 1769 he discusses religious matters, mentions the pope and some mythological figures such as Pluto and Venus. In the letter of August 30, 1769, Voltaire says that he cannot meddle in the case of Martin because he already has his hands full with the case of Pierre-Paul Sirven, who was unjustly persecuted because he was protestant. Voltaire says that he dreams of Sirven, Martin, Jean Calas, and others. The letter of 1764 and the letter of August 30, 1769 are both signed with a "V."

Box 1, folder 16

Louis La Valliere to Voltaire 1756 March 1

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

In this letter, Louis La Valliere tells Voltaire that he has received the sermon which Voltaire sent, and says that the sermon inspired more respect for the author than for the "sound philosophy which reigns there". La Valliere then asks Voltaire for "the most meager friendship which you can give me." He compliments Voltaire on the fact that he has the "greatest genius and the most harmonious head." La Valliere tells Voltaire about his own career, which he began in order to care for his 15 year old son. Part of a wax seal is still on the letter.

Box 1, folder 17

Voltaire to Derrey de Rocqueville 1777

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

This is a letter to Derrey de Rocqueville, who was a lawyer to the Parliament of Toulouse. A note beneath the letter explains that Rocqueville had made a plea for a man named Louis Dussot, "the father of a large and poor family". Louis Dussot wanted to claim part of a large inheritance which his brother had bequeathed to the Hospital of Montpellier.

In the body of the letter Voltaire praises Rocqueville's eloquence, and offers his opinions on the Louis Dussot case. He ends by saying that "All laws which contradict nature are unjust." The letter is signed with a "V."

Box 1, folder 18

Von Bassewitz to Voltaire...1 1757 March 9

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

This lengthy letter discusses certain figures in Russia's leadership. Von Bassewitz talks about Peter the Third's reign and that he may "incur a new war", but luckily the war should be short and peace will reign shortly after. The letter then goes on to talk about a manuscript of the life of Alexis of Russia, and quotes directly from the manuscript. The quoted passage from the manuscript paints a picture of the child Alexis, who was neglected and given governors to care for him so that he would behave himself. Once he was given a good governor/ teacher, his genius began to show that he could speak, write, and draw very well. By 1705, he had read the Bible 5 times in Slavonian, one time in Luther's German version, and the works of several Greek fathers. Then Von Bassewitz mentions some manuscripts regarding Peter the Great, who was the son of Alexis. The letter is signed "Your very humble and very obedient servant."

Box 1, folder 19

Von Bassewitz to Voltaire...2 1762 June 27

Physical Description: 1 letter

Scope and Content

This letter begins with a line that reads "I welcome you, sir, and from the best of my heart, do not be dead. Voltaire needs to live as long as possible." The rest of the letter goes on to wish that Voltaire recovers soon from his illness, and that he soon completes his history of "heroes of the north".

Box 1, folder 20

Poems written by Voltaire 1774

Physical Description: 3 items

Scope and Content

This folder contains three sheets of paper, on which Voltaire wrote 4 poems. Two poems are addressed to Madame de Pompadour, one is addressed to Le Duc d'Olonne, and one is addressed to Monsieur de Chambon. The poems are short and make use of many metaphors as well as references to mythology.