

THE FRENCH PHILOSOPHES AND THEIR ENLIGHTENING MEDIEVAL PAST

by John Frederick Logan

The Enlightenment's scorn for the Middle Ages is well known. "Centuries of ignorance," "barbarous times," "miserable age"—such descriptions of medieval life and culture seem to justify the assumption that a contempt for the Middle Ages was a uniform and central characteristic of the French Enlightenment. B. A. Brou, for example, sees the medieval period as an epitome of everything despised by the philosophes: the men of the Enlightenment, he asserted, "rejected authority, tradition, and the past. . . . Thus there was disdain for the Middle Ages."¹ Summarizing the philosophes' view of the medieval period, the French critic Edmond Estève similarly declared that

Bayle . . . scarcely knew the Middle Ages and did not like them. His disciples and successors knew this period no better and detested it even more. The historians spoke of it because, nonetheless, one could not cross out five or six centuries of our past—whatever distaste one might have. But they affected reluctance in all sorts of ways before approaching the subject.²

Such interpretations of the attitude towards medieval history prevalent among the philosophes are quite understandable: the colorful, often-quoted comments of Voltaire on the decadence and ignorance of the past come immediately to mind. Furthermore, the task of the modern interpreter of Enlightenment historiography becomes much lighter if he can neatly and quickly dispense with the philosophes' view of the Middle Ages; a uniformly negative attitude toward the medieval period provides a most useful contrast to the sympathetic approach of many nineteenth century historians. Yet the historian is quite justified in examining the Enlightenment view of the medieval period in greater detail. This period, after all, did last for many centuries and could hardly be ignored totally. Certain of the philosophes devoted many pages to the description and elucidation of these Middle Ages: the greater part of Voltaire's massive *Essai sur les mœurs* deals with this period.

The literature of the eighteenth century reflects a great interest in medieval life. The Middle Ages provided a colorful setting for the plays, novels,

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and romances of many eighteenth century French writers; even that archetypical philosophe, Voltaire, wrote plays set in medieval times. In fact, the eighteenth century witnessed the development of a medievalizing movement which produced the monumental *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie* (1759) and the *Histoire littéraire des troubadours* (1774) of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye.³

The question of the philosophes' view of the Middle Ages as an historical period thus demands reexamination. What was the picture of medieval times given in the works of Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Condorcet? Was this picture in fact so uniformly negative? And what does its interpretation of medieval history reveal about the nature of the Enlightenment?

The scholars of the seventeenth century, "the Age of Erudition," had produced a great number of works relating to many aspects of medieval history. These learned compilers were particularly active in their researches into the history of medieval France. André Duchesne (1584-1640), the historian and geographer to the king and "the founder of French historical scholarship," published a famous series of early Norman chronicles. The *Acta Sanctorum* of Bollandus (1596-1665) and his confrères provided scholars with much primary material on the lives of medieval saints. Among the Maurists, Dom Luc d'Achery edited a thirteen-volume collection of medieval documents, *Spicilegium* (1655-1667), and Jean Mabillon (1632-1707) compiled numerous works of hagiography and established the studies of paleographics and diplomatics. Étienne Baluze's *Capitularia regnum Francorum* (1677) made many French legal antiquities available to scholars and historians. Through the great dictionary of Du Cange (1610-1688), the study of medieval Latin philology began on a firm basis. The Jesuits initiated a series on the medieval Church councils, the first three volumes of which were published by Jacques Sirmond in 1609-1612. In 1715, the first volume of *Gallia Christiana*—the history of French bishoprics—was issued by a group of Jesuits; and in 1738 Dom Boquet began the massive *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, "the last monument of the Age of Erudition."⁴ A vast amount of information on the Middle Ages had become available to historians through the efforts of these *érudits*. The primary texts which they so laboriously discovered and published, often with useful commentaries, provided the historians of the eighteenth century with a great number of dependable sources upon which to base their studies and interpretations of the medieval period.

In the later part of the seventeenth century, the famous quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns influenced much of French historical thought. Despite their differences and their rancor, both the proponents of modern culture and their opponents were united in their attitude towards the Middle Ages. For the Ancients, the ignorance and decadence of the period after the fall of Rome were foregone conclusions. With the collapse

of the Roman Empire, the Baron de Longepierre asserted, "the West . . . suddenly saw itself enveloped in the heavy shadows of barbarity and ignorance—which lasted until the recovery of the same ancients, whose loss was followed by an inevitable collapse of the arts and sciences." The Moderns similarly condemned the Middle Ages. Fontenelle compared medieval Europe to a sick man who had forgotten the work begun in good health. Perrault described the course of the arts and sciences in the Middle Ages as that of a river which comes up against a chasm and disappears for a time. "Having flowed underground," he declared, "they find an opening, from which one sees them come forth again with the same abundance in which they had gone under." Since both Ancients and Moderns disclaimed the medieval period, it was perhaps inevitable that it should be portrayed in terms acceptable to both parties: "l'antiquité moderne."⁵

Among the philosophes, no uniform term, temporal limitation, or criterion was used to define the Middle Ages. Bayle often spoke of a "moyen temps" lasting until the fifteenth century; this middle period was characterized by its incorrect Latin and inferior literature.⁶ In the *Esprit des lois*, Montesquieu saw a time of ignorance lasting from Charlemagne until Charles VIII (1483-1498). In his *Pensées* he described the history of France in terms of three "races": the race of Clovis was the "history of a barbarous people," that of Charlemagne was the history of "a superstitious people," and that of Capet was the history of "a people living in a kind of anarchy."⁷

The contributors to the *Encyclopédie* presented varying pictures of the medieval period. The Chevalier de Jaucourt considered only three centuries—the ninth, tenth, and eleventh—to be true centuries of ignorance.⁸ D'Alembert, on the other hand, spoke of a "long interval of ignorance" in which the masterpieces of the ancients were "forgotten for twelve centuries." These "unfortunate times," according to d'Alembert, lasted until the middle of the fifteenth century.⁹

Voltaire quite typically gave differing accounts of the Middle Ages. In the *Essai sur les mœurs* he described a France languishing in obscure misery—in confusion, tyranny, and barbarism—for "almost two hundred fifty years" from Charlemagne until Philip I. In the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire extended the unhappy period to nine hundred years, during which the French genius was restricted under a Gothic government, the nobles were warlike and undisciplined, the clergy were ignorant and disorderly, and the people were wallowing in misery. In another part of the *Essai*, he added another century to this miserable age, making it an even millenium: ". . . we have seen, during a period of about ten centuries, an almost continuous succession of crimes and disasters."¹⁰

Condorcet portrayed his sixth epoch—from the eclipse of ancient enlightenment until the Crusades—as the darkest in European history. "In

this disastrous epoch," he asserted, "we will see the human spirit descend rapidly from the height to which it had been raised and ignorance follow after it: ferocity in one place, refined cruelty in another, and corruption and perfidy everywhere. . . . Theological dreams, superstitious impostures are the only characteristic of men, intolerance their only morality."¹¹ The seventh epoch, lasting until the invention of the printing press, saw the beginning of man's gradual emergence from this dismal abyss.

Despite their varying descriptions of the Middle Ages, these philosophes would probably have agreed on a general outline of the period—on the fact that a general absence of enlightenment followed the fall of ancient Rome and lasted until late in the fifteenth century, and that the period from the death of Charlemagne until sometime in the twelfth century was the nadir of European cultural, political, and social life.

Furthermore, all the philosophes discerned a general decadence of knowledge as a fundamental characteristic of medieval Europe. For Bayle, the barbaric use of Latin seems to have been the most significant element within this decadence. The writings of the "middle period," he declared, "repel most people because of the frightful barbarity which prevails in the works which one must consult."¹² Bayle particularly praised Lorenzo Valla, who "vigorously attacked the barbarism in which the Latin language had languished for centuries."¹³ The medieval writers' ignorance of the ancient classics was another characteristic to which the philosophes called their readers' attention. According to d'Alembert, the Scholastics "mistook for the true philosophy of the ancients a barbarous tradition which disfigured it."¹⁴

The barbaric Gothic art also frequently became the object of the philosophes' scorn. For Montesquieu, the Gothic style did not belong to any particular time or people, but rather was the style employed by peoples experiencing the birth or death of true art. The Gothic artisans—and for Montesquieu even the art of the Egyptians was "Gothic"—designed figures characterized by the lack of grace and movement.¹⁵ Voltaire's estimate of Gothic art was perhaps most scornful of all. After pointing out that the Goths and the Vandals had smothered even those *beaux-arts* that Charlemagne had tried to revive, Voltaire asserted:

The necessary arts remained coarse, and the pleasing arts unknown. The architecture, for example, was at first that which we call old Gothic; and the new Gothic . . . only added defective ornamentations to a base even more defective. Sculpture and the graphic arts were shapeless. Painting was used only to cover the heavy walls with a few colors. Men sang, but knew nothing of music; they produced no work of good taste in any *genre* until the fourteenth century. Speaking and writing existed, but eloquence was unknown. Men versified, sometimes in corrupted Latin, sometimes in barbaric idioms, but they knew nothing of poetry.¹⁶

For the philosophes, Scholastic philosophy was no more praiseworthy or admirable than the abominable Gothic art. In the article on Scholasticism in the *Encyclopédie*, d'Alembert characterized this philosophy as ridiculous, barbarous, unintelligible, and ignorant. In his *Preliminary Discourse*, he spoke in somewhat less inflammatory terms and described Scholasticism as the study of "a thousand frivolous questions concerning abstract and metaphysical beings" involving "a great abuse of intelligence."¹⁷ But again it was Voltaire whose condemnation was most colorful and contemptuous:

One passed, in this thirteenth century, from savage ignorance to scholastic ignorance. Albert, called *the Great*, taught the principles of warmth, of coldness, of dryness, and of humidity: he also taught politics according to *the rules of astrology and of the influence of the stars*, and morality according to *the logic of Aristotle*.

Scholastic studies were then and have remained, almost to our own times, systems of absurdities which, if attributed to the peoples of Taprobane, we would believe to be slanders against these people. . . the doctors resolved questions having to do with the great, the subtle, the angelic, the irrefragable, the solemn, the illumined, the universal, the profound.¹⁸

For the philosophes, such useless speculation typified the general intellectual decadence and could only be the object of their scorn and ridicule.

The writers of the Enlightenment frequently used the term "superstition" in their criticisms of medieval life. The article in the *Encyclopédie* on superstition (by Jaucourt) defined this phenomenon as "all excess of religion in general." Jaucourt further asserted that "ignorance and barbarism introduce *superstition*, hypocrisy maintains it in vain ceremonies, false zeal spreads it, and self-interest perpetuates it."¹⁹ In his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire summarized the history of superstition: born in paganism and adopted by Judaism, it infected the Christian Church from the earliest times. Voltaire particularly attacked the "tax on sins" and the cult of relics. The pieces of the true cross, he asserted, "would be enough to build a 100-cannon ship. . . ."²⁰ Even Montesquieu, usually more moderate and circumspect in his criticisms, complained of the travails of those obliged to read the lives of the medieval saints: "All these cold, dry, insipid and hard writings, it is necessary to read them—to devour them, as the fable says of Saturn who devoured the stones."²¹

Themselves attacked for immorality and libertinism, the philosophes delighted in pointing out the immorality and irreligiosity in the medieval Church. Bayle referred his readers to the writings of certain medieval authors on the decadence of their own times: in the eleventh century Peter Damian wrote many works "forcefully describing the enormous vices of his age," and

early in the fifteenth century Ambrose of Camoldoli's *Hodoeporicon* mentioned a convent which "was a real brothel" and another in which "almost all the nuns were downright prostitutes."²² In the article "Conciles" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire satirized the discrepancy between the actions of the medieval councils and the sort of actions which might be expected of a venerable religious gathering. At the Lateran Council of 1139, he asserted, "virtually nothing would have been done there, if one had not anathematized those who were saying that the Church was too rich"; at the General Council of Lyon in 1245, "the cardinals were given a red hat, in order to remind them of the necessity to bathe themselves in the blood of the emperor's partisans."²³

The superstition and moral decadence seen in medieval times became weapons in the philosophes' battles against eighteenth century Christianity. In their descriptions of the evils of medieval times, they often seemed to be commenting on the contemporary Church. After reciting a long list of the follies, misfortunes, and failures of medieval Christianity, Voltaire commented ironically, "Thus God tests his Church through humiliations, through troubles, through crimes, and through splendor."²⁴

None of the philosophes stated clearly what he thought to be the causes of the darkness of the medieval period. Yet they all frequently condemned the anarchy of the Middle Ages—an anarchy which in some way produced the political tyranny of rulers and the religious and intellectual tyranny of priests. For the philosophes, the collapse of the Roman Empire left Europe in a state of desperate disorder. "In the condition in which Europe was [after the fall of Rome]," Montesquieu asserted, "one would not have thought that it could restore itself." Although recognizing that Charlemagne had restored a certain amount of political and social order, the historians *en philosophe* emphasized that Europe soon fell into a state of anarchy in which numerous minor rulers and tyrants asserted their power. "By the nature of government," declared Montesquieu, "it [Europe] dispersed itself into an infinity of little sovereignties."²⁵ Particularly contemptuous of this "feudal anarchy," Voltaire described all the post-Charlemagnian customs and manners as a perpetual vicissitude—in government, in religious life, in society, and even in clothing. Europe, he asserted,

was in a chaos in which the strongest raised himself over the ruins of the weakest—only in order to be [himself] thrown down by others. All this history is only one of certain barbarian captains who disputed with bishops over the domination of imbecilic serfs. Men lacked two necessary things to sustain themselves amid such horrors: reason and courage.²⁶

Condorcet also spoke of the "feudal anarchy" of the "crude centuries" and pointed out that the tyrannical rule of authority extended even to the intellectual realm. "A proposition was not adopted because it was true," he

declared, "but because it was written in a certain book and because it was accepted in a certain country and since a certain century. Thus, the authority of men was everywhere substituted for that of reason."²⁷

Voltaire particularly stressed the causative importance of this anarchy as the foundation of political, social, and religious institutions in the Middle Ages. The governmental functions of the medieval nobility, as well as their customs and ideals, were the result of the dissolution of Europe into innumerable bands of warring groups. Communications and commerce could no longer be carried on where there was no effective central authority. "France had more or less languished in this state of weakness," he asserted, "because it had almost never enjoyed a good government . . . the kings, always occupied in sustaining their authority against their vassals, had neither the time to think of the happiness of their subjects nor the power to make them happy."²⁸

The historians of the Enlightenment also suggested a close relationship between this anarchy and despotism and the dominance of religion. According to Montesquieu, "while Religion afflicts us, Despotism—spread everywhere—overwhelms us."²⁹ D'Alembert spoke of "the conditions of slavery into which almost all of Europe was plunged and the ravages of superstition which is born of ignorance and which spawns it in turn."³⁰ D'Holbach saw the priests of the medieval Church as instigators of revolutions and revolts who contributed to the confusion and chaos in these "centuries of shadows." The audacious claims of the priests, he declared, "were established because of the ignorance of the people, because of the weakness of the rulers, and because of the cleverness of the priests."³¹ Using his more emotional, inflammatory rhetoric, Concorcet expressed a similar view of a relationship between the religious and political despotisms. During the period from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the Crusades, he asserted, "Europe—constrained between sacerdotal tyranny and military despotism—awaited in blood and tears the moment when new lights would permit it to be reborn to liberty, to humanity, and to the virtues."³² Although none of these philosophes explained his theories in detail, they all clearly believed that the miserable darkness of medieval times could, in some way, be tied to the anarchic social conditions and to the subsequent rise of political and religious tyrannies.

There was, however, another less obvious side to the philosophes' view of medieval history. Despite their often-stated antipathy, the philosophes did not portray this period as entirely dismal and miserable. They occasionally praised, for example, the basic principles of the Christian Church which played so large a role in medieval life. Voltaire commented that Christ had "preached only morality" and declared that a religious society could not have been established for evil purposes. He even seemed to view the Chris-

tian religion as potentially the most benevolent of all. "Of all the religions," he asserted, "the Christian is doubtlessly the one which ought to inspire toleration, although until now the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men."³³ D'Holbach spoke of "the meekness and kindness so recommended by the Gospel" when condemning those clerics who had encouraged war.³⁴ Condorcet praised the Christian principles of common brotherhood which led to the condemnation of slavery. He further pointed out that the priests alone had taught moral truths amid the darkness of the sixth epoch—although he denounced the accompanying superstitions: "The morality, taught only by the priests, included those universal principles which no sect has failed to recognize; but it created a pack of purely religious duties, of imaginary sins."³⁵

The philosophes also recognized that at least some of the Christians were honest and holy men. Voltaire praised the Church Fathers—and in particular St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine—for acknowledging that there were no more miracles in their own times. In an attack on the Scholastic doctors, he lauded the Fathers: the Scholastics "were to the ancient fathers what a false *bel esprit* is to a true savant."³⁶ D'Alembert admitted that the medieval Christian Church had contained some of those geniuses which nature never failed to produce. And one of these geniuses had even occupied the chair of St. Peter—Pope Sylvester II (c. 940-1003). "Situated in the time of Archimedes," d'Alembert asserted, this figure "would perhaps have equalled him."³⁷

The philosophes also saw greatness outside the ranks of medieval clerics. According to Montesquieu, Charlemagne—despite his defects—was good, just, moderate, and wise. Alfred the Great was lauded by Voltaire as a noble mind—in the first rank "of the heroes, useful to the human race, which, without these extraordinary men, would always be like savage beasts." Louis IX of France received commendations from both Montesquieu and Voltaire. Montesquieu considered him to be a great monarch and cautioned historians against judging him out of the context of his own times; Voltaire went so far as to assert that "it is not given to man to carry virtue farther."³⁸

The philosophes particularly directed their attention to those men whom they seem to have considered as their predecessors—the intellectuals, free thinkers, and skeptics of the Middle Ages. The persecuted Roger Bacon (c. 1214-1249), according to Diderot, was celebrated "because of the discoveries which he made in a century of shadows."³⁹ Dante received qualified praise from Voltaire for his poetry's harmony, elegance, and natural style. The continuing history of certain medieval heresies received a brief treatment in Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV*.⁴⁰ Condorcet asserted that, even in the sixth epoch, "some flashes of talent, some traits of greatness of soul or of goodness were able to pierce through this profound night." He suggested that, despite

the efforts of the medieval Church, "there existed a class of men who, superior to all superstitions, continued to despise them in secret." Among these courageous figures he counted men such as Frederick II, Boccaccio, and the members of secret societies of free thinkers.⁴¹

The philosophes often expressed a certain admiration for the institution of chivalry. Montesquieu praised "the marvelous system of chivalry" for its ideals of gallantry, love, and valor. For Voltaire, the chivalric institutions served as a balance to the prevailing ferocity and barbarism in fourteenth century France. "Honor, generosity, joined to gallantry," he asserted, "were its principles." Condorcet declared that chivalry did not affect the mass of people, but conceded that it did add some decency and mildness and that it spread the seeds of a humanitarianism to bear fruit later.⁴²

Charles Homer Haskins was not the first historian to perceive *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, for the historians *en philosophe* also noted this phenomenon. Condorcet pointed out how the Crusades had helped to weaken the nobility, to spread Arab ideas, and to revive commerce. "These wars, begun on account of superstition," he asserted, "served to destroy it." Even the Scholasticism so often condemned for being ridiculous and barbarous received some praise. In his article "Philosophie de l'école" in the *Encyclopédie*, d'Alembert admitted that there was a certain amount of intelligence and *esprit* in Scholastic writings. According to Condorcet, Scholasticism had served to sharpen men's minds, to establish some principles of philosophic analysis, and to provide more precise ideas of God, liberty, and creation.⁴³

The philosophes were not entirely ignorant or critical of medieval economic and political life. Tracing the historical development of French legal institutions was, of course, a central purpose of Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*. Condorcet and Voltaire both recognized a growth in independence and size of towns during and after the thirteenth century. The Encyclopedists devoted a considerable amount of attention to economic developments in the Middle Ages: Diderot in his articles on "Boulanger" and "Boucher," Jaucourt on the "Hanse," and Boucher d'Argis on "Foire" and "Taille." These articles usually included a plea for the end of certain taxes, procedures, and institutions, showing that they had outlived their historical functions.⁴⁴

In the intellectual realm, the philosophes also pointed to certain hopeful developments, especially within the monasteries and schools. Bayle mentioned the studies of oriental languages; Condorcet praised fourteenth century literature—characterizing Boccaccio's prose as graceful, simple, and elegant, Dante's writing as noble, precise, and vigorous, and Petrarch's as ingenious and sensitive.⁴⁵ Even Gothic architecture received

some rather sympathetic attention. The author of the article "Gothique" in the *Encyclopédie* declared,

Gothic architecture sets upon slender pillars huge arches that rise to the clouds. One thinks that all will collapse, yet it has endured for centuries. The building is full of windows, roses, and pinnacles; the stone seems to be cut like cardboard; a lacework suspended in air.⁴⁶

That the philosophes should view the Middle Ages as a time of decadence and darkness is scarcely surprising. The medieval period was traditionally viewed by most historians and critics as being miserable and barbaric. Even the chroniclers of the Middle Ages had regarded their times as unhappy and dismal. The men of the Renaissance only sharpened and intensified this interpretation of European history after the collapse of the ancient Roman Empire.⁴⁷ The Classical Age, with its admiration of antiquity and its exaltation of rational order and simplicity in all disciplines, could only confirm the interpretation of the medieval period to which it fell heir. Even among practicing Christians, the Middle Ages were often regarded with disdain. As Gustave Lanson commented in discussing the views of the Abbé Fleury, "The judgment of this reasonable Christian on the Middle Ages scarcely differed from that of Voltaire. The enlightened minds of a classical formation, whether pious or impious, could not have been indulgent with these 'crude' centuries."⁴⁸

Among the historians of the "siècle philosophique," however, the unsympathetic attitude towards the medieval period was to develop into an even more active hostility. For the philosophes, history was no mere antiquarian discipline, but rather a source of weapons to be utilized in their conflict with contemporary superstition and irrationality. Even Montesquieu viewed the historian's role as largely didactic and stressed the necessity of involving the reader. "It is not always necessary to exhaust a subject so that there is nothing left for the reader to do," he asserted. "It is not a matter of making him read, but rather of making him think."⁴⁹ The philosophes wanted to make the past useful in the present—to further their programs for the improvement of man's present condition.

This didacticism often took the form of discussions of the historical background of specific eighteenth century institutions. Montesquieu traced the tyranny of the Inquisitions in his own time⁵⁰ to the bishops' power under the Visigoths. The Encyclopedists, as pointed out earlier, showed the medieval origins of the antiquated trade restrictions and guild laws. The philosophes also used medieval history to point to ever-present evils which men must always oppose. For Voltaire, war and monasticism were two forces which had always hindered European progress. "In what a flourishing state Europe would be without the continual wars which trouble it on account of slight interests and often on account of mere caprices," he declared. "What a degree of perfection the cultivation of the soil might have reached and how

much the manufacturing arts would have contributed to civil life, if only an astonishing number of useless men and women had not been interred in the cloisters."⁵¹ Condorcet commented at length and with passionate rhetoric on the evils of the institution of the papacy. In discussing theocracy, Diderot asserted that "in general, history and experience prove to us that the priesthood has always strived to introduce a kind of theocracy on the earth." On occasion, the philosophes even used medieval history to reproach directly the evil-doers of their day. Voltaire's denunciations were particularly impassioned:

Monstrous persecutors, look for these truths [about cruelty] only in your annals: you will find them in the crusades against the Albigensians, in the massacres of Mérindol and of Cabrières, in the appalling Saint Bartholomew's Day, in the Irish massacres, in the valleys of the Vaudois . . . Stop calumniating the Romans, your legislators, and ask pardon from God for the abominations of your fathers. . . . your Inquisition, which still exists, does it not necessarily shake reason, nature, religion?⁵²

For these philosophes, then, the study of the medieval past had a direct relevance to their own times. By condemning the evils of the Middle Ages, they were also condemning evil forces in their own society.

Yet this negative view of all medieval history presented certain problems of which the philosophes seem partially aware. If human nature is indeed constant and universal, how could the existence of such unhappiness and ignorance be admitted without implying the inevitability of continuing, ever-present darkness? How could man ever hope to improve his earthly condition if he had been able to languish so long in misery and superstition? These problems stand out with particular clarity in the writings of Voltaire. In his *Essai sur les mœurs*, he frequently set forth a dim view of human nature and of its historical revelations:

Men want to be amused and tricked. . . .

Instinct, more than reason, directs mankind.

. . . in general, all history is a collection of crimes, of follies, and of misfortunes. . . .

Because nature has placed self-interest, pride, and all the passions in the heart of men, it is not astonishing that we have seen, in a period of about ten centuries, an almost continuous succession of crimes and disasters.⁵³

Voltaire was able to hold this interpretation of human nature as it evidenced itself in the Middle Ages and, at the same time, to hope for human progress because of his view of the potential of man's learning power. If men could increase their knowledge and see the negative influences of customs, then they might expect a better future. Through his portrayal of the darkness and barbarism of the medieval period, he tried to make his contemporaries aware of the importance of customs in determining human development. "It is not in the nature of man to desire what he does not know," he declared. "It was necessary everywhere to have not only a prodigious span of time, but also happy circumstances in order that man raise himself above animal life."⁵⁴

D'Alembert similarly placed his hopes for progress in the accumulation of knowledge and in mankind's understanding of the causes of medieval decadence:

Not that these unfortunate times were less fertile than others in rare geniuses; Nature is always the same. But what could these great men do, scattered as they always are, from place to place, occupied with different purposes, and left to their solitary enlightenment with no cultivation of their abilities? . . . The principles of the sciences and the arts were lost, because the beautiful and the true, which seem to show themselves everywhere to men, are hardly noticed unless men are already apprised of them.⁵⁵

Although the philosophes' attacks on the darkness of the Middle Ages may be quite understandable, the historian must also account for those rays of light which all the philosophes saw in the medieval period. Censorship may have forced them to be more moderate in their criticisms, and the historical "facts" themselves may have necessitated a more balanced view. But both of these reasons can only partially explain the philosophes' admission of some goodness and progress amid the medieval darkness.

One of the primary reasons for these concessions to the Middle Ages must be sought in the philosophes' didactic program. Although a denial of any admirable things in the medieval period might not have been theoretically contrary to the Enlightenment outlook, it certainly might have had an effect on the reader of history. If mankind had fallen into complete degeneration, into a hopeless abyss of ignorance and barbarism, then any hopes for the future would be frail indeed. Even if mankind should continue to make progress, how could one be sure that a new dark age was not lying in wait at some time in the future? The philosophes preferred to look to the past for the roots of modern times—the roots of progress as well as of evil. Voltaire, for example, called the medieval period the "infancy of mankind—in all things relating to government, religion, commerce, the arts, the rights of citizens."⁵⁶

By pointing to certain beneficial effects of customs—of those things not part of invariable human nature—the philosophes could strengthen their case for the possibility of human progress. They emphasized the plurality of factors which might influence and direct human development. "Many things," Montesquieu asserted, "govern men: the climate, religion, the laws, the principles of government, the examples of past things, the customs, the manners. . . ." Similarly, in concluding his *Essai*, Voltaire declared that

it follows from this tableau that all which depends intimately upon human nature is the same from one end of the universe to the other; that all which might depend on custom is different. . . . The realm of custom is much vaster than that of nature; it extends to manners, to all the customs . . . it establishes everywhere a small number of invariable principles: thus the basis is everywhere the same, and culture produces diverse fruits.⁵⁷

The thinkers of the Enlightenment were less original and revolutionary in

their historical writings than they and certain later writers seem to have thought. The philosophes' sense of their own originality is particularly noticeable in the writings of Voltaire—who stated, for example, that Machiavelli and Guicciardini were the only worthy historians since ancient times.⁵⁸ But the philosophes' historical studies still represent a continuation of those of the seventeenth century. In their interpretations of the Middle Ages, these historians often profited from the voluminous works of the *érudits* and at the same time shared the fundamental views and prejudices of the *classiques*. The philosophes approached the study of the past with no more objectivity or disinterest than did their predecessor, Bishop Bossuet; as literary works, their histories can hardly be said to have surpassed Bossuet's *Discours*.

The differences between the philosophes' and the Romantics' views of the medieval period have been emphasized by critics like Edmond Estève and B. A. Brou. There is, to be sure, a great contrast between the antipathy of the men of the Enlightenment and the sympathetic approach of writers like Chateaubriand or Michelet. Yet this difference might easily be overemphasized. The philosophes did devote a significant amount of attention to the Middle Ages, and they did see some praiseworthy aspects within the medieval past. The authors of history *en philosophie* were neither ignorant nor totally disdainful of the medieval period.

If the philosophes' view of the medieval period is to provide a key to understanding the Enlightenment as a whole, it must be remembered that this view was not entirely negative and that the philosophes did not "reject" the medieval past. On the contrary, they approached this past with the eagerness of someone who has found a most forceful vehicle for the diffusion of his ideas. The philosophes delighted in showing the miseries of medieval history for the same reason that they took care to portray its favorable aspects: they wanted to show that light and darkness are always present in human societies, that the human condition is never hopeless, and that the amelioration of the social order depends on the increasing propagation of humanitarian ideals. The philosophes' picture of the Middle Ages may at times seem ambiguous, but this ambiguity reflects tensions in their own thought. Torn between the fear of social and intellectual chaos and the fear of authoritarian orders and systems, they condemned the medieval period for both its anarchy and its despotisms. Desiring to substantiate their belief in individual freedom, as well as their often deterministic psychology, they stressed both the overwhelming force of medieval social institutions and the ability of men to rise above this force. The philosophes were in fact less sure of themselves and less extreme in their views than many critics have admitted.

NOTES

1. B. A. Brou, *Le XVIII^e siècle littéraire* (Paris, 1923), vol. II, p. 84, quoted in Everhard Weis, *Geschichtsschreibung und Staatsauffassung in der französischen Enzyklopädie* (Wiesbaden, 1956), p. 11. (All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.)

2. Edmond Estève, "Le Moyen âge dans la littérature du XVIII^e siècle," *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, XXVII (April-July 1923), p. 354.

3. On the eighteenth-century interest in medieval literature, see Madeleine Jouglard, "La connaissance de l'ancienne littérature française au XVIII^e siècle: Essai bibliographique," in *Mélanges offerts par ses amis et ses élèves à M. Gustave Lanson* (Paris, 1922); and René Lanson, *Le Goût du moyen âge en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1912). In *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment: The World and Work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore, 1968), Lionel Gossman provides a masterful analysis of the "medievalizing movement" as well as of the contributions of Sainte-Palaye. Little attention has, however, been given to the attitudes of the major philosophes towards the Middle Ages. Werner Krauss's brief article, "Le Moyen âge au temps de l'Aufklärung" in *Mélanges à la mémoire de Jean Sarrailh* (Paris, 1966), vol. I, pp. 463-470, focuses on Spain. H. Weisinger, "The Middle Ages and the Late Eighteenth-Century Historians," *Philological Quarterly*, XXVII (January 1948), 63-79, is limited to English historians.

4. James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing* (New York, 1942), vol. II, pp. 3-57. See also Francis Mannhardt, "Bollandus," in Peter Guilday, ed., *Church Historians* (New York, 1926), pp. 190-211; and A. D. Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," in *Studies in Historiography* (New York, 1966), pp. 1-39.

5. Quoted in Nathan Edelman, *Attitudes of Seventeenth-Century France toward the Middle Ages* (New York, 1946), pp. 14-18.

6. Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, ed. Beuchot (Paris, 1820-1824), vol. XII, pp. 396-398.

7. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1966), vol. II, pp. 804, 864; I, 1096.

8. Quoted in Nelly N. Schargo, *History in the Encyclopédie* (New York, 1947), pp. 186-187.

9. Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Schwab (New York, 1936), pp. 61-62 (italics mine).

10. Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris, 1963), vol. I, p. 448; II, 810. Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV in Oeuvres Historiques*, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1962), pp. 608-609.

11. Antoine Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Paris, 1822), p. 115.

12. Quoted in Elisabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle* (The Hague, 1964), vol. II, p. 21n.

13. Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, XIV, 418; cf. IX, 66; V, 237.

14. D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, p. 62.

15. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, I, 696.

16. Voltaire, *Essai*, II, 181-189.

17. D'Alembert, "Scholastique" in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers* . . . 36 vols., 3rd ed. (Geneva: J. L. Pellet, 1779-1779), vol. XXX, pp. 274-287; D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, p. 62.

18. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 638-639 (italics in original).

19. Jaucourt, "Superstition," *Encyclopédie*, XXII, 71.

20. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ed. J. Benda and R. Naves (Paris, 1961), pp. 396-397, 620.

21. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 895.

22. Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, V, 365; IV, 360.

23. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, pp. 145, 156; cf. *Essai*, I, 639.
24. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, p. 133.
25. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 709; cf. Voltaire, *Essai*, II, 17.
26. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 384; II, 18-19, 25.
27. Concorcet, *Esquisse*, pp. 122, 146.
28. Voltaire, *Oeuvres historiques*, pp. 618-619; *Essai*, II, 22, 34.
29. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, I, 1081.
30. D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, p. 62.
31. "Prêtres," *Encyclopédie*, XXVII, 360-365.
32. Condorcet, *Esquisse*, p. 115.
33. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, pp. 111-112, 403; *Essai*, II, 809.
34. "Prêtres," *Encyclopédie*, XXVII, 360-365.
35. Concorcet, *Esquisse*, p. 117.
36. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 870n. 12; *Dictionnaire philosophique*, p. 318.
37. D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, p. 61.
38. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, I, 1095, 1099; II, 824-855, 968-969. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 324-329; 393.
39. "Cordelier," *Encyclopédie*, IX, 461.
40. Voltaire, *Essai*, II, 822-823; *Oeuvres historiques*, pp. 1042-1043.
41. Condorcet, *Esquisse*, pp. 115, 133-136.
42. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 822-823; Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 729; Condorcet, *Esquisse*, p. 147.
43. Condorcet, *Esquisse*, pp. 138-142; "Philosophie de l'école," *Encyclopédie*, XI, 749-754.
44. Condorcet, *Esquisse*, p. 142; Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 634. On the Encyclopedists, see especially Schargo, *History in the Encyclopédie*, pp. 101-102.
45. Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, X, 341; XII, 531; Condorcet, *Esquisse*, p. 144.
46. Quoted in Schargo, *History in the Encyclopédie*, pp. 189-190.
47. On changing interpretations of the "Dark" Ages, see Lucie Varga, *Das Schlagwort von "Finsteren Mittelalter,"* (Vienna, 1932) and Georgio Falco, *La polemica sul medio evo* (Turin, 1933).
48. Gustave Lanson, "Voltaire historien," in his *Essais de méthode, de critique et d'histoire littéraire*, ed. Henri Peyre (Paris, 1965), p. 351. This essay originally appeared in Lanson's *Voltaire* (1906).
49. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 430.
50. *Ibid.*, II, 792.
51. Voltaire, *Essai*, II, 811.
52. Condorcet, *Esquisse*, pp. 120-121; "Théocratie" in *Encyclopédie*, XXXIII, 287-289; Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, p. 297.
53. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 41; II, 66, 804, 810.
54. *Ibid.*, I, 201.
55. "Encyclopédie," *Encyclopédie*, XII, 361-410.
56. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 451.
57. Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 558; Voltaire, *Essai*, II, 810.
58. Voltaire, *Essai*, I, 298.