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Eloquence in the Defense of Deism: Voltaire's *Histoire de Jenni*

Thomas M. Carr, Jr.

In the *Histoire de Jenni* (1775), his last major *conte*, Voltaire returns to a pattern similar in many ways to the one he had used in his first important tale, *Micromégas*. In both, as Vivienne Mylne has pointed out, two discussion scenes—the first near the beginning of the tale and a second more substantial one—are set in a narrative frame involving a voyage.¹ Critics have generally attributed this return to a structure relying heavily on debate to convey his message to Voltaire's increasing use of the philosophical dialogue in his later years.² Perhaps a more fruitful approach, however, is to emphasize Voltaire's reliance in *Jenni* on eloquence. To be sure, Freind's debates with the Bachelor of Salamanca and the atheist Birton have much in common with dialogues like *L'ABC* or *Le Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers*. But unlike these rather intimate discussions, the dialogues in *Jenni* are public events in which the opponents attempt to influence a large audience. And precisely because of this a more expansive, highly charged style is appropriate. In fact, both traditional aspects of eloquence are pressed into service—*l'art de persuader* and *l'art de bien dire*. In addition, *Jenni* contains numerous minor displays of eloquence, making its use the distinctive feature of the *conte's* construction. So pervasive is eloquence that characterization and, to some extent, plot are shaped by its needs. I also hope to show that eloquence is especially suited to the defense of Voltaire's deistic credo.

It is not surprising that Voltaire calls upon eloquence, for his interest in it was lifelong and particularly strong during the Ferney period. At Louis-le-Grand Voltaire, like all pupils of the Jesuits, received a thorough grounding in rhetoric. His professors during his year of rhetoric (1709–1710), Fathers Lejay and Porée, were both authors of Latin treatises on the subject.³ In 1755 Voltaire surveyed rhetorical theory for the *Encyclopédie* in the article "Eloquence." As his campaign against *l'Infâme* and for legal reform intensified, he turned

increasingly to various forms of eloquence to stir up public opinion. Works like the *Homélies prononcées à Londres* attacked the Church, while a series of *mémoires* defended the Calas and other victims of judicial tyranny. During the months preceding the publication of *Jenni*, Voltaire frequently referred to eloquence in his letters as he prepared *mémoires* in behalf of young Etallonde, who had been implicated in the La Barre affair.⁴

But why did Voltaire turn to eloquence in this *conte*? After all, its central issue, God's existence and His relation to men, seems to belong to philosophy rather than to rhetoric. A look at the circumstances of *Jenni's* composition and Voltaire's views on the role of reason in eloquence provides a tentative answer. The *Histoire de Jenni* is considered to be in large measure a response to Holbach's *Système de la nature* (1770). Although Voltaire does not mention the materialist philosopher by name, his reference to "un frenchman qui dit que rien n'existe et ne peut exister, sinon la nature"⁵ is almost certainly to the baron. Over and over in his correspondence and pamphlets Voltaire stated that the *Système* was dangerous because of its eloquence. "Il y a beaucoup de choses qui peuvent séduire, il y a de l'éloquence" (Best. D16565). He labeled Holbach "cet éloquent athée" (Best. D16388). The only consolation he could find was that, except for a few such brilliant chapters, "tout le reste est déclamation et répétition" (Best. D16786).

Voltaire saw reason as the basis of eloquence. In his *Encyclopédie* article he wrote that "la dialectique est le fondement de l'art de persuader, et qu'être éloquent c'est savoir prouver" (XVIII.515). Likewise, he referred to "des idées vraies et profondes" as "la source cachée de l'éloquence" (Best. D15418). Yet many of his references to eloquence show that he saw it chiefly as an aid to reason, a supplement which could increase the force of reason. Writing to Richelieu about one of the duke's lawsuits, he said, "Heureusement les preuves sont si fortes qu'elles n'ont besoin d'aucune éloquence" (Best. D19342). He pictured eloquence as the passport of reason (Best. D16390). In the *Philosophe ignorant* he notes that a philosopher relying on reason alone will have less influence than an eloquent man: "aucun philosophe n'a influé seulement sur les mœurs de la rue où il demeurerait. Pourquoi? parce que les hommes se conduisent par la coutume et non par la métaphysique. Un seul homme éloquent, habile, et accrédité, pourra beaucoup sur les hommes; cent philosophes n'y pourront rien s'ils ne sont que philosophes" (XXVI.69). Part of the power of eloquence stems perhaps from the fact that it appeals to the whole man, rather than to just the intellectual faculties. Voltaire recognized that its goal is broader than that of philosophy; "plaire, convaincre et toucher à la fois" (XVIII.515) is eloquence's aim. It is thus particularly appropriate in *Jenni* where it is a question not just of winning Jenni's adhesion to the proposition that God exists, but of bringing him to reform his entire way of life.

Voltaire had perhaps another motive for invoking the aid of eloquence. He was aware that reason could not provide absolutely conclusive demonstrations for key points of his credo. His standard was admittedly high: the certainty of geometric proof. He described geometric demonstrations as having a sort of overwhelming immediacy: "une persuasion pleine, une conviction lumineuse, dans laquelle l'esprit se repose sans aucun doute" (XXVI.327). Voltaire admitted that in law (XVIII.118-19), medicine (XXIX.330), and even metaphysics (XVIII.377) men have to deal in probabilities, rather than absolute certainties. For example, to prove that God rewards or punishes men after death it is necessary to establish the immortality of the soul. Yet Voltaire remained skeptical on this point all his

life. He consistently maintained that God exists, yet many texts indicate that His existence could not be proved with the compelling force of a mathematical demonstration. As early as the *Traité de métaphysique* in the 1730's Voltaire described the proposition there is a God only as "la chose la plus vraisemblable que les hommes puissent penser" (XXII.202). He expressed the idea several time that God's existence belongs to the realm of probability, although he did see the degree of probability as so high as to almost constitute a certainty—it is "une probabilité qui approche de la plus grande certitude" (XVIII.358; cf. XXIX.330).⁶ Because of this awareness of the limits of reason, the particular brand of eloquence Freind envisages is quite an asset. He does not wish to bypass the intellect completely: "Le grand secret est de démontrer avec éloquence" (XXI.550). But he thinks it more important to aim for the heart. This ideal comes across clearly in his rejection of Clarke's proofs for God's existence: "ils sont plus faits pour vous éclairer que pour vous toucher: je ne veux vous apporter que des raisons qui peut-être parleront à votre coeur" (XXI.552).

Before examining how this eloquence bolsters Friend's defense of deism, it will be helpful to consider how plot and character add to the effectiveness of the speeches and debates. Unlike Voltaire's sermons and homelies, where the characterization of the orator and his audience is minimal, in *Jenni* the rhetorical situation of each speech is fully developed. The use of eloquence within a narrative structure makes the speeches more dramatic and allows character to play an important role as an agent of persuasion.

The plot's travel frame is loose enough for Voltaire to treat us to a wide variety of oratorical displays. Besides the two major debates, there is the sermon by the Inquisitor, Freind's parliamentary defense of Peterborough, a rather ingenuous welcoming speech by an Indian chief, as well as a minor debate on cannibalism between Birton and Freind. At the same time, the action illustrates the *conte's* thesis. In the first section Jenni is rescued from physical danger caused by fanaticism and superstition represented by the Inquisition. In the middle part it is moral ruin which threatens him as he falls under the influence of the atheist Birton and Clive-Hart. He is finally saved by eloquence when he responds to his father's refutation of atheism and appeals to return to a life of *honnêteté*.

The characters' use of eloquence, or their receptivity to it, is a telling sign about their personality, just as their personality itself has persuasive force. Voltaire designed his characters so that what rhetoricians call the ethical proof—the credibility established by the speaker's character—works strongly in Freind's favor, while a negative ethos undermines his opponents.

Thus, the rhetoric of the two representatives of the Church is as damaging to their cause as their obvious greed and ignorance. Perhaps the lies and *non sequiturs* which fill the Inquisitor's sermon went unchallenged as long as his audience was composed of docile, terror-ridden Spaniards, but Freind quickly points out that "on ne raisonne point ainsi dans la Société royale de Londres" (XXI.527). The Bachelor's debating technique is likewise as revealing as the arguments he uses. The discussion rambles from topic to topic with little progression because the Bachelor is unwilling to pursue any question at length. His repeated *mais*, which introduce each of his comments and give the dialogue its name, are indicative of his bad faith, of his refusal to seek areas of agreement with Freind. Unable to

think for himself, he objects mechanically to whatever Freind says. He has confidence neither in human reason nor in the Bible and must fall back on authority—the infallibility of the Pope as declared by the University of Salamanca.

Birton's rhetoric cannot be dismissed so easily. The narrator takes pains to point out that he is "plus savant, plus éloquent qu'aucun jeune homme de son âge, mais ne s'étant jamais donné la peine de rien approfondir" (XXI.551). This facile eloquence reflects his debonair attitude toward life and a certain superficiality in his treatment of philosophical questions. He has the kind of mind "qui tient les vraisemblances pour des démonstrations" (XXI.551). Still he argues in good faith with Freind, finding one after another point of agreement, until he is ultimately converted. He is neither wicked nor stupid, only "évaporé" (XXI.576).

Voltaire goes out of his way to establish Freind as the ideal orator during his appearance before Parliament. The fact that the whole episode is so tenuously linked to the plot and that the summary of the speech stresses Freind's delivery more than his arguments in defense of Peterborough shows that Voltaire's chief interest is in presenting a model of eloquence:

Il alla done en parlement: je l'y entendis prononcer un discours ferme et serré, sans aucun lieu commun, sans épithète, sans ce que nous appelons des phrases; il n'*invoquait* point un témoignage, une loi; il les attestait, il les citait, il les réclamait; il ne disait point qu'on avait *surpris la religion* de la cour en accusant milord Peterborough d'avoir hasardé les troupes de la reine Anne, parce que ce n'était pas une affaire de religion; ii ne prodiguait pas à une conjecture le nom de démonstration; il ne manquait pas de respect à l'auguste assemblée du parlement par de fades plaisanteries bourgeoises; il n'appelait pas milord Peterborough son client, parce que le mot de client signifie un homme de la bourgeoisie protégé par un sénateur. Freind parlait avec autant de modestie que de fermeté (XXI.537)

The series of negations is meant as one more condemnation of an artificial style of legal oratory Voltaire had often criticized.⁷ At the same time, Freind's eloquence is indicative of his character; he is a man of calm, controlled sensibility. "Sa raison commande à son coeur" (XXI.539). Thus he avoids emotion-laden embellishments in favor of a simple style. He refuses to offer hypotheses as proofs. Finally, he has a sense of decorum and the respect for his audience that is the mark of an orator who eschews manipulative techniques for honest persuasion.

Freind never got the opportunity to display the full range of his oratorical talents with the Bachelor whose arguments tended to self-destruct. Against Birton, however, who twice is on the verge of winning over the audience, a less eloquent defender of God might not have carried the day. The discussion this time progresses in an orderly fashion as Birton and Freind debate God's existence, evil, and the moral consequences of belief in God. This is roughly the same order of topics Voltaire had followed in his *Homélie sur l'athéisme* (1767). In fact, taken as a whole, the debate can be seen as a sermon of sorts. Critics have remarked that Birton's eloquence stems from the fact that there is much of Voltaire in him,⁸ and his speeches serve much the same role as the objections a good orator anticipates only

to refute. This sustained discussion and final agreement is possible because the two share many presuppositions: both feel that overly subtle metaphysical thought is futile, that the universe is ordered along Newtonian lines, and that evil is the principal obstacle to belief in God. Indeed, the question of God's goodness is "le fort de la dispute" (XXI.557). As Birton puts it at one point, "S'il n'a pas pu empêcher le mal, il est impuissant; s'il l'a pu et ne l'a pas voulu, il est barbare" (XXI.562).

Voltaire spoke in his *Encyclopédie* article of the "dialectical" basis of persuasion. The pattern of reasoning underlying Friend's eloquence becomes evident when we consider how he deals with this dilemma. His strategy is to treat the problem of evil only in the larger framework of the positive links between God and men. Thus his first concern is to demonstrate what he considers the most important of these points of contact between the human and the divine: men can know that God exists (others include conscience, and rewards and punishments after death). Then, without denying either the reality of evil, or of God, he dissociates the two, changing the relationship by interposing a third element between them. As a preliminary, he asserts that the amount of physical evil in the world has been exaggerated by writers like "St. Augustin le rhéteur . . . qui . . . prodiguait dans ses écrits la figure de l'exagération" (XXI.560–61). The implication is that Freind will avoid such rhetorical tricks. He presents evil as merely a by-product of the general laws by which God governs the universe. Given these laws, "il est impossible qu'il n'en résulte quelques désastres particuliers" (XXI.561). He substitutes free will for general laws in his explanation of human evil. Men "font un détestable usage de la liberté que ce grand Etre leur a donnée et a dû leur donner" (XXI.564). Again God is not directly responsible. Finally, much physical evil is simply the result of human evil, and he cites the many diseases caused by man's incontinence and immoderation. This may not be an ultimately satisfying solution to the problem of evil, but it is marvelous rhetoric. Freind's use of dissociation in the larger context of God's ties with men allows him to minimize God's responsibility while avoiding the picture of a God entirely removed from the world. In addition, Freind's honesty in refusing to deny the reality of evil is a chief factor in establishing his credibility in Birton and the reader's eyes.

So far the discussion of Friend's eloquence has touched on his choice of arguments and their arrangement. A more detailed look at their development will be possible if we compare the presentation of the points of contact between God and men in *Jenni* and in other works Voltaire directed against Holbach's *Système*. The goal is not an exhaustive analysis of the figures and tropes Freind uses but to show how much his eloquence adds to the appeal of his arguments.

Freind first argues that man can discern in the order of the universe a design, and thus know the Designer—God. Such an argument is obviously complex, involving complicated analogies and inferences, but in the *Lettres de Memmius* (1771), Voltaire invests it with the succinctness and immediacy of mathematical proof: "Tu crois que j'ai de l'intelligence, parce que tu vois de l'ordre dans mes actions, des rapports, et une fin; il y en a mille fois plus dans l'arrangement de ce monde: juge donc que ce monde est arrangé par une intelligence suprême" (XXVIII.440). Freind tries to retain this immediacy, while avoiding the dryness of mathematics by amplifying the visual element only hinted at (*tu vois*) in the *Lettres*. It is all so simple, he seems to be saying, if you will only open your eyes: "Servez-

vous de vos yeux, et vous reconnaîtrez, vous adorerez un Dieu" (XXI.554). He is successful in touching Birton and Jenni because his proofs are, in the narrator's words, "palpables" (XXI.556). His descriptions of the functioning of the universe and the human body have a vividness that grips the imagination, while at the same time he implies that his interpretation of these natural processes in terms of final causes is the only one possible. For example: "Les secours dans le corps sont si artificieusement préparés de tous côtés qu'il n'y a pas une seule veine qui n'ait ses valvules, ses écluses, pour ouvrir au sang des passages. Depuis la racine des cheveux jusqu'aux orteils des pieds, tout est art, tout est préparation, moyen, et fin" (XXI.555). Once the listener acquiesces to the vision of order and design implicit in the picture Freind paints, the conclusion that God exists seems inescapable.

Besides making Himself known to man through His works, God has provided, according to Freind, a second point of contact in the conscience. In the *Lettres de Memmius* Voltaire makes the assertion in a rather straightforward way: "Le sentiment de la vertu a été mis par la nature dans le coeur de l'homme, comme un antidote contre tous les poisons dont il devait être dévoré. Vous savez que César eut un remords quand il fut au bord du Rubicon. Cette voix secrète qui parle à tous les hommes lui dit qu'il était un mauvais citoyen" (XXVIII.460). Freind's eloquence is able to dramatize this same argument considerably because its proof is in a sense already within Birton for it is in man's heart that God has inscribed His law. Freind has only to prompt this interior voice to speak out: "N'est-il pas vrai que si vous aviez tué votre père et votre mère, cette conscience vous déchirerait par des remords aussi affreux qu'involontaires? Cette vérité n'est-elle pas sentie et avouée par l'univers entier? Descendons maintenant à de moindres crimes. Y en a-t-il un seul qui ne vous effraye au premier coup d'oeil, qui ne vous fasse pâlir la première fois que vous le commettez, et qui ne laisse dans votre coeur l'aiguillon du repentir" (XXI.570)? He personalizes what he claims to be a universal phenomenon by appealing to Birton's own experience of remorse, rather than to that of a third party. His examples (parricide) and choice of adjectives and verbs (*dechirait*, *effraye*, *palir*, *affreux*) evoke emotional extremes. Finally, his contention is phrased in a series of sharp questions that seem to compel assent.

Yet conscience, as Freind conceives it, turns out to be an insufficient moral regulator. It acts more as a censor than as a guide and can be stifled by passion or habit. Hence the need for an additional link between God and man: punishment or rewards after death. These serve both as a deterrent to crime and as a vindication of God's justice. Here Voltaire states his case in *Dieu V* (1770), one of his immediate responses to the *Système*. "La philosophie, selon vous, ne fournit aucune preuve d'un bonheur à venir. Non; mais vous n'avez aucune démonstration du contraire. Il se peut qu'il y ait en nous une monade indestructible qui sente et qui pense. . . . La raison ne s'oppose point absolument à cette idée, quoique la raison seule ne la prouve pas. Cette opinion n'a-t-elle pas un prodigieux avantage sur la vôtre? La mienne est utile au genre humain, la vôtre est funeste; elle peut, quoi que vous en disiez, encourager les Néron, les Alexandre VI, et les Cartouche; la mienne peut les réprimer" (XVIII.377). The argument is particularly vulnerable based as it is on expediency. Even though he has no proof that the soul is immortal, he asserts that it is useful for men to believe in rewards and punishment after death. Nonetheless, Freind develops this same argument into a solemn finale which completes Birton and Jenni's conversion. In order to make them overlook his weakest point—the fact that it is at best only *possible* that

the soul exists after death—Freind uses a series of forceful questions and exclamations to stress Birton's admission that he cannot prove the contrary. Once Birton is on the defensive, Freind redefines the meaning of atheist in terms of utility: "n'attendre de Dieu ni châtement ni récompense, c'est être véritablement athée. A quoi servirait l'idée d'un dieu qui n'aurait sur vous aucun pouvoir" (XXI.573)? An atheist is not so much one who does not believe in God, as one who has no fear of God to regulate his conduct. This skillful shift in definition is in keeping with Freind's emphasis on the practical consequences of belief in God and gives him the excuse to dwell on the frightening influence of atheism on the poor and the powerful. Amplifying the reference to Cartouche, he paints a grim picture of the *bas peuple* given over to crime and drink, while he devotes a second paragraph to the murders committed by Renaissance prelates like Alexander VI.

These horrors lead to a sober peroration where Freind first sums up his thesis in a balanced period typical of the dignified style he has used throughout: "La croyance d'un dieu rémunérateur des bonnes actions, punisseur des méchantes, pardonneur des fautes légères, est donc la croyance la plus utile au genre humain: c'est le seul frein des hommes puissants, qui commettent insolemment les crimes publics; c'est le seul frein des hommes qui commettent adroitement les crimes secrets" (XXI.574). Then, aware that the peroration is the orator's last opportunity to stir his listeners' emotions, he evokes in somber tones worthy of Bossuet or Massillon the possibility of death at any moment and the agony of remorse experienced by the unrepentant on their deathbeds.

But Freind's professed desire to provide proofs which speak to the heart has not led to an exclusive dependence on fear or the more sentimental emotions. He is perhaps as satisfied by the admiration he elicits for the order of the universe as by the tears of repentance Jenni sheds. One of the *conte's* most gripping moments occurs at a pause midway in the debate when the Indian Parouba, to whom the principles of astronomy have just been explained, falls to his knees in wonder, exclaiming, "Les cieux annoncent Dieu" (XXI.568). Yet the most powerful mode of persuasion, and one which appeals to the head as well as the heart, is Freind's character. His virtue is cited to refute Birton's charge that human nature is perverse. His modest awareness of the limits of reason disposes his listeners in his favor, and the deep conviction with which he presents his arguments communicates an intensity that makes them even more compelling. The effectiveness of this ethical proof is evident in Birton's confession of faith: "je crois en Dieu et en vous" (XXI.575).

It is not surprising that Birton and Jenni, puppets of Voltaire, are won over but what of the reader? J. H. Brumfitt and M. I. Gerard Davis remark that "as a logical demonstration, *Jenni* is far from irrefutable; as a piece of propaganda, it probably only convinces the converted."⁹ This is not necessarily a sign of failure, if Clifton Cherpach's contention is correct that *Jenni* is a defense of Voltaire's deism, an effort to reassure the authorities angered by works like the *Système*, rather than an attack against atheism.¹⁰ Reinforcing convictions is as legitimate a goal of the art of persuasion as conversion. This *conte* is the culmination of a number of works written by Voltaire between 1770 and 1775 in the wake of the *Système*. As the comparisons have shown, Freind's eloquence tends to strengthen the appeal of Voltaire's arguments. *L'art de bien dire* in Freind's hands is able to add to the persuasive force of his arguments because he has chosen to emphasize ones which lend themselves to striking presentation. He has avoided the more abstract demonstrations of God's existence,

such as the one based on a prime mover used in *Il faut prendre un parti* (1772) in favor of the proof from design which invites vivid evocations of the order of nature. Freind's dramatic appeals to the heart are all the more effective because he sees it as the seat of moral experience, just as his argument for rewards and punishments after death based on expediency is well served by his *tableaux* painting the "cercle abominable de brutalités" (XXI.573) of an atheist society. From the point of view of pure logic *Jenni* may not be any more adequate a refutation of the *Système* than the works which precede it. Yet if Voltaire chooses to rest his case with *Jenni*, it is perhaps because he has finally stated his position with an eloquence that more than matches that of Holbach.

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Notes

1. V. Mylne, "Literary Techniques and Methods in Voltaire's *Contes philosophiques*," *SVEC*, LVII (1967), 1056-57.
2. cf. Jacques van den Heuvel, *Voltaire dans ses contes* (Paris, 1967), pp. 326-27.
3. Rene Pomeau, "Voltaire au college," *RHL*, LII (1952), 5.
4. cf. Best. D19377; 19390; 19303. All citations from the correspondence are from the *Correspondence and Related Documents*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Banbury, 1968-1977).
5. *OEuvres*, ed. Moland, XXI (Paris, 1877-85), 554. All subsequent citations of Voltaire, except from the correspondence, are from this edition.
6. Ian W. Alexander discusses the role of probability in Voltaire's metaphysics in "Voltaire and Metaphysics," *Philosophy*, XIX (1944), 34-48.
7. cf. XVIII.516-17; Best. D19311. R. E. Najem in his unpubl. diss. (Wisconsin, 1958), "A Critical Edition of Voltaire's *Histoire de Jenni*," p. 152, suggests that the *conte* was probably written somewhere between April 27 and July 29, 1775. However, the similarity between the description of Freind's speech and a letter of March 18 indicates that Voltaire may have been working on *Jenni* at least a month earlier. "Le jeune homme [Etallonde] qui est une des plus sages têtes que j'aie jamais connues fera son mémoire lui même. Il ne parlera point comme les avocats éloquentes qui invoquent une loi et un témoignage, qui apportent des raisons victorieuses, qui parlent de l'ordre moral et politique, et de l'ordre des avocats. . . . Best. D19377.
8. "Birton, the atheistic spokesman in the work, raises some of the same questions on good and evil that had concerned Voltaire throughout his career, and he recalls to the reader some of Voltaire's own arguments from his despondent periods to express his moral uneasiness." Richard A. Brooks, *Voltaire and Leibniz* (Geneva, 1964), p. 129.
9. Voltaire, *L'Ingénu and Histoire de Jenni*, ed. J. H. Brumfitt and M. I. Gerard Davis (Oxford, 1960), p. xlvii.
10. Clifton Cherpach, "Voltaire's *Histoire de Jenni: A Synthetic Creed*," *MP*, LIV (1956-57), 32.