

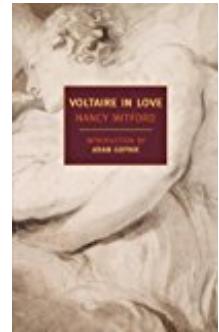
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Jenny McPhee

## Émilie du Châtelet: The Lady Who Was A Great Man

In a 1740 letter to an English friend, Voltaire expressed his regret at being unable to visit him, as he could not live without, even for a short period, "that lady whom I look upon as a great man and as a most solid and respectable friend. She understands Newton; she despises superstition and in short she makes me happy." The famous French poet, playwright, and polemicist was then midway through his extraordinary fifteen-year love affair with the Marquise du Châtelet, a liaison that would produce works of genius from both their pens.



Émilie du Châtelet was a mathematician, physicist, and philosopher who loved to bedeck herself in diamonds, attend salons and soirées, show off at court, and indulge in amorous adventures. Émilie was born into French aristocracy and showed an early aptitude for learning. Her father hired the best Parisian tutors to educate her. When she was nineteen, he arranged her marriage to the Marquis du Châtelet, a man who adored his young wife, appreciated her talents, and never interfered with her indefatigable pursuit of intellectual excellence.

At twenty-six Émilie resolved, after giving birth to her third child, to turn to the serious study of mathematics. At a dinner party in Paris, she encountered Voltaire. He was thirty-nine and after an exile in England -- his controversial compositions frequently forced him to flee France -- he had returned steeped in Newton's scientific discoveries and the philosophy of Locke. He couldn't, however, arouse in French academics -- devoted Cartesians -- any intellectual curiosity, much less enthusiasm, for these new ideas from across the Channel. Émilie became ignited mind and body by Voltaire and his ability to clearly express complex notions about the natural world. For his part, Voltaire found in the Marquise someone whose scientific intelligence enhanced, challenged, and eventually surpassed his own.

Their uncommon relationship drives Nancy Mitford's remarkable 1957 book *Voltaire in Love*, reissued by The New York Review Books in November 2012. In zestful prose, itself dripping with Voltarian wit, Mitford spins an account of the lovers' incessant shenanigans, both highbrow and bawdy, and in so doing paints a flamboyant, down-and-dirty tableau of the French Enlightenment. Mitford offers hilarious and astonishing reports of the lovers' quarrels, betrayals, and sexual appetites; their embroilments with the nobility at Versailles; Émilie's destructive gambling habit (to repay her staggering debts she developed a financing arrangement similar to modern derivatives); Voltaire's endless fights with fellow writers and banishments by the royal censor; the ménage at Cirey, Émilie's husband's country estate in

Champagne where the lovers transformed a crumbling chateau into a resplendent laboratory and high-powered think tank; the myriad productions, both failures and successes, of Voltaire's plays, many featuring Émilie as leading lady; Émilie's desperate push to finish her masterpiece, an annotated translation of Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, after discovering at age forty-two that she was pregnant by her young lover (by then she and Voltaire no longer shared a bed) and unlikely to survive the birth, which she did not.

Adam Gopnik, in his introduction to the new edition of Mitford's book, calls it "a small-scale masterpiece of antiheroic history." Mitford's work is an *amuse-bouche* for at least three subsequent full-scale biographies of the Marquise: *The Divine Mistress* (1970) by Samuel Edwards; *Émilie du Châtelet: Daring Genius of the Enlightenment* (2006) by Judith Zinsser; and David Bodanis's *Passionate Minds: The Great Enlightenment Love Affair* (2006), which details how fundamental du Châtelet's work was to scientific development.

For example, a paper she wrote for a competition she and Voltaire participated in on the properties of fire and the nature of light contributed to the discovery of photography and predicted infrared radiation; Voltaire's *Newton for the Common Reader*, which popularized English-style experimental empiricism and made science fashionable in France, was a collaboration with Émilie. "She dictates," said Voltaire, "and I write"; in 1740, Émilie published *Lessons in Physics*, in which her groundbreaking work on energy would later contribute to Einstein's equation  $E=mc^2$ ; her translation of the *Principia* remains the definitive one used by French scientists today.

Though Voltaire outlived Émilie by twenty-nine years, his best work, Mitford notes, was written while with the Marquise: "Nearly all that is still read by Voltaire was influenced by [her]... *Candide* and his other tales, the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, and his letters which increased in number, depth, and importance during the Cirey period."

The near total erasure from history, until recently, of Madame du Châtelet and her work began even before she died -- an all too familiar pattern. Many claimed her work was not her own, but that of Voltaire or her math tutors Moreau de Maupertuis and Alexis Clairaut. She was well aware in her own lifetime of what she was up against. In the preface to her translation of Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, she writes:

I feel the full weight of the prejudice which so universally excludes us from the sciences... Let the reader ponder why, at no time in the course of so many centuries, a good tragedy, a good poem, a respected tale, a fine painting, a good book on physics has ever been produced by women. Why these creatures whose understanding appears in every way similar to that of men, seem to be stopped by some irresistible force, this side of a barrier. If I were king... I would redress an abuse which cuts back, as it were, one half of human kind.

After her death, Voltaire made sure her Newton translation received the attention it deserved, but as Bodanis points out, "By the end of the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant was writing that to imagine Mme du Châtelet a great thinker was as preposterous as imagining a woman to possess a beard."

Indeed, in order to accomplish all that she did, Émilie du Châtelet had to tolerate being perceived, even by her beloved Voltaire, as an aberration, as a man's mind trapped in a female body. After her death, Voltaire wrote: "She was a great man whose only fault was in being a woman. A woman who translated and explained Newton... in one word, a very great man." But Émilie herself never expressed any desire to be a man, and objected to this distortion with every fiber of her being. In a letter to Frederick the Great of Prussia, she wrote:

Judge me for my own merits, or lack of them, but do not look upon me as a mere appendage to this great general or that great scholar, this star that shines at the court of France or that famed author. I am in my own right a whole person, responsible to myself alone for all that I am, all that I say, all that I do. It may be that there are metaphysicians and philosophers whose learning is greater than mine, although I have not met them. Yet, they are but frail humans, too, and have their faults; so, when I add the sum total of my graces, I confess I am inferior to no one.

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