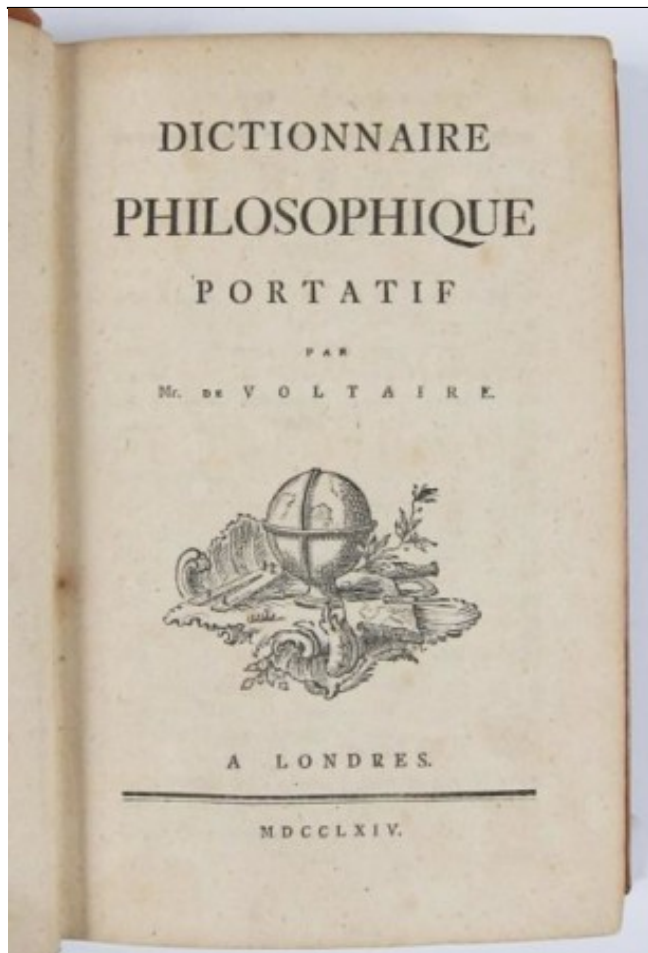


*Arrest De La Cour Du Parlement:  
Qui Confirme Une Sentence Rendue Par La Sénéchaussée De Ponthieu À  
Abbeville...*  
[France, 1766(?)]

The original statue, prominently mounted near the Sacré-Coeur in 1904, moved in 1926, and melted down in 1941.

Voltaire's role in the Calas Affair was a warmup for his less successful role four years later in the case for which the Law Library recently has obtained a very rare pamphlet. It is a printing of the 1766 decision of the *Parlement* of Paris in the blasphemy and sacrilege case of Jean-François Lefebvre, Chevalier de la Barre. Though not as widely known as the case of Jean Calas (1762), the de la Barre case typically is classed with cases that illustrate some form of "religious intolerance." Yet, subscribing to the notion that this case was based squarely on issues of religion fails to take into account the offstage skein of cultural, social, and state factors at play in the de la Barre affair. Today the affair remains emblematic of religious intolerance, even if that was not exactly what drove the case. Controversies surrounding the affair persist, reflected especially in the long saga of the statues of the Chevalier de la Barre near the Basilica of the Sacré Coeur in Paris. The current statue, itself a subject of disputation as was its predecessor, provides a visual reminder of the storm of events in 1765-1766 in the Picardy town of Abbeville, and the Paris *Parlement's* subsequent affirmation of the Abbeville court decision convicting de la Barre of blasphemy and sacrilege, then condemning him to torture, the guillotine, and burning his detached head along with his body.

**The events.** The Chevalier de la Barre, an orphaned, rudderless, nineteen-year old Catholic aristocrat, was accused, along with several other young men known for their horseplay, of defacing a wooden crucifix by caning it. The devout community had been shocked by this and other recent acts of desecration, and sought to assign blame. Suspicion fell upon the small group of well-born pranksters, and though proof of their participation was lacking, the young men were accused because they had failed to remove their caps and kneel as a Catholic religious procession passed by.



The incriminating opus found in de la Barre's room, burned along with him after he was decapitated.

With word out of the imminent arrests, some of the group fled, leaving only de la Barre and his friend Moisnel. The accusations mounted to include uttering blasphemies against God, and singing impious songs against God, the Virgin Mary, selected saints, the Church, and religion in general. When Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique portatif* was discovered in de la Barre's room alongside his library of erotic literature, the authorities further charged him with worshiping despicable books, and the link to the perceived heretical and subversive views of the *philosophes* was established.

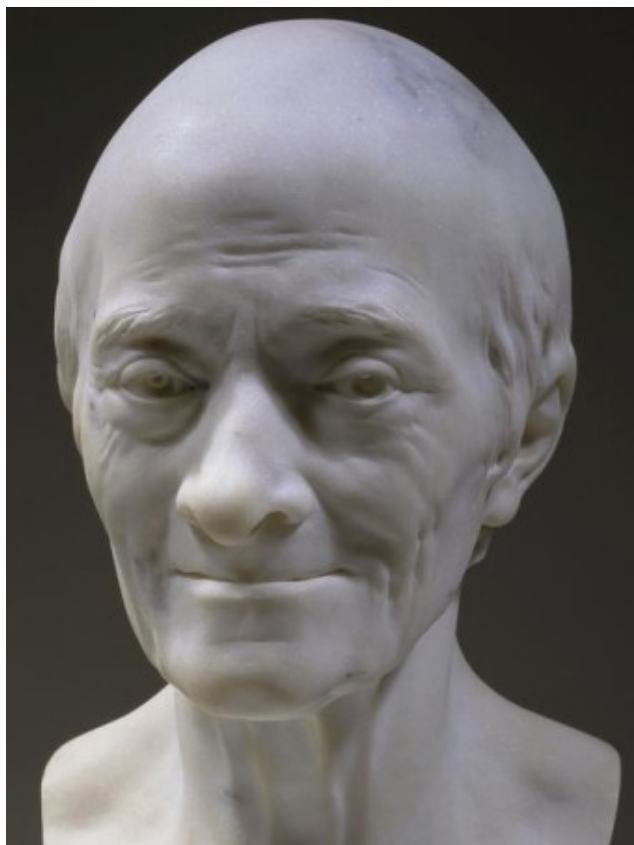
Despite able representation by the brilliant but prickly avocat Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, de la Barre was found guilty by the Abbeville court, and the Paris *Parlement* confirmed his sentence.

Fresh in the judges' minds must have been the Paris *Parlement's* condemnation of the *Dictionnaire* shortly before the crucifix desecration in 1765; Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes* constituted a menace to organized Catholic religion, and it was understood by the authorities that their influence was to be aborted at any cost. Despite able representation by the brilliant but prickly *avocat* Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, de la Barre was found guilty by the Abbeville court, and the Paris *Parlement* confirmed his sentence. On July 1, 1766, after submitting to torture, he was beheaded and burned. His portable copy of the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* was flung onto the pyre with him, as ordered by the court. Moisnel was released.

**Voltaire's role.** Voltaire was shaken by the de la Barre events. His *Dictionnaire Philosophique* had figured prominently in the court's decision to execute de la Barre, and the Paris *Parlement* reportedly was angered by letters denouncing the de la Barre case that were attributed to him. Voltaire fled France for Switzerland and began his de la Barre letter-writing campaign in earnest to rehabilitate the young chevalier, a not entirely altruistic or morally-motivated endeavor

since he feared for his own safety. Conforming to his classic *modus operandi*, Voltaire anonymously penned *Rélation de la mort du Chevalier de la Barre*, using the case to broadcast his criticism of the Church and the French judges. According to some, publication of this pamphlet marked the start of de la Barre's symbolic life: his fate came to represent the calamitous consequences of religious and clerical oppression, and de la Barre himself became a martyr for freethought. As the author of the *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, the book that the authorities contended led de la Barre to perform the impious acts of which he was accused, Voltaire found himself cast yet again as an enemy of religion and authority. But this time his rehabilitation campaign fell short; unlike his successful effort to have Calas's conviction overturned posthumously, Voltaire failed to effect a posthumous judicial reversal for de la Barre. The Chevalier's rehabilitation would occur some twenty-five years later during the Revolution.

Already Voltaire thought little of France's judicial system, and had criticized its secret practices.

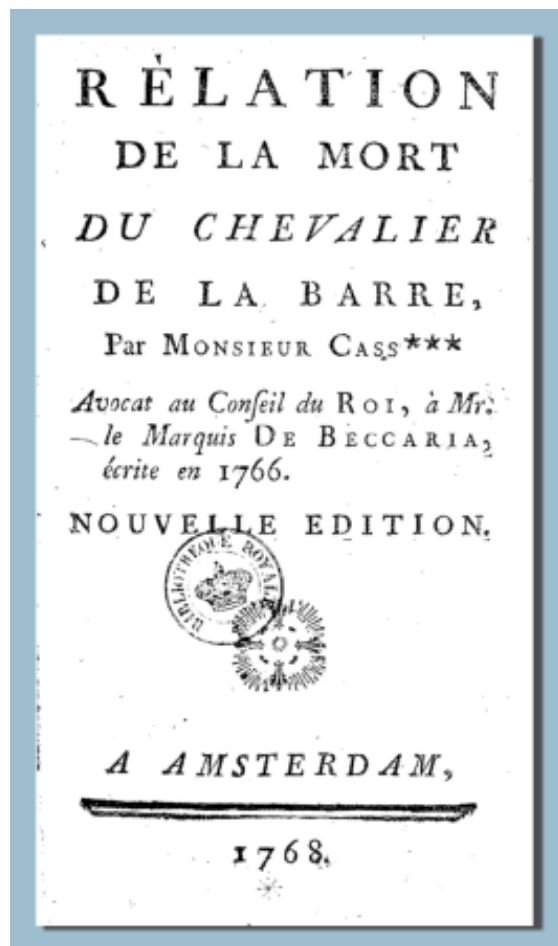


Voltaire in white marble by Houdon, 1778.

**Offstage realities in the de la Barre affair.** It was Voltaire, in his *Rélation de la mort du Chevalier de la Barre*, who first wrote about the backstory of how de la Barre came to be accused as a blasphemer. Already Voltaire thought little of France's judicial system, and had criticized its secret practices. Through family and friends, Voltaire learned that the de la Barre investigation was born of jealousy and revenge: the case had begun as a personal vendetta, rather than a legitimate initiative led by religious and state authorities.

A local magistrate with amorous intentions toward de la Barre's aunt (the abbess of the Abbeville convent) was annoyed that when the orphaned de la Barre had arrived to live with her, his lustful overtures were repelled. Believing that de la Barre's presence had thwarted his designs on the abbess, the magistrate began a campaign against de la Barre to lay blame for the recent crucifix desecration, threatening witnesses with the possibility of excommunication if they refused to cooperate in giving information implicating de la Barre. After a relentless evidence-gathering crusade, the magistrate succeeded in clinching de la Barre's arrest, despite that de la Barre had produced a sound alibi for the August night in question. Without this dogged and personally-motivated pursuit, coercion of witnesses, and use of

spurious “evidence,” it seems unlikely that de la Barre would have been accused as the crucifix vandal.

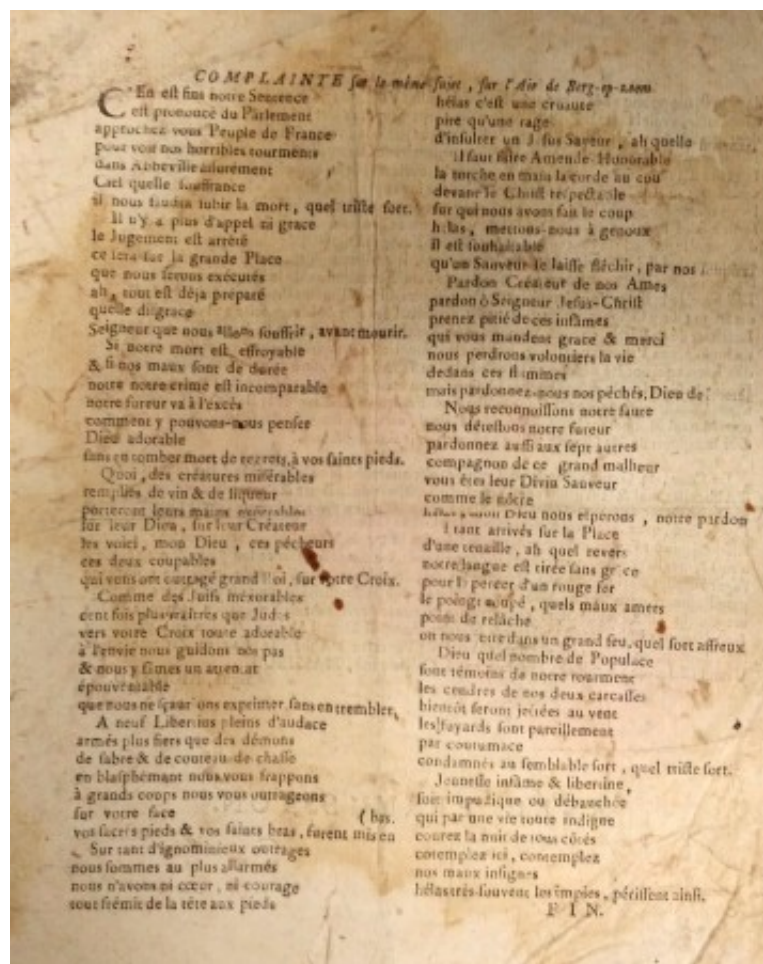


Voltaire’s anonymous work with fictitious imprint, which told the “story behind the story” of the de la Barre affair.

De la Barre, to be sure, presented himself as a predictable victim. Despite his noble status, as an orphan running at large with a merrymaking crew of young rowdies, shouting blasphemies, singing licentious songs, and quoting from their most recently-acquired erotic literature, there was hardly much to recommend him, and it seems he had scant money or family left to support him when things went wrong. He was in a weak position, and was brazenly making light of the Church, still a powerful institution in pre-Revolutionary France. It is no stretch to consider that he would have been an easy mark for harassment and punishment by the authorities (whether Church or State), and his torture, execution, and burning would act as a warning to others who might stray into sacrilege or rebellion. Tossing de la Barre’s copy of the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* into the flames also read loud and clear to Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes* that they were treading on dangerous territory in their writings. The authorities may have intended that the punishments to de la Barre and destruction of his book would reinforce the impression of the power of the Church, supported by the French government in its prosecution and execution of such a heretic. And making a show of obliterating the *Dictionnaire*, the purported source of de la Barre’s ideas, was the closest the authorities could come to tearing iconoclastic rhetoric out by its roots.

By doing as he pleased without regard to convention, de la Barre allowed himself to be cast as what would later be called a “freethinker,” a person who bases his beliefs on reason and logic rather than faith: a “natural enemy” of the Church. In de la Barre’s case, his “freethinking” doubtless was more akin to larking than philosophy, and meting out his unusually heinous sentence could have been considered a “win-win” situation by the authorities: a win for the Church, and a win for the State. The attractive prospect of seizing such a victory for French institutions, and the possibility of its generating a valuable fillip for the establishment in the years preceding the Revolution, may have acted as catnip upon the authorities, faced as they were with the steady erosion of their beliefs and traditions, as the strongholds of French culture came increasingly under attack.

**The pamphlet with its cautionary *chanson*.** The de la Barre pamphlet recently acquired by the Law Library consists of a three-page report of the *Arrest de la Cour du Parlement*, and an interesting page four. Characteristic of ephemeral materials, few copies of these printings exist today. There are three other known copies of pamphlets reporting the decision of *Parlement* in the de la Barre case (Edinburgh holds a copy printed in Abbeville, and Sweden and France hold copies printed in Paris). However, the Law Library's copy appears to be unique, and sheds important light on this historical period because of what an enterprising publisher printed on page four. Apparently left blank in other copies, the final page of the library's pamphlet contains the ballad-like "Complainte sur le même sujet, sur l'Air de Berg-op-zoom."



The final page of the de la Barre pamphlet that may make the Law Library copy unique.

The pamphlet was issued without publisher information, and could have been reprinted from other copies as a strategy for distributing this *chanson* anonymously. The ninety-two-line song, printed in two columns, would have been performed to the tune of *Berg-op-Zoom*, a seventeenth-century martial air commemorating the Dutch city of Bergen op Zoom that survived a siege by the Spanish in 1622.

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Plainly addressed to the sacrilegious acts pinned on de la Barre and the young band of rascals, the piece makes reference, without naming names, to the "créatures misérables remplies de vin & de liqueur" [wretched creatures full of wine and liqueur] who performed the crucifix desecration, with a comparison to "Juifs inexorables cent fois plus traîtres que Judas" [inexorable Jews, one hundred times more treacherous than Judas]. It closes with a stern warning addressed to "[la] jeunesse infâme & libertine, soit impudique ou débauchée qui par une vie toute indigne courez la

nuit de tous côtés” [vile & libertine youth, whether indecent or debauched, who, through leading an utterly disgraceful life, roam everywhere by night] who risk the grim and unspeakable fate of the impious (unspoken, yet clearly a reference to the execution of de la Barre). Young night-crawling mischief-makers, beware!

Ephemera were free (or nearly so), flimsy, and often distributed in times of turmoil: a recipe for early destruction.

The de la Barre pamphlet joins the Law Library’s historical megacollection of printed legal ephemera. These pamphlets and broadsides offer a contemporary view of events, which, regardless of historical accuracy, are valuable for the light they shed on the attitudes, perceptions, and cultural norms of the period. Ephemera, frequently just a single sheet, were handed out on street corners or sold in booths to raise public awareness of a current event or trial; broadsides plastered to a wall informed the public of a new law or recent tragedy. Surviving ephemera can be among the rarissima of antiquarian publications thanks to the likelihood that they would be discarded soon after printing. Ephemera were free (or nearly so), flimsy, and often distributed in times of turmoil: a recipe for early destruction.

**And what of the de la Barre statues?** The story of the statues of the Chevalier de la Barre commences with the knight’s migration from mortal to symbol after the appearance of Voltaire’s *Rélation de la mort du Chevalier de la Barre*. Years later during the Revolution, action by the Convention in 1792 resulted in the chevalier’s rehabilitation, something Voltaire had not accomplished. The nineteenth century saw de la Barre’s status solidified as a victim of Catholic fanaticism.



The current statue of the Chevalier de la Barre, mounted in 2001 on the empty plinth at the Square Nadar at Montmartre.

Then around the turn of the twentieth century, de la Barre resurfaced with renewed vigor in the French national consciousness. In 1904, the first statue of the chevalier was installed prominently near the entrance to the Basilica of

the Sacré-Coeur in Paris. It was a dramatic depiction of de la Barre lashed to the stake for burning, with the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* open at his feet. The installation was a project of an organized group of Freethinkers, who intended the cheek-by-jowl placement of the statue near the Sacré-Coeur to symbolize the ruinous effects of religious intolerance. Planning for and mounting the statue coincided generally with the debate and enactment of the French law on the separation of Church and State in 1905, which officially established state secularism.

The statue was not destined to remain undisturbed. In 1926, it was moved away from its position of prominence to a lower elevation near the Basilica. Then in 1941 during the Vichy regime, Maréchal Pétain chose de la Barre for melting to provide bronze to the Germans, and the statue was removed. At the time, no replacement statue was installed.

Abbeville's memorial with its bronze relief plaque depicting de la Barre's torture was erected in 1907 on the torture location, financed by a public subscription. The chevalier's memorial remains a symbol of anticlericalism and secularism.

On July 1 each year, freethinkers and opponents of religious oppression in France celebrate Chevalier de la Barre Day, which commemorates the day of his execution.