

# VOLTAIRE<sup>1</sup>

[A N O N Y M O U S]

Published in *The Pioneer*, January, 1843 (1:1)

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Arizona Antebellum Magazine Edition Project  
May 4, 2015

Heaven shield me from ambition such as his—  
To weigh a pun against Eternal bliss  
And scoff at God for an antithesis.<sup>2</sup>



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1. An 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher known to attack religious institutionalization and dogma (*The European Graduate School*).

2. Rhetoric: a contrast of ideas presented as two connected clauses or sentences (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

## EDITOR'S NOTE

At the time that this poem was published, there was a certain amount of revival of interest in the writings of Voltaire. In 1842 a notable French literary society chose Voltaire as the subject of their annual writing competition, and broadened the competition from its former eulogistic nature, to a potentially more critical discourse on the man and his work. This was seen as an opportunity to religious persons, who hoped that the winner of the competition would be one who would call more upon the “weakness and duplicity” of Voltaire, in light of his views on God and religious institutionalism (PH B). This poem continues in this vein of condemnation in citing pride as the potential motivation for Voltaire to have made light of God and salvation. The poet likely was familiar with Voltaire’s works, as it appears that he was referencing a specific instance of humorous rhetoric. The most likely work that this poem may have been responding to, was one of Voltaire’s letters to Frederick the Great in which he says, “Doubt is not a pleasant condition. But certainty is an absurd one” (Arouet). This is the specific instance of the rhetoric, and Voltaire then continues to say, “What is most repellent in the *System of Nature* [of d’Holbach] — after the recipe for making eels from flour — is the audacity with which it decides that there is no God, without even having tried to prove the impossibility” which ties in the religious aspect. In longing for and encouraging the idea of trying to prove the impossibility of God’s existence, Voltaire sets himself up against the religious community, and it is possibly to this that the poet was reacting.

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