

VOLTAIRE AND THE WRITINGS OF RAPIN DE THOYRAS

Janet Godden
Voltaire Foundation, Oxford

Reviewing the new édition of Hume's *History of England* in the *Gazette littéraire* for May 1764 Voltaire writes:

La fureur des partis a longtemps privé l'Angleterre d'une bonne histoire comme d'un bon gouvernement. Ce qu'un tory écrivait était nié par les whigs, démentis à leur tour par les torys. Rapin Thoiras, étranger, semblait seul avoir écrit une histoire impartiale ; mais on voit encore la souillure du préjugé jusque dans les vérités que Thoiras raconte au lieu que dans le nouvel historien on trouve un esprit supérieur à sa matière.¹

Some twenty years earlier, in the *Lettres philosophiques*, Voltaire had written: “pour de bons historiens [anglais] je ne leur en connais pas encore ; il a fallu qu'un Français ait écrit leur histoire”.² In between, he drew extensively on Rapin's *Histoire d'Angleterre* as a reference tool for his own writing. It is plain that in addition to the volumes found in his library at St Petersburg he used at some stage an earlier edition or editions not only of Rapin's text, but also probably of Nicholas Tindal's notes on Rapin and Thomas Rymer's *Foedera* which was an indispensable source for Rapin.

Paul Rapin de Thoyras was born in Castres in 1661, into a well-connected protestant family and received a strong protestant early education, attending the Académie de Puy-Laurens a few years after Pierre Bayle and subsequently training as a lawyer. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, issued shortly after the death of his father, Rapin left France on the advice of his mother. He went first to England, where through his uncle, Paul Pélisson, he had

1 Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. L. Moland, Paris, Garnier, 1877-85, 52 vols [M], vol.25, pp.172-73. Voltaire makes the same judgement in the Catalogue des écrivains to the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, where he adds an extra sentence in 1756 to take account of Hume (*Œuvres historiques*, ed. R. Pomeau, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1957, p.1197). See also John Morgan's account of a visit to Ferney in 1764: “[Voltaire] told me that Mr Hume [...] has given us a good History of England. It is not so full of minute facts as that of Rapin, who smells indeed of the Presbyterian whilst Mr Hume throughout smells of the Philosopher” (D12089).

2 Letter XVII, “Sur Pope”, in *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. G. Lanson and A.M. Rousseau, Paris, Didier, 2 vols, 1964, vol.2, p.138.

connections to the French ambassador at the court of James II. Quite quickly, however, he moved on to Holland, probably as a result of pressure from French Catholics in London to renounce protestantism. In Utrecht he joined a cadet corps set up for young *refugiés* which formed part of the invasion army of William of Orange in 1688. Rapin served with William in Ireland and took part in the Battle of the Boyne. On his recall to London he was rewarded by the king with the appointment of tutor to the son of the earl of Portland, an influential diplomat and politician whom Rapin accompanied on missions to The Hague and Paris in connection with negotiations around the Peace of Ryswijk (1697) and attempts to find a solution to the problem of the Spanish succession. Portland retired from public life in 1699; in the same year Rapin returned to Holland, living first at The Hague, where he moved in the circle of prominent Huguenot intellectuals. The withdrawal of Rapin's English pension after the death of William III entailed a move to a more modest house in Wesel, where he died in 1725. He did not revisit England.³

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Rapin himself tells us that, being of a serious turn of mind and disliking idleness, his long months of inactivity in the Irish garrison town of Kinsale had set him thinking about the events he had witnessed surrounding the accession of William III and hence the history of succession to the English crown.⁴ These thoughts were first set down in the *Dissertation sur les Whigs et les Torys* (1717) in which Rapin explained impartially and for a non-English audience the origins and particularities of the British party system.⁵ This was a book for its time. It aroused much interest and was quickly translated into several languages and it established Rapin's reputation for writing an unbiased clear account of a complex subject. The separate early edition of the *Dissertation* does not appear in Voltaire's library. It is appended to the 1749 edition of the *Histoire d'Angleterre* so in this form it was in his possession after that date but there is no trace of his reading nor are there references to it in his correspondence.

Following this success Rapin embarked on expanding what was in effect the first third of the *Dissertation* into a full-scale history of England, maintaining

3 See the "Vie de M. de Rapin Thoyras" in the 1749 edition of Rapin's *Histoire d'Angleterre*, La Haye, s.n., 16 vols, Préface, vol.1, pp.c-clxv. A full account of Rapin's life and wide family connections, including the Pélissons, can be found in Raoul de Cazenove, *Rapin-Thoyras, sa famille, sa vie et ses œuvres* (Paris, A. Aubry, 1866). Among more recent assessments of Rapin's life and work, see Hugh Trevor Roper, "A Huguenot historian: Paul Rapin", in *Huguenots in Britain and their French background, 1550-1800*, ed. I. Scouladi, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987, pp.3-20.

4 *Histoire d'Angleterre*, Preface to the 1749 edition, vol.1, pp.clxix-clxx.

5 *Dissertation sur les Whigs et les Torys* (La Haye, C. Le Vier, 1717). The book's subtitle, probably first intended by Rapin to be the title itself, is more explanatory: *Dissertation sur l'origine du gouvernement en Angleterre et sur la naissance les progrès, les vues, les forces, les intérêts et les caractères des deux partis des Whigs et des Torys*.

his focus on the succession of the monarchy, balancing it against the power of the people and the liberty for all that was attained when these powers were in balance. Although Rapin possessed the talent of weighing up the arguments for both sides of a case and presenting a dispassionate account, his underlying support for the accession of William III and the introduction of a parliamentary monarchy was fundamentally Whig and therefore heavily criticised by supporters of the Jacobite cause.⁶

Some of Rapin's *leitmotifs* are echoed constantly in Voltaire's writing, in particular the importance in English history of the legislative power of parliament, and the legitimacy of royal succession through the female line.⁷ His influence on Voltaire is certainly discernible in the early 1730s. Jerom Vercruysse, for instance, has seen the influence of Voltaire's reading of Rapin in the composition of *La Pucelle*, and Rapin was almost certainly among the sources for some extended remarks on Joan of Arc in chapter 80 of the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the article "Arc, Jeanne d'" of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.⁸ We know too from the work of Gustave Lanson that Rapin was one of Voltaire's sources for Letters VIII and IX ("Sur le Parlement" and "Sur le gouvernement") of the *Lettres philosophiques*. Compare for instance Voltaire's "*La Chambre des Pairs et celle des Communes sont les arbitres de la nation, le roi est le sur-arbitre. Cette balance manquait aux Romains. Les grands et le peuple étaient toujours en division à Rome*" with Rapin's "*C'est un gouvernement mixte [...] Les prérogatives du souverain, des grands et du peuple y sont tellement tempérées les unes par les autres qu'elles se soutiennent mutuellement.*"⁹ The influence of Bolingbroke is also strong in these Letters, and Bolingbroke was one of the subscribers to the *Histoire d'Angleterre*.

At Rapin's death in 1725 eight volumes of his magisterial *Histoire d'Angleterre*, containing livres I-XXI finishing with the death of Charles I, had been published by Rogissart at The Hague in 1723. Volumes 9 and 10, livres XXII-XXIV finishing with the Glorious Revolution and the advent of William and Mary, were published posthumously in 1726. The work was well publicised and an

6 For instance, sustained attacks on Rapin by Thomas Salmon were reported, sympathetically towards Rapin, in *Le Pour et Contre* (No.4, July 1733).

7 A crucial element in the disputes around the accession of both William III and George I. Voltaire discusses Salic law in a number of places: in the article "Loi salique" for the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* he specifically refers to Rapin (M, vol.19, p.611); and see "De la loi salique", in *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des lois (Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire)*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation [OCV], vol.80b, 2009, p.438f). See also N. Girard d'Albissin, *Un précurseur de Montesquieu. Rapin de Thoyras. Premier historien français des institutions anglaises* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1969).

8 Livre XII of the *Histoire d'Angleterre* is followed by a "Dissertation sur *La Pucelle d'Orléans*". See OCV, vol.7, 1970, pp.129-30; also *Essai sur les mœurs*, ed. R. Pomeau, Paris, Garnier frères, 1963, 2 vols, vol.1, pp.752-53; *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, dans OCV, vol.38, 2007, pp.571-78.

9 *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. Lanson, vol.1, p.89 and note.

impressive list of subscribers obtained.¹⁰ It was published almost simultaneously in France at Trévoux and was translated into English by Nicholas Tindal in 1725.¹¹ Tindal's translation was accompanied by notes on Rapin's text, which were published separately as *Remarques historiques et critiques sur l'Histoire d'Angleterre par M. Rapin Thoyras*, by Neaulme at La Haye in 1733. Excerpts from them were also published in the *Journal des savants* in spring 1733.

As early as March 1724 Voltaire asked Prosper Marchand to send him a copy of the first edition of the *Histoire d'Angleterre* (D186), but this edition does not survive in his library. Voltaire's library at St Petersburg does however hold two posthumous editions. They are first an *Abrégé de l'Histoire de l'Angleterre de M. de Rapin Thoyras* produced by Falaiseau and published by Rogissart at The Hague in 1730,¹² and second the new edition of the *Histoire d'Angleterre* of 1749, published by Charles-Hugue Le Febvre de Saint-Marc.¹³ Voltaire also acquired a 1749 edition of John Lockman's successful adaptation of the work for use in schools, first published in 1729.¹⁴

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By piecing together scraps of a torn up manuscript fragment used as bookmarks in the *Abrégé*, M. Lublinsky was able to conclude that Voltaire first read this work at Cirey during the summer of 1730,¹⁵ when he was working on the *Lettres philosophiques* (1732).

Voltaire quarries Rapin principally, however, for the chapters on England in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, whose composition and revision occupied him almost continuously in one way or another from the early 1740s until 1775. The marginalia of the 1749 edition of the *Histoire d'Angleterre* and the 1730 *Abrégé* occupy about 50 pages of volume 7 of the *Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire*,¹⁶ a total exceeded in that volume only by Pluche.

Rapin's text is detailed, so the appeal of an abridged version for Voltaire's purpose in writing the *Essai sur les mœurs* is obvious, and the presence of bookmarks and *papillons collés* is evidence of his use of the *Abrégé*. On the other

10 The list, printed by Cazenove, includes several printers, among them the frères Cramer and Jean Néaulme.

11 *The history of England done into English, with additional notes by N. Tindal*, London, J.&J. Knapton, 1726-31). Tindal later continued the history to the accession of George II and a new edition was published in 4 volumes, 1732-47.

12 *Abrégé de l'Histoire d'Angleterre de M. de Rapin Thoyras*, La Haye, C. de Rogissart et sœurs, 1730, BV2872.

13 *Histoire d'Angleterre, par M. Rapin de Thoyras, nouv. éd. augmentée de notes de M. Tindal [...]*, La Haye, s.n., 1749 (BV2871).

14 *A New History of England, in French and English by question and answer. Extracted from the most celebrated English historians; particularly M. de Rapin Thoyras. A new edition, corrected and improv'd*, London, P. Vaillant, 1749 : see S. V. Korolev, "Quelques livres récemment retrouvés dans la bibliothèque de Voltaire (II)", below, pp.247-54, especially p.252.

15 V. Lublinsky, "Voltaire and his library", in *OCV*, vol.136, 2008, p.702.

16 *OCV*, vol.142, 2008, pp.209-59.

hand one brief factual account can read much like another so we cannot say with certainty that Voltaire used the *Abrégé* rather than the full first edition of 1724. An interesting example concerns the enormous ransom that Richard I was forced to pay to the emperor Henry VI in order to secure his release from prison. The text of the *Abrégé* reads “*Il accorda donc à cent cinquante mille marcs d’argent*”, with a *papillon collé* beneath the words “*donc*” to “*argent*”; the same figure is specified in the 1749 edition of Rapin’s text but with no marker or other trace of use so we assume that Voltaire was using the *Abrégé* on this point. In chapter 56 of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, however, Voltaire takes a slightly different tack in his surprise at the size of the sum. Henry VI, he writes, “*exigea de [Richard], dit-on, cent mille marcs d’argent [...] c’était probablement cent mille marques (marcas) qui reviennent à cent mille écus*”.¹⁷

Voltaire ordered the new quarto edition of the *Histoire d’Angleterre* from Lambert in May 1749 (D3926) and chased its apparent non-arrival by March 1750 (D4120). In May and June 1754, writing from Colmar, he includes “Rapin de Thoyras” in a list of works that Mme Denis can dispose of (D5824, D5833), along with other large historical works that are cumbersome and easy to replace, but since the edition of 1749 survives in his library we have to conclude either that Mme Denis did not sell it, or that Voltaire acquired it again later, or that he was referring to a superseded early edition, perhaps the one ordered in 1724. We do not know what books the Cirey library contained that did not belong to Voltaire, nor do we know what resources were available to him in Potsdam in the early 1750s, so it is impossible to say which editions of Rapin he might have been able to consult at any given time during the composition of the *Essai*.

On leafing through these pages the reader is struck by the fact that – in contrast to Voltaire’s treatment of many of the books in his library – the marginal notes themselves are comparatively few in comparison to the underlinings, bookmarks and other signs of reading. Voltaire does not comment on Rapin, as he does on several of the other authors whose works he annotates, he rarely criticises him or makes jokes at his expense. This could indicate that the edition he used when he was writing the *Essai sur les mœurs* was the first edition that he may have disposed of in 1754. Rapin’s own text remained unaltered in the new edition, although it was embellished with his translated extracts from Rymer’s *Foedera* (see below) and Tindal’s notes. Voltaire does allow himself a piece of sarcasm at Tindal’s expense, writing alongside Tindal’s reference to Burnet’s claim that the divorce of Henry VIII from Katharine of Aragon had only the most tangential connection with the

17 *OCV*, vol.142, pp.255-56; *Essai sur les mœurs*, ed. R. Pomeau, vol.1, p.580.

English Reformation – “*mais / mon ami si henri 8 navait pas voulu foutre anne, / point de reforme*”.¹⁸

The proliferation of markers over marginal notes reinforces the impression that Voltaire used the *Histoire d'Angleterre* first and foremost as a reliable and fair-minded reference work. The 1749 edition does not look like a book that Voltaire read for pleasure or at a sitting, pen in hand.

At times we see Voltaire, far from being the impartial historian himself, altering Rapin's sense to suit his own purpose. The case of Oliver Cromwell, of whom Voltaire rarely has a good word to say, is a good example. “*Cromvel / Roi*”, he writes on a scrap of paper marking the page where Rapin describes the moment when the aldermen of the City of London offer the English crown to Cromwell. Rapin's ending of the scene is as follows: “[*Cromwell*] *répondit donc aux commissaires du Parlement, qu'absolument, il ne voulait point être roi.*”¹⁹ In chapter 181 of the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire paints the same picture, but concludes: “*C'est ainsi qu'un citoyen obscur du pays de Galles parvint à se faire roi sous un autre nom.*”²⁰

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From the outset Rapin had relied heavily on the *Foedera*²¹ collected by Thomas Rymer on the instructions of William III, to whom he was historiographer royal. Rapin translated (and abridged) Rymer's Latin text for Leclerc's *Bibliothèque choisie*,²² and his French translation was separately published in 1728 and again in 1733 before being integrated volume by volume into the new edition of the *Histoire d'Angleterre*.²³ The *Foedera* contain the texts of peace treaties, marriage agreements, commercial agreements, instructions to ambassadors, briefings received back from them and so forth. Rapin's publication of them brought various misconceptions and misunderstandings to light, in French history as well as English. Voltaire comments on them in his article “*Histoire*” written for the *Encyclopédie* in 1755-56, in terms which make us feel that perhaps he was envious of Rymer, with his access to the vast archives of the Tower of London, in contrast to the limited information made available to him in his own capacity as *historiographe du roi*.

18 OCV, vol.142, p.223.

19 OCV, vol.142, pp.247-48.

20 *Essai sur les mœurs*, ed. R. Pomeau, vol.2, p.681. Cromwell was of Welsh and modest ancestry.

21 *Foedera, conventiones, litterae et cuiusque generis acta publica inter reges anglorum et alios quosvis imperatores, reges, pontifici[...]*, vol.1-15, were published by Rymer (Londini, per J. Tonson, 1704-13); vol.16-20 were edited by Robert Sanderson. Rapin's extracts were translated into English by Stephen Whately and published in 1733 under the title *Acta regia [...]*.

22 *Bibliothèque choisie pour servir de suite à la Bibliothèque universelle*, Amsterdam, Henry Schelte, 1703-18, vol.16 (1708), 20-24 (1710-12), 26-27 (1713). Rapin worked on Rymer's text volume by volume as it appeared.

23 *Extraits des Actes de Rymer par M. Rapin Thoyras tirés de la Bibliothèque choisie et la Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne de M. Le Clerc*, Amsterdam, D. Mortier, 1728.

*Pour pénétrer dans le labyrinthe ténébreux du Moyen Âge, il faut le secours des archives, et on n'en a presque point. [...] L'Angleterre est, de tous les pays, celui qui a sans contredit, les archives les plus anciennes et les plus suivies. Ces actes recueillis par Rimer, sous les auspices de la reine Anne, commencent avec le XI^e siècle, et sont continués sans interruption jusqu'à nos jours. Ils répandent une grande lumière sur l'histoire de France. Ils font voir par exemple, que la Guienne appartenait aux Anglais en souveraineté absolue, quand le roi de France Charles V la confisqua [...]. On y apprend quelles sommes considérables, et quel espèce de tribut paya Louis XI au roi Édouard IV qu'il pouvait combattre ; et combien d'argent la reine Élisabeth prêta à Henri le Grand, pour l'aider à monter sur son trône, etc.*²⁴

Voltaire did not it seems require quite such detailed light as this for the *Essai sur les mœurs*, of which the relevant chapters date from the edition of 1753.²⁵ The point about the seizure of the English territories in France by Charles V is mentioned in similar terms in chapter 78, where Voltaire says that Edward III “*possédait la Guyenne et les lieux circonvoisins en souveraineté absolue par le droit de conquête et par un traité solennel.*”²⁶ The negotiations between Louis XI and Edward IV in 1475 are mentioned in chapter 94 where Voltaire specifies that Louis “*fait des présents de vin à toute l'armée ; il achète le retour de cette armée en Angleterre*” (vol.2, p.4). The third example comes in chapter 168, where Voltaire writes “*qu'elle envoie des secours réitérés à Henri IV pour l'aider à conquérir son patrimoine. C'est avec ce secours qu'Henri assiégea enfin Paris*” (vol.2, p.472). Only the last of these three examples is singled out in the marginalia to the 1749 edition of the *Histoire d'Angleterre*: there is a marker at the page where Rapin writes that Elizabeth “*fit donc avec Henri un second traité, par lequel elle s'engageait à lui fournir encore quatre mille hommes, à les payer pour deux mois*” and various markers at Rymer's “Actes” in the pages immediately following.²⁷

Voltaire's interest in Rymer is also evident in passages of the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* (1767-68) where Voltaire is writing of various Anglo-French disputes during the Hundred Years War. In 1420 one particular document was found only because “*Les Anglais, malgré tous les troubles qui ont agité leur pays, ayant toujours été plus soigneux que nous pour conserver les archives, ont trouvé à la Tour de Londres l'original de l'arrêt*”, and a dispute about Brittany in 1320 is the subject of a marginal note against Rapin's own

²⁴ *Œuvres alphabétiques*, in OCV, vol.33, 1987, pp.175-76.

²⁵ *Abrégé de l'histoire universelle*, La Haye, Jean Neaulme, 1753.

²⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, ed. R. Pomeau, vol.1, pp.735-36.

²⁷ OCV, vol.142, p.226.

text: “querelle entre montfort et / blois p[ou]r la bretag[ne] non jugée / par le parlement.”²⁸

Voltaire’s remark quoted above about there being no other good English historians was not strictly accurate. He must have known of the work of Laurence Echard, whose later *Dictionnaire géographique-portatif* and *Histoire romaine* he possessed. Echard was admired by Gibbon, and Rapin tells us that he had first considered making a French translation of Echard rather than writing his own history.²⁹ In French there was the history by André Du Chesne, and the more popular and successful history by Isaac de Larry, a protestant who took refuge in Holland after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.³⁰

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Rapin’s even-handed and clear style of writing appealed to Voltaire, who would have found him a reliable source, and this is no doubt one reason for such seemingly exclusive use. Even after Rapin had in many ways been eclipsed by Hume’s *History of England* which appeared in 1752 Voltaire is praising his style and contrasting it to that of the Père Daniel. Writing to D’Alembert in October 1756 he says (D7018): “*Je suis bien mécontent de l’article Histoire. J’avais envie de faire voir quel est le stile convenable à une histoire generale, celui que demande une histoire particulière, celui que des memoires exigent. J’aurais voulu faire voir combien Toiras l’emporte sur Daniel, et Clarendon sur le cardinal Retz.*” In 1761, when a new edition of the *Essai sur les mœurs* is about to appear, he writes to Mme du Deffand (D9955): “*Je vous sais bien bon gré madame de lire l’histoire d’Angleterre par Thoiras. Vous la trouverez plus exacte, plus profonde, et plus intéressante, que celle de notre insipide Daniel.*”

In this context it is important to note that in the *Histoire d’Angleterre*, as in the *Dissertation sur les Whigs et les Torys*, Rapin was writing expressly for foreign readers as is explained in the *Avertissement* to the *Dissertation*:

Si les Anglais trouvent cette Dissertation insuffisante, à certains égards, et trop étendue aux autres, on les prie de considérer qu’elle n’a pas été faite pour eux : que l’auteur a eu pour but, de se borner à des idées générales : enfin, que les choses qui passent en Angleterre pour les plus communes et plus connues sont pour les autres pays des mystères qui ne peuvent se passer d’éclaircissement³¹.

²⁸ *Histoire du parlement de Paris*, in OCV, vol.68, 2005, ch.6, p.184, 202; OCV, vol.142, p.213.

²⁹ L. Echard, *The History of England from the first entrance of Julius Caesar to the end of the reign of James I*, London, s.n., 1707-18.

³⁰ I. de Larry, *Histoire d’Angleterre, d’Écosse et d’Irlande avec un abrégé des choses les plus remarquables*, Rotterdam, s.n., 1697-1713; A. Du Chesne, *Histoire d’Angleterre, d’Écosse et d’Irlande contenant les choses les plus dignes de mémoire*, Paris, J. Petit-Pas, 1614.

³¹ *Dissertation sur les Whigs et les Tories*, p.9.

This is what makes his text so accessible. Rapin first came to England in the reign of James II, and returned with the army of William of Orange. During his years as part of the entourage of the earl of Portland he would have followed closely the debates around the Hanoverian succession and the accession of George I. Rapin would have been particularly conscious of “régime change” in England. He was writing for a European public with a renewed interest in English history and he knew how to win the confidence of his readers, including Voltaire.