

3 MEN OF LETTERS by Voltaire

MEN OF LETTERS (philosophy and literature). This name corresponds exactly to 'grammarians'. The Greeks and the Romans designated by 'grammarian' not someone who was merely versed in grammar – the basis of all knowledge – but a man familiar with geometry, philosophy, and general and particular history, a man whose special studies were poetry and eloquence. Today that is what our *men of letters* are. This name is not given to a man whose knowledge is limited and who cultivates only one *genre* of literature. No man is considered a *man of letters* if he has read only novels and writes nothing but novels, if without any literary background he happens to have written some plays or if without any knowledge he has composed some sermons. Today the name '*man of letters*' has an even more extended meaning than the 'grammarian' of the Greeks and Romans. The Greeks were only interested in their own language, the Romans learned only Greek, but today a *man of letters* often studies Italian, Spanish, and especially English, as well as Greek and Latin. The scope of history is a hundred times more vast than it was at the time of the ancients and natural history has grown in the same proportion as the history of nations. It is not expected that a man of letters delve deeply into all these subjects: universality of knowledge is no longer within man's grasp, but true *men of letters* acquire the ability to venture into these different fields even if they cannot cultivate them all.

Formerly, in the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth, *men of letters* devoted much time to grammatical criticism of Greek and Latin authors. To their labours we owe dictionaries, correct editions, and commentaries on the masterpieces of antiquity. Today this criticism is no longer so necessary and has given way to the philosophic spirit. This spirit seems to characterize *men of letters*, and when it is combined with good taste, it produces a perfect literary man.

Our century enjoys a great advantage over former times in having such a great number of educated men who pass from the thorns of mathematics to the flowers of poetry and judge equally well a book of metaphysics and a play. The spirit of the century has made most of them

as much at ease in society as in their study. This is the great advantage they hold over *men of letters* of preceding centuries. Up to the time of Balzac and Voiture⁶ they were not admitted to society; since that time they have become a necessary part of it. The profound and clear reasoning which many have infused into their books and their conversation has done much to instruct and polish the nation. Their criticism is no longer spent on Greek and Latin works but, with the aid of a sound philosophy, it has destroyed all the prejudices with which society was afflicted: astrologers' predictions, the divinings of magicians, all types of witchcraft, false prodigies, false marvels, and superstitious customs. This philosophy has relegated to the schools thousands of childish disputations which had formerly been dangerous and have now become objects of scorn. In this way *men of letters* have in fact served the state. We are sometimes amazed that matters which formerly disturbed the world no longer trouble it today. We owe this to true *men of letters*.

They are ordinarily more independent of mind than other men. Those who were born poor easily find in the endowments established by Louis XIV the means to strengthen this intellectual independence. We no longer encounter, as formerly, those dedicatory epistles offered to vanity by self-interest and servility.

A *man of letters* is not what we call a wit. One does not need to know philosophy to be a wit, nor does one need to be so learned and cultivated. To be a wit requires above all a brilliant imagination, a mastery of the art of conversation, and wide reading. A wit may well not merit the name of *man of letters*, and a *man of letters* may not be able to aspire to the brilliance of the wit.

There are many *men of letters* who do not publish anything. They are probably the happiest of all. They are spared the humiliations that the profession of author sometimes brings with it, as well as the quarrels occasioned by rivalry, partisan spite, and unfounded opinions. They live in greater concord with each other, they enjoy sociability more, they are the judges while the others suffer judgement.

Source: *Gens de lettres*, translated by N. Hoyt and T. Cassirer, volume vii, 1757, pp. 599–600.

⁶ Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac (1595–1654), essayist, and Vincent Voiture (1598–1648), poet and letter-writer, were prominent French authors of their period. [eds]