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Benjamin Franklin Seminar/Fren 360/History 211

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Books have many powers. All too rarely, however, do they shape public opinion and change history.

The greatest works of the Enlightenment are perhaps the most striking exception ever to this rule. Our seminar will attempt to understand what the Enlightenment was and how it made its impact. We will read above all the works of the three individuals who, more than anyone else, defined the age of Enlightenment: Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau. We will see, for example, how Voltaire used his works to teach Europeans to believe in such concepts as brotherhood and the fraternity of man. We will retrace Rousseau's invention of autobiography and his redefinition of education. And we will explore the construction of perhaps the most characteristic of all Enlightenment masterpieces, the Encyclopédie edited by Diderot and d'Alembert.

We will pay particular attention to the risks each of these authors ran in making such controversial works public: they were constantly threatened by censorship from both church and state; Voltaire was exiled; Diderot was sent to prison. The seminar will meet on the 6th floor of Van Pelt Library so that we can have access during our meetings to the original editions of many Enlightenment classics. We will thus be able to discuss both ways in which these works were shaped by the fear of censorship and techniques devised by their authors to elude censorship.

We will also consider topics such as what the Enlightenment meant for women and the Enlightenment's global influence in the 18th century, particularly on the founding fathers of this country. We will thus read works by the greatest women authors of the age, as well as the most read author in the colonies, Montesquieu.

The seminar will be taught in English. Students who wish to receive French credit will do the reading in French.