

VOLTAIRE'S MAHOMET

A Play in Five Acts written by Voltaire in 1741, complete and unabridged translation by E. P.

Dupont publishers (New York, 1901).

Dramatis personae.

Mahomet (Prophet Mohammed, Founder of Islam).

Zopir, Sheik of Mecca.

Omar, General and second in command to Mahomet.

Seid, Slave to Mahomet.

Palmira, Slave to Mahomet.

Phanor, Senator of Mecca.

Company of Meccans.

Company of Mussulmans

Scene, Mecca.

ACT I. SCENE I.

ZOPIR, PHANOR.

ZOPIR.

Thinkest thou thy friend will ever bend the knee
To this proud hypocrite; shall I fall down
And worship, I who banished him from Mecca?
No: punish me, just heaven, as I deserve,
If e'er this hand, the friend of innocence
And freedom, stoop to cherish foul rebellion,
Or aid imposture to deceive mankind!

PHANOR.

Thy zeal is noble, and becomes the chief
Of Ishmael's sacred senate, but may prove
Destructive to the cause it means to serve:
Thy ardor cannot check the rapid power
Of Mahomet, and but provokes his vengeance:
There was a time when you might safely draw
The sword of justice, to defend the rights
Of Mecca, and prevent the flames of war
From spreading o'er the land; then Mahomet
Was but a bold and factious citizen,
But now he is a conqueror, and a king;
Mecca's impostor at Medina shines
A holy prophet; nations bend before him,
And learn to worship crimes which we abhor.
Even here, a band of wild enthusiasts, drunk

With furious zeal, support his fond delusions,
His idle tales, and fancied miracles:
These spread sedition through the gaping throng, invite his forces, and believe a God
Inspires and renders him invincible.
The lovers of their country think with you,
But wisest counsels are not always followed;
False zeal, and fear, and love of novelty
Alarm the crow; already half our city
Is left unpeopled; Mecca cries aloud
To thee her father, and demands a peace.

ZOPIR.

Peace with a traitor! coward nation, what
Can you expect but slavery from a tyrant!
Go, bend your supple knees, and prostrate fall
Before the idol whose oppressive hand
Shall crush you all: for me, I hate the traitor;
This heart's too deeply wounded to forgive:
The savage murderer robbed me of a wife
And two dear children: nor is his resentment
Less fierce than mine; I forced his camp, pursued
The coward to his tent, and slew his son:
The torch of hatred is lit up between us,
And time can never extinguish it.

PHANOR.

I hope
It never will; yet thou shouldst hide the flame,
And sacrifice thy griefs to public good:
What if he lay this noble city waste,
Will that avenge thee, will that serve thy cause?
Thou hast lost all, son, brother, daughter, wife.
Mecca alone remains to give thee comfort,
Do not lose that, do not destroy thy country.

ZOPIR.

Kingdoms are lost by cowardice alone.

PHANOR.

As oft perhaps by obstinate resistance.

ZOPIR.

Then let us perish, if it be our fate.

PHANOR.

When thou art almost in the harbor, thus
To brave the storm is false and fatal courage:
Kind heaven, thou seest, points out to thee the means
To soften the proud tyrant; fair Palmira,
Thy beauteous captive, brought up in the camp
Of this destructive conqueror, was sent
By gracious heaven, the messenger of peace,
Thy guardian angel, to appease the wrath
Of Mahomet; already by his herald
He has demanded her.

ZOPIR.

And wouldst thou have me
Give up so fair a prize to this barbarian?
What! whilst the tyrant spreads destruction round him,
On peoples kingdoms, and destroys mankind,
Shall beauty's charms be sacrificed to bribe
A madman's frenzy? I should envy him
That lovely fair one more than all his glory;
Not that I feel the stings of wild desire,
Or, in the evening of my day, indulger,
Old as I am, a shameless passion for her;
But, whether objects born like her to please,
Spite of ourselves, demand our tenderest pity,
Or that perhaps a childless father hopes
To find in her another daughter, why
I know not, but for that unhappy maid
Still am I anxious; be it weakness in me,
Or reason's powerful voice, I cannot bear
To see her in the hands of Mahomet;
Would I could mould her to my wishes, form
Her willing mind, and make her hate the tyrant
As I do! She has sent to speak with me
Here in the sacred porch—and lo! she comes:
On her fair cheek the blush of modesty
And candor speaks the virtues of her heart.

SCENE II.
ZOPIR. PALMIRA.

ZOPIR.

Hail, lovely maid! the chance of cruel war
Hath made thee Zopir's captive, but thou art not
Amongst barbarians; all with me revere
Palmira's virtues, and lament her fate,
Whilst youth with innocence and beauty plead
Thy cause; whatever thou askest in Zopir's power,
Thou shalt not ask in vain: my life declines
Towards its period, and if my last hours
Can give Palmira joy, I shall esteem them
The best, the happiest I have ever known.

PALMIRA.

These two months past, my lord, your prisoner here
Scarce have I felt the yoke of slavery;
Your generous hand, still raised to soothe affliction,
Hath wiped the tears of sorrow from my eyes,
And softened all the rigor of my fate:
Forgive me, if emboldened by your goodness
I ask for more, and centre my hope
Of future happiness on you alone;
Forgive me, if to Mahomet's request
I join Palmira's, and implore that freedom
He hath already asked: O listen to him,
And let me say, that after heaven and him
I am indebted most to generous Zopir.

ZOPIR.

Has then oppression such enticing charms
That thou shouldst wish and beg to be the slave
Of Mahomet, to hear the clash of arms,
With him to live in deserts, and in caves,
And wander o'er his ever shifting country?

PALMIRA.

Where'er the mind with ease and pleasure dwells,
There is our home, and there our native country:
He formed my soul; to Mahomet I owe

The kind instruction of my earlier years;
Taught by the happy partners of his bed,
Who still adoring and adored by him
Send up their prayers to heaven for his dear safety,
I lived in peace and joy! for ne'er did woe
Pollute that seat of bliss till the sad hour
Of my misfortune, when wide –wasting war
Rushed in upon us and enslaved Palmira:
Pity, my lord, a heart oppressed with grief,
That sighs for objects far, far distant from her.

ZOPIR.

I understand you, madam; you expect
The tyrant's hand, and hope to share the throne.

PALMIRA.

I honor him, my lord; my trembling soul
Looks up to Mahomet with holy fear
As to a god; but never did this heart
E'er cherish the vain hope that he would deign
To wed Palmira: No: such splendor ill
Would suit my humble state.

ZOPIR.

Whoe'er thou art,
He was not born, I trust, to be thy husband,
No, nor thy master; much I err, or thou
Springest from a race designed by heaven to check
This haughty Arab, and give laws to him
Who thus assumes the majesty of kings.

PALMIRA.

Alas! we know not what it is to boast
Of birth or fortune; from our infant years
Without or parents, friends or country, doomed
To slavery; here resigned to our hard fate,
Strangers to all but to that God we serve,
We live content in humble poverty.

ZOPIR.

And can ye be content? and are ye strangers,
Without a father, and without a home?
I am a childless, poor, forlorn, old man;
You might have been the comfort of my age:
To form a plan of future happiness
For you, had softened my own wretchedness,
And made me some amends for all my wrongs:
But you abhor my country and my law.

PALMIRA.

I am not mistress of myself, and how
Can I be thine? I pity thy misfortunes,
And bless thee for thy goodness to Palmira;
But Mahomet has been a father to me.

ZOPIR.

A father! ye just gods! the vile impostor!

PALMIRA.

Can he deserve that name, the holy prophet,
The great ambassador of heaven, sent down
To interpret its high will?

ZOPIR.

Deluded mortals!
How blind ye are, to follow this proud madman,
This happy robber, whom my justice spared,
And raise him from the scaffold to a throne!

PALMIRA

My lord, I shudder at your imprecations;
Though I am bound by honor and the ties
Of gratitude to love thee for thy bounties,
This blasphemy against my kind protector
Cancels the bond, and fills my soul with horror.
O superstition, how thy savage power
Deprives at once the best and tenderest hearts
Of their humanity!

ZOPIR.

Alas! Palmira,
Spite of myself, I fell for thy misfortunes,
Pity thy weakness, and lament, thy fate.

PALMIRA

You will not grant me then—

ZOPIR.

I cannot yield thee
To him who has deceived thy easy heart,
To a base tyrant; No: thou art a treasure
Too precious to be parted with, and makest
This hypocrite but more detested.

SCENE III.

ZOPIR, PALMIRA, PHANOR.

ZOPIR.

Phanor,
What wouldst thou?

PHANOR.

At the city gate that leads
To Moad's fertile plain, the valiant Omar
Is just arrived.

ZOPIR.

Indeed; the tyrant's friend,
The fierce, vindictive Omar, his new convert,
Who had so long opposed him, and still fought
For us!

PHANOR.

Perhaps he yet may serve his country,
Already he hath offered terms of peace;
Our chiefs have parleyed with him, he demands
An hostage, and I hear they've granted him
The noble Seid.

PALMIRA.

Seid? gracious heaven!

PHANOR.

Behold! my lord, he comes.

ZOPIR.

Ha! Omar here!

There's no retreating now, he must be heard;
Palmira, you may leave us. —O ye gods
Of my forefathers, you who have protected
The sons of Ishmael these three thousand years,
And thou, O Sun, with all those sacred lights
That glitter round us, witness to my truth,
Aid and support me in the glorious conflict
With proud iniquity!

SCENE IV.

ZOPIR, OMAR, PHANOR, ATTENDANTS.

ZOPIR.

At length it seems,
Omar returns, after three years' absence,
To visit that loved country which his hand
So long defended, and his honest heart
Has now betrayed: deserter of our gods,
Deserter of our laws, how darest thou thus
Approach these sacred walls to persecute
And to oppress; a public robbers slave;
What is thy errand? Wherefore comest thou hither?

OMAR.

To pardon thee: by me our holy prophet
In pity to thy age, thy well known valor
And past misfortunes, offers thee his hand
Omar is come to bring thee terms of peace.

ZOPIR.

And shall a factious rebel offer peace
Who should have sued for pardon? Gracious gods!
Will ye permit him to usurp your power,
And suffer Mahomet to rule mankind?
Dost thou not blush, vile minion as thou art,
To serve a traitor? Hast thou not beheld him
Friendliness and poor, a humble citizen
And ranking with the meanest of the throng?
How little then in fortune or in fame!

OMAR.

Thus low and groveling souls like thine pretend
To judge of merit, whilst in fortune's scale
Ye weigh the worth of men: proud, empty being
Dost thou not know that the poor worm which crawls
Low on the earth, and the imperial eagle
That soars to heaven, in the all-seeing eye
Of their eternal Maker are the same,
And shrink to nothing? Men are equal all;
From virtue only true distinction springs,
And not from birth: there are exalted spirits
Who claim respect and honor from themselves
And not their ancestors: these, these, my lord,
Are heaven's peculiar care, and such is he
Whom I obey, and who alone deserves
To be master; all mankind like me
Shall one day fall before the conqueror's feet,
And future ages follow my example.

ZOPIR.

Omar, I know thee well; thy artful hand
In vain hath drawn the visionary portrait;
Thou mayest deceive the multitude, but know,
What Mecca worships Zopir can despise:
Be honest then, and with the impartial eye
Of reason look on Mahomet; behold him
But as a mortal, and consider well
By what base arts the vile impostor rose,
A camel-driver, a poor abject slave,
Who first deceived a fond, believing woman,

And now supported by an ideal dream
Draws in the weak and credulous multitude:
Condemned to exile, I chastised the rebel
Too lightly, and his insolence returns
With double force to punish my indulgence.
He fled with Fatima from cave to cave
And suffered chains, contempt and banishment;
Meantime the fury which he called divine
Spread like a subtle poison through the crowd;
Medina was infected; Omar then,
To reason's voice attentive, would have stopped
The impetuous torrent; he had courage then
And virtue to attack the proud usurper,
Though now he crouches to him like a slave.
If thy proud master be indeed a prophet,
How didst thou dare to punish him? Or why,
If an impostor, wilt thou dare to serve him?

OMAR.

I punished him because I knew him not;
But now, the veil of ignorance removed,
I see him as he is; behold him born
To change the astonished world and rule mankind:
When I beheld him rise in awful pomp,
Intrepid, eloquent, by all admired,
By all adored; beheld him speak and act,
Punish and pardon like a god, I lent
My little aid, and joined the conqueror.
Altars, thou knowest, and thrones were our reward;
Once I was blind like thee, but, thanks to heaven!
My eyes are opened now; would, Zopir, thine
Were open too! Let me entreat thee, change,
As I have done; no longer boast thy zeal
And cruel hatred, nor blaspheme our God,
But fall submissive at the hero's feet
Whom thou hast injured; kiss the hand that bears
The angry lightning, lest it falls upon thee.
Omar is now the second of mankind;
A place of honor yet remains for thee,
If prudent thou wilt yield, and own a master:
What we have been thou knowest and what we are:

The multitude are ever weak and blind,
Made for our use, born but to serve the great,
But to admire, believe us and obey:
Reign then with us, partake the feast of grandeur,
No longer deign to imitate the crowd,
But henceforth make them tremble.

ZOPIR.

Tremble thou,
And Mahomet, with all thy hateful train:
Thinkest thou that Mecca's faithful chief will fall
At an impostor's feet, and crown a rebel?
I am no stranger to his specious worth;
His courage and his conduct have my praise;
Were he but virtuous I like thee should love him;
But as he is I hate the tyrant: hence,
Nor talk to me of his deceitful mercy,
His clemency and goodness; all his aim
Is cruelty and vengeance: with this hand
I slew his darling son; I banished him:
My hatred is inflexible, and so
Is Mahomet's resentment: if he e'er
Re-enters Mecca, he must cut his way
Through Zopir's blood, for he is deeply stained
With crimes that justice never can forgive.

OMAR.

To show thee Mahomet is merciful,
That he can pardon though thou canst not, here
I offer thee the third of all our spoils
Which we have taken from tributary kings;
Name your conditions, and the terms of peace;

MAHOMET.

Set your own terms on fair Palmira; take
Our treasures, and be happy.

ZOPIR.

Thinkest thou Zopir
Will basely sell his honor and his country,
Will blast his name with infamy for wealth,
The foul reward of guilt, or that Palmira
Will ever own a tyrant for her master?
She is too virtuous e'er to be the slave
Of Mahomet, nor will I suffer her
To fall a sacrifice to base impostors
Who would subvert the laws, and undermine
The safety and the virtue of mankind.

OMAR.

Implacably severe; thou talkest to Omar
As if he were a criminal, and thou
His judge; but henceforth I would have thee act
A better part, and treat me as a friend,
As the ambassador of Mahomet,
A conqueror and a king.

ZOPIR.

A king! Who mad,
Who crowned him?

OMAR.

Victory: respect his glory,
And tremble at his power: amidst his conquests
The hero offers peace; our swords are still
Unsheathed, and woe to this rebellious city
If she submits not: think what blood must flow,
The blood of half our fellow-citizens;
Consider, Zopir, Mahomet is here,
And even now requests to speak with thee.

ZOPIR.

Ha! Mahomet!

OMAR.

Yes, he conjures thee.

ZOPIR.

Traitor!

Were I the sole despotic ruler here
He should be answered soon ---by chastisement.

OMAR.

I pity, Zopir, thy pretended virtue;
But since the senate insolently claim
Divided empire with thee, to the senate
Let us begone; Omar will meet thee there.

ZOPIR.

I'll follow thee: we then shall see who best
Can plead his cause: I will defend my gods,
My country, and her laws; thy impious voice
Shall bellow for thy vengeful deity,
Thy persecuting god, and his false prophet.

[Turning to Phanor,

Haste, Phanor, and with me repulse the traitor;
Who spares a villain is a villain: --come,
Let us, my friend, unite to crush his pride,
Subvert his wily purposes, destroy him,
Or perish in the attempt: If Mecca listens
To Zopir's councils, I shall free my country
From a proud tyrant's power, and save mankind.

End of First Act.

ACT II. SCENE I.

SEID, PALMIRA.

PALMIRA.

Welcome, my Seid, do I see thee here
Once more in safety? What propitious god
Conducted thee? At length Palmira's woes
Shall have an end, and we may yet be happy.

SEID.

Thou sweetest charmer, balm of every woe,
Dear object of my wishes and my tears,
O since that day of blood when flushed with conquest
The fierce barbarian snatched thee from my arms,

When midst a heap of slaughtered friends I lay
Expiring on the ground, and called on death,
But called in vain, to end my hated being,
What have I suffered for my dear Palmira!
How have I cursed the tardy hours that long
Withheld my vengeance! my distracted soul's
Impatience thirsted for the bloody field,
That with these hands I might lay waste this seat
Of slavery, where Palmira mourned so long
In sad captivity; but thanks to heaven!
Our holy prophet, whose deep purposes
Are far beyond the ken of human wisdom,
Hath hither sent his chosen servant Omar;
I flew to meet him, they required a hostage;
I gave my faith, and they received it; firm
In my resolve to live or die for thee.

PALMIRA.

Seid, the very moment ere thou camest
To calm my fears, and save me from despair,
Was I entreating the proud ravisher;
Thou knowest, I cried, the only good on earth
I prized is left behind, restore it to me:
Then clasped his knees, fell at the tyrant's feet,
And bathed them with my tears, but all in vain:
How his unkind refusal shocked my soul!
My eyes grew dim, and motionless I stood
As one deprived of life; no succor nigh,
No ray of hope was left, when Seid came
To ease my troubled heart, and bring me comfort.

SEID.

Who could behold unmoved Palmira's woes?

PALMIRA.

The cruel Zopir; not insensible
He seemed to my misfortunes, yet at last
Unkindly told me, I must never hope
To leave these walls, for naught should tear me from him.

SEID.

'Tis false; for Mahomet, my royal master,
With the victorious Omar, and forgive me,
If to these noble friends I proudly add
The name of Seid, these shall set thee free,
Dry up thy tears, and make Palmira happy:
The God of Mahomet, our great protector,
That God whose sacred standard I have borne;
He who destroyed Medina's haughty ramparts
Shall lay rebellious Mecca at our feet;
Omar is here, and the glad people look
With eyes of friendship on him; in the name
Of Mahomet he comes, and meditates
Some noble purpose.

PALMIRA.

 Mahomet indeed
Might free us, and unite two hearts long since
Devoted to his cause; but he, alas!
Is far removed, and we abandoned captives.

SCENE II.

PALMIRA, SEID, OMAR.

OMAR

Despair not; heaven perhaps may yet reward you,
For Mahomet and liberty are nigh.

SEID.

Is he then come?

PALMIRA.

Our friend and father?

OMAR

 Yes.

I met the council, and by Mahomet
Inspired, addressed them thus: "Within these walls,
Even here," I cried, "the favorite of heaven,
Our holy prophet, first drew breath; the great,
The mighty conqueror, the support of kings;

And will ye not permit him but to rank
As friend and fellow-citizen? He comes not
To ruin or enslave, but to protect,
To teach you and to save, to fix his power,
And hold dominion o'er the conquered heart."

I spoke; the hoary sages smiled applause,
And all inclined to favor us; but Zopir,
Still resolute and still inflexible,
Declared, the people should be called together,
And give their general voice: the people met,
Again I spoke, addressed the citizens,
Exhorted, threatened, practiced every art
To win their favor, and at length prevailed;
The gates are opened to great Mahomet,
Who after fifteen years of cruel exile
Returns to bless once more his native land;
With him the gallant Ali, brave Hercides,
And Ammon the invincible, besides
A numerous train of chosen followers:
The people throng around him; some with looks
Of hatred, some with smiles of cordial love;
Some bless the hero, and some curse the tyrant:
Some threaten and blaspheme, whilst others fall
Beneath his feet, embrace and worship him;
Meantime the names of God, of peace and freedom,
Are echoed through the all-believing crowd;
Whilst Zopir's dying party bellows forth
In idle threats its impotent revenge:
Amidst their cries, unruffled and serene,
In triumph walks the god-like Mahomet,
Bearing the olive in his hand; already
Peace is proclaimed, and see! The conqueror comes.

SCENE III.

MAHOMET, OMAR, HERCIDES, SEID, PALMIRA, ATTENDANTS.

MAHOMET.

My friends, and fellow-laborers, valiant Ali,
Morad, and Ammon, and Hericides, hence
To your great work, and in my name instruct
The people, lead them to the paths of truth,

Promise and threaten; let my God alone
Be worshipped, and let those who will not love
Be taught to fear him—Seid, art thou here?

SEID.

My ever-honored father, and King,
Led by that power divine who guided thee
To Mecca's walls, preventing your commands
I came, prepared to live or die with thee.

MAHOMET.

You should have waited for my orders; he
Who goes beyond his duty knows it not;
I am heaven's minister, and thou art mine;
Learn then of me to serve and to obey.

PALMIRA.

Forgive, my lord, a youth's impatient ardor:
Brought up together from our infant years,
The same our fortunes, and our thoughts the same:
Alas! My life has been a life of sorrow;
Long have I languished in captivity,
Far from my friends, from Seid, and from thee;
And now at last, when I beheld a ray
Of comfort shining on me, thy unkindness
Blasts my fair hopes, and darkens all the scene.

MAHOMET.

Palmira, 'tis enough : I know thy virtues;
Let naught disturb thee: spite of all my cares,
Glory, and empire, and the weight of war,
I will remember thee; Palmira still
Lives in my heart, and shares it with mankind:
Seid shall join troops: thou, gentle maid,
Mayest serve thy God in peace: fear naught but Zopir.

SCENE IV.
MAHOMET, OMAR.

MAHOMET.

Brave Omar, stay, for in thy faithful bosom
Will I repose the secrets of my soul:
The lingering progress of a doubtful siege
May stop our rapid course; we must not give
These weak deluded mortals too much time
To pry into our actions; prejudice
Rules o'er the vulgar with despotic sway.
Thou knowest there is a tale which I have spread
And they believe, that universal empire
Awaits the prophet, who to Mecca's walls
Shall lead his conquering bands, and bring her peace.
'Tis mine to mark the errors of mankind,
And to avail me of them; but whilst thus
I try each art to soothe this fickle people
What thinks my friend of Seid and Palmira?

OMAR.

I think most nobly of them, that amidst
Those few staunch followers who own no God,
No faith but thine, who love thee as their father,
Their friend, and benefactor, none obey
Or serve thee with an humbler, better mind:
They are most faithful.

MAHOMET.

Omar, thou art deceived;
They are my worst foes, they love each other.

OMAR.

And can you blame their tenderness?

MAHOMET.

My friend,
I'll tell thee all my weakness.

OMAR.

How my Lord!

MAHOMET.

Thou knowest the reigning passion of my soul;
Whilst proud ambition and the cares of empire
Weighed heavy on me, Mahomet's hard life
Has been a conflict with opposing Nature,
Whom I have vanquished by austerity,
And self denial; have banished from me
That baleful poison which unnerves mankind,
Which only serves to fire them into madness,
And brutal follies; on the burning sand
Or desert rocks I brave the inclement sky,
And bear the seasons' rough vicissitude:
Love is my only solace, the dear object
O fall my toils, the idol I adore,
The god of Mahomet, the powerful rival
Of my ambition: know, midst all my queens,
Palmira reigns sole mistress of my heart:
Think then what pangs of jealousy thy friend
Must feel when she expressed her fatal passion
For Seid.

OMAR.

But thou art revenged.

MAHOMET.

Judge thou
If soon I ought not to take vengeance on them;
That thou mayest hate my rival more, I'll tell thee
Who Seid and Palmira are—the children
Of him whom I abhor, my deadliest foe.

OMAR.

Ha! Zopir!

MAHOMET.

Is their father: fifteen years
Are past since brave Hercides to my care
Gave up their infant years; they know not yet
Or who or what they are; I brought them up
Together; I indulged their lawless passion.,
And added fuel to the guilty flame.

Methinks it is as if the hand of heaven
Had meant in them to center every crime.
But I must— Ha! Their father comes this way,
His eyes are full of bitterness and wrath
Against me—now be vigilant, my Omar,
Hercides must be careful to possess
This most important pass; return, and tell me
Whether 'tis most expedient to declare
Against him, or retreat: away.

SCENE V.

ZOPIR, MAHOMET.

ZOPIR.

Hard fate!

Unhappy Zopir! Thus compelled to meet
My worst of foes, the foe of all mankind!
Since 'tis the will of heaven that Mahomet
And Zopir should at length untie, approach
Without a blush, and fearless tell thy tale.
I blush for thee alone, whose baneful arts
Have drawn thy country to the brink of ruin;
Who in the bosom of fair peace wouldst wage
Intestine war, loosen the sacred bonds
Of friendship, and destroy our happiness;
Beneath the veil of proffered terms thou meanest
But to betray, whilst discord stalks before thee:
Thou vile assemblage of hypocrisy
And insolence, abhorred tyrant! Thus
Do the chosen ministers of heaven dispense
Its sacred blessings, and announce their God?

MAHOMET.

Wert thou not Zopir, I would answer thee
As thou deservest, in thunder, by the voice
Of that offended Being thou deridest:
Armed with the hallowed Koran I would teach thee
To tremble and obey in humble silence:
And with the subject world to kneel before me;
But I will talk to thee without disguise,
As man to man should speak, and friend to friend:

I have ambition, Zopir; where's the man
Who has it not? But never citizen,
Or chief, or priest, or king projected aught
So noble as the plan of Mahomet;
In acts or arms hath every nation shone
Superior in its turn; Arabia now
Steps forth; that generous people, long unknown
And unrespected, saw her glories sunk,
Her honors lost; but lo! The hour is come
When she shall rise to victory and renown;
The world lies desolate from pole to pole;
India's slaves and bleeding Persia mourns
Her slaughtered sons; whilst Egypt hangs the head
Dejected; from the walls of Constantine
Splendor is fled; the Roman Empire torn
By discord, sees its scattered members spread
On every side inglorious;--let us raise
Arabia on the ruins of mankind:
The blind and tottering universe demands
Another worship, and another God.
Crete had her Minos, Egypt her Osiris,
To Asia Zoroaster gave his laws,
And Numa was in Italy adored:
O'er savage nations where nor monarchs ruled
Nor manners softened, nor religion taught,
Hath many a sage his fruitless maxims spread;
Beneath a nobler yoke I mean to bend
The prostrate world, and change their feeble laws,
Abolish their false worship, pull down
Their powerless gods, and on my purer faith
Found universal empire: say not Zopir,
That Mahomet betrays his country, no:
I mean but to destroy its weak supports,
And banishing idolatry, unite it
Beneath one king, one prophet, and one God;
I shall subdue it but to make it glorious.

ZOPIR.

Is this thy purpose then, and darest thou thus
Avow it? Canst thou change the hearts of men,
And make them think like thee? Are war and slaughter

The harbingers of wisdom and of peace;
Can he who ravages instruct mankind?
If in the night of ignorance and error
We long have wandrered, must thy dreadful torch
Enlighten us? What right hast thou to empire?

MAHOMET.

That right which firm, exalted spirits claim
O'er vulgar minds.

ZOPIR.

Thus every bold impostor
May forge new fetters, and enslave mankind:
He has a right, it seems, to cheat the world
If he can dot it with an air of grandeur.

MAHOMET.

I know your people well; I know they want
A leader; my religion, true or false,
Is needful to them: what have all your gods
And all your idols done? What laurels grow
Beneath their altars? Your low, groveling sect
Debases man, unnerves his active soul,
And makes it heavy, phlegmatic, and mean;
Whilst mine exalts it, gives it strength and courage:
My law forms heroes.

ZOPIR.

Rather call them robbers:
Away; not bring thy hateful lessons here;
Go to the school of tyrants, boast thy frauds
To lost Medina, where thou reignest supreme
Where blinded bigots bend beneath thy power,
And thou beholdest thy equals at thy feet.

MAHOMET.

My equals! Mahomet has none; long since
I passed them all; Medina is my own,
And Mecca trembles at me; if thou holdest
Thy safety dear, receive the peace I offer.

ZOPIR.

Thou talkest of peace, but 'tis not thy heart;
I'm not to be deceived.

MAHOMET.

I would not have thee;
The weak deceive, the powerful command:
To-morrow I shall force thee to submit;
To-day, observe, I would have been they friend.

ZOPIR.

Can we be friends? Can Mahomet and Zopir
E'er be united? Say, what god shall work
A miracle like that?

MAHOMET.

I'll tell thee one,
A powerful God, one that is always heard,
By me he speaks to thee.

ZOPIR.

Who is it? Name him.

MAHOMET.

Interest, thy own dear interest.

ZOPIR.

Sooner heaven
And hell shall be united; interest
May be the god of Mahomet, but mine
Is—justice: what shall join them to eachother?
Where is the cement that must bind our friendship?
Is that the son I slew, or the warm blood
Of Zopir's house which thou has shed?

MAHOMET.

It is
Thy blood, thy son's—for now I will unveil
A secret to thee, known to none but me:
Thou weepst thy children dead; they both are—living.

ZOPIR.

What sayest thou? Living? Unexpected bliss!
My children living?

MAHOMET.

Yes; and both—my prisoners.

ZOPIR.

My children slaves to thee? Impossible!

MAHOMET.

My bounty nourished them.

ZOPIR.

And couldst thou spare
A child of Zopir's?

MAHOMET.

For their father's faults
I will not punish them

ZOPIR.

But tell me, say,
For what are they reserved?

MAHOMET.

Their life or death
Depend on me: speak but the word, and thou
Art master of their fate.

ZOPIR.

O name the price
And thou shalt have it; must I give my blood,
Or must I bear their chains, and be the slave
Of Mahomet?

MAHOMET.

I ask not either of thee:
Lend me thy aid but to subdue the world;
Surrender Mecca to me and give up
Your temple, bid the astonished people read

My sacred Koran; be thou my vassal,
And fall before me, then will I restore
Thy son, perhaps hereafter may reward thee
With honors, and contract a closer tie
With Zopir.

ZOPIR.

Mahomet, thou seest in me
A tender father: after fifteen years
Of cruel absence, to behold my children,
To die in their embraces, were the first
And fairest blessings that my soul could wish for;
But if to thee I must betray my country,
Or sacrifice my children, know, proud tyrant,
The choice is made already—fare thee well.

MAHOMET.

Inexorable dotard! But henceforth
I will be more implacable, more cruel
Even than thyself.

SCENE VI.

MAHOMET, OMAR.

OMAR.

And so indeed thou must be,
Or all is lost: already I have bought
Their secret counsels: Mahomet, to-morrow
The truce expires, and Zopir reassumes
His power; thy life's in danger: half the senate
Are leagued against thee: those who dare not fight
May hire the dark assassin to destroy thee;
May screen their guilt beneath the mask of justice,
And call the murder legal punishment.

MAHOMET.

First they shall feel my vengeance: persecution,
Thou knowest, has ever been my best support.
Zopir must die.

OMAR.

‘Tis well resolved: his fate
Will teach the rest obedience: lose no time.

MAHOMET.

Yet, spite of my resentment, I must hide
The murderous hand that deals the blow. To ‘scape
Suspicion’s watchful eye, and not incense
The multitude.

OMAR.

They are not worth our care.

MAHOMET.

And yet they must be pleased: I want an arm
That will strike boldly.

OMAR.

Seid is the man;
I’ll answer for him.

MAHOMET.

Seid?

OMAR.

Ay: the best,
The fittest instrument to serve our purpose:
As Zopir’s hostage he may find occasion
To speak with him, and soon avenge his master.
Thy other favorites are too wise, too prudent
For such a dangerous enterprise; old age
Takes off the bandage of credulity
From mortal eyes; but the young, simple heart,
The willing slave to its own fond opinions,
And void of guile, will act as we direct it:
Youth is the proper period for delusion.
Seid, thou knowest, is superstitious, bold,
And violent, but easy to be lead;
Like a tame lion, to his keeper’s voice
Obedient.

MAHOMET.

What! The brother of Palmira?

OMAR.

Ay; Seid, the fierce son of thy proud foe,
The incestuous rival of great Mahomet,
His master's rival.

MAHOMET.

I detest him, Omar,
Abhor his very name; my murdered son
Cries out for vengeance on him; but thou knowest
The object of my love, and whence she sprung;
Thou seest I am oppressed on every side;
I would have altars, victims, and a throne;
I would have Zopir's blood, and Seid's too:
I must consult my interest, my revenge,
My honor, and my love, that fatal passion,
Which, spite of my resentment, holds this heart
In shameful chains: I must consult religion,
All powerful motive, and necessity
That throws a veil o'er every crime: away.

End of the Second Act

ACT III. SCENE I.

SEID, PLAMIRA

PALMIRA.

O Seid, keep me not in dread suspense,
What is this secret sacrifice? What blood
Hath heaven demanded?

SEID.

The eternal power
Deigns to accept my service, calls on me
To execute its purposes divine;
To him this heart's devoted, and for him
This arm shall rise in vengeance; I am bound
To Omar and to Mahomet, have sworn
To perish in the glorious cause of heaven:
My next and dearest care shall be Palmira.

PALMIRA.

Why was not I a witness to thy oath?
Had I been with thee, I had been less wretched;
But doubts distract me: Omar talks of treason,
Of blood that soon must flow; the senate's rage,
And Zopir's dark intrigues: the flames of war
Once more are kindled, and the sword is drawn
Heaven only knows when to be sheathed again:
So says our prophet, he who cannot lie,
Cannot deceive us: O I fear for Seid,
Fear all from Zopir.

SEID.

So base and so perfidious? But this morning,
When as a hostage, I appeared before him,
I thought him noble, generous and humane;
Some power invincible in secret worked,
And won me to him; whether the respect
Due to his name, or specious form external
Concealed the blackness of his heart I know not;
Whether thy presence filled my raptured soul
With joy that drove out every painful sense,
And would not let me think of aught but thee:
Whate'er the cause, methought I was most happy
When nearest him: that he should thus seduce
My easy heart makes me detest him more;
And yet how hard it is to look on those
With eyes of hatred whom we wish to love!

PALMIRA.

By every bond hath heaven united us,
And Seid and Palmira are the same:
Were I not bound to thee, and to that faith
Which Mahomet inspires, I too had pleaded
The cause of Zopir; but religion, love,
And nature, all forbid it.

SEID.

Think no more
Of vain remorse, but listen to the voice
Of heaven, the God we serve will be propitious:
Our holy prophet who protects his children
Will bless our faithful love: for thy dear sake
I hazard all. Farewell.

SCENE II.

PALMIRA.

(Alone.

Some dark presage
Of future misery hangs o'er me still:
That love which made my happiness, this day,
So often wished for, is a day of horror:
What is this dreadful oath, this solemn compact
Which Seid talks of? I've a thousand fears
Upon me when I think of Zopir: oft
As I invoke great Mahomet, I feel
A secret dread, and tremble as I worship:
O save me, heaven! Fearful I obey,
And blind I follow" O direct my steps
Aright, and deign to wash my tears away!

SCENE III.

MAHOMET, PALMIRA.

PALMIRA.

Propitious heaven hath heard my prayers; he comes
The prophet comes. O gracious Mahomet, My Seid—

MAHOMET.

What of him? Thou seemest disturbed;
What should Palmira fear when I am with her!

PALMIRA.

Have I not cause when Mahomet himself
Seems touched with grief?

MAHOMET.

Perhaps it is for thee:
Darest thou, imprudent maid, avow a passion
Ere I approved it: is the heart I formed
Turned rebel to its master, to my laws
Unfaithful? O ingratitude!

PALMIRA.

My lord,
Behold me at your feet, and pity me
Didst thou not once propitious smile upon us,
And give thy sanction to our growing love?
Thou knowest the virtuous passion that unites us
Is but a chain that binds us more to thee.

MAHOMET.

The bonds that folly and imprudence knit
Are dangerous! Guilt doth sometimes follow close
The steps of innocence: our hearts deceive us,
And love, with all his store of dear delights,
May cost us tears, and dip his shafts in blood.

PALMIRA.

Nor would I murmur if it flowed for Seid.

MAHOMET.

Are you indeed so fond?

PALMIRA.

E'er since the day
When good Hercides to thy sacred power
Consigned us both, unconquerable instinct,
Still growing with our years, united us

In tender friendship; 'twas the work of heaven
That guides our every action, and o'errules
The fate of mortals; so thy doctrines teach:
God cannot change, nor gracious heaven condemn
That love itself inspired: what once was right
Is always so; canst thou then blame Palmira?

MAHOMET.

I can, and must; nay, thou wilt tremble more
When I reveal the horrid secret to thee.
Attend, rash maid, and let me teach thy soul
What to avoid, and what to follow: listen
To me alone.

PALMIRA.

To thee alone Palmira
Will listen everm the obedient slave
Of Mahomet; this heart can never lose
It's veneration for thy sacred name.

MOHAMET.

That veneration in excess may lead
To foul ingratitude.

PALMIRA.

When I forget
Thy goodness, then may Seid punish me!

MAHOMET.

Seid!

PALMIRA.

O why, my lord, that cruel frown,
And look severe?

MAHOMET.

Be not alarmed; I meant
But to explore the secrets of thy heart
And try if thou were worthy to be saved:
Be confident, and rest on my protection;
On your obedience will depend your fate;

If ye expect a blessing at my hands,
Be careful to deserve it, and whate'er
The will of heaven determines touching Seid,
Be thou his guide, direct him in the paths
Of duty and religion; let him keep
His promise, and be worthy of Palmira.

PALMIRA.

O he will keep it; doubt him not, my lord,
I'll answer for his heart as for my own;
Seid adores thee, worships Mahomet
More than he loves Palmira; thou are all
To him, his friend, his father, and his king:
I'll fly, and urge him to his duty.

SCENE IV.

MAHOMET (ALONE.)

Well:

Spite of myself I must, it seems, be made
A confidant; the simple girl betrayed
Her guilty flame, and innocently plunged
The dagger in my heart: unhappy race!
Father and children, all my foes, all doomed
To make me wretched! But ye soon shall prove
That dreadful is my hatred—and my love.

SCENE V.

MAHOMET, OMAR.

OMAR.

At length the hour is come, to seize Palmira,
To conquer Mecca, and to punish Zopir;
His death alone can prop our feeble cause,
And humble these proud citizens: brave Seid
Can best avenge thee; he has free access
To Zopir: yonder gloomy passage leads
To his abode; there the rebellious chief
His idle vows and flattering incense ours
Before his fancied deities; there Seid,
Full of the law divine by thee inspired,

Shall sacrifice the traitor to the God
Of Mahomet

MAHOMET.

He shall: that youth was born
For crimes of deepest dye: he shall be the first
My useful slave, my instrument, and then
The victim of my rage; it must be so:
My safety, my resentment, and my love,
My holy faith, and the decrees of my fate
Irrevocable, all require it of me:
But thinkest thou, Omar, he hath all the warmth
Of wild fanaticism?

OMAR.

I know he has,
And suits our purpose well; Palmira too,
Will urge him on: religion, love, resentment
Will bind his headstrong youth, and hurry him
To madness.

MAHOMET.

Hast thou bound him by an oath?

OMAR.

O yes; in all the gloomy pomp of rites
Nocturnal, oaths, and altars, we have fixed
His superstitious soul, placed in his hand
The sacred sword, and fired him with the rage
Of fierce enthusiasm—but behold him.

SCENE VI.

MAHOMET, OMAR, SEID.

MAHOMET.

Child
Of heaven, decreed to execute the laws
Of an offended God, now hear by me
His sacred will: thou must avenge his cause.

SEID.

O thou, to whom my soul devoted bends
In humblest adoration, king, and prophet,
Sovereign, acknowledged by the voice of heave,
O'er prostrate nations—I am wholly thine:
But O enlighten my dark mind! O say,
How can weak man avenge his God?

MAHOMET.

Oft-times
Doth he make use of feeble hands like thine
To punish impious mortals, and assert
His power divine.

SEID.

Will he, whose perfect image
Is seen in Mahomet, thus condescend
To honor Seid?

MAHOMET.

Do as he ordains;
That is the highest honor man can boast,
Blindly to execute his great decree:
Be thankful for the choice, and strike the blow:
The angel of destruction shall assist,
The God of armies shall protect thee.

SEID.

Speak;
What tyrant must be slain? What blood must flow?

MAHOMET.

The murderer's blood whom Mahomet abhors,
Who persecutes our faith, and spurns our God,
Who slew my son; the worst of all my foes,
The cruel Zopir.

SEID.

Ha! Must Zopir fall?

MAHOMET.

And dost thou pause? Presumptuous youth! 'tis impeditious
But to deliberate: far from Mahomet
Be all who for themselves shall dare to judge
Audacious: those who reason are not oft
Prone to believe; thy part is to obey.
Have it not told thee what the will of heaven
Determines? If it be decreed that Mecca,
Spite of her crimes and base idolatry,
Shall be the promised temple, the chosen seat
Of empire, where I am appointed king,
And pontiff, knowest thou holy Abram here
Was born, that here his sacred ashes rest?
He who, obedient to the voice of God,
Stifled the cries of nature, and gave up
His darling child: the same all powerful Being
Requires of thee a sacrifice; to thee
He calls for blood; and darest thou hesitate
When God commands? Hence, vile idolater,
Unworthy Mussulman, away, and seek
Another master; go, and love Palmira;
But thou despisest her, and bravest the wrath
Of angry heaven; away, forsake thy lord,
And serve his deadliest foes.

SEID.

It is the voice
Of God that speaks in Mahomet—command,
And I obey.

MAHOMET.

Strike, then, and by the blood
Of Zopir merit life eternal.—Omar,
Attend and watch him well.

SCENE VII.

SIED.

To sacrifice

A poor, defenseless, weak old man!— no matter:
How many victims at the altar fall
As helpless! Yet their blood in grateful streams
Rises to heaven: God hath sworn, and Seid shall perform
His sacred promise—O assist me now,
Illustrious spirits, you who have destroyed
The tyrants of the earth, O join your rage
To mine, o guide this trembling hand, and thou
Exterminating angel who defendest
The cause of Mahomet, inspire this heart
With all thy fierceness!—ha! What do I see?

SCENE VIII.

ZOPIR, SEID.

ZOPIR.

Seid, thou seemest disturbed; unhappy youth!
Why art thou ranked amongst my foes? My heart
Feels for thy woes, and trembles at thy danger;
My house may be a shelter from the storm.
Accept it, thou art welcome, for the life
Is dear to Zopir.

SEID.

Gracious heaven! Wilt thou
Protect me thus? Will Zopir guard his foe?
What do I hear! O duty, conscience, virtue!
O Mahomet, this rives my heart.

ZOPIR.

Perhaps

Thou art surprised to find that I can pity
An enemy, and wish for Seid's welfare;
I am a man like thee; that tie alone
Demands at least a sympathetic tear
For innocence afflicted: gracious gods,
Drive from this earth those base and savage men,
Who shed with joy their fellow-creatures' blood.

SEID.

O glorious sentiments! And can there be
Such virtue in an infidel?

ZOPIR.

Thou knowest

But little of that virtue, thus stand
Astonished at it! O mistaken youth,
In what a maze of errors art thou lost!
Bound by a tyrant's savage laws, thou thinkest
Virtue resides in Mussulmans alone;
Thy master rules thee with a rod of iron,
And shackles thy free soul in shameful bonds;
Zopir thou hatest, alas! Thou knowest him not:
I pardon thee because thou art the slave
Of Mahomet; but how canst thou believe
A God who teaches hatred, and delights
In discord?

SEID.

O I never can obey him!

I know, and feel I cannot hate thee, Zopir.

ZOPIR.

Alas! The more I talk to him, the more
He gains upon me: his ingenuous look,
His youth, his candor, all conspire to charm me;
How could a follower of this vile impostor
This win my heart! Who gave thee birth what art
Thou?

SEID.

A wretched orphan; all I have on earth
Is a kind master, whom I never met
Have disobeyed; howe'er my love for thee
May tempt me to betray him.

ZOPIR.

Knowest thou not
Thy parents then?

SEID.

His camp was the first object
My eyes beheld; his temple is my country;
I know no other; and amidst the crowd
Of yearly tributes to our holy prophet,
None e'er was treated with more tenderness
Than Seid was.

ZOPIR.

I love his gratitude:
Thy kind return for benefits received
Merits my praise:--O why did heaven employ
The hand of Mahomet in such an office?
He was thy father, and Palmira's too;
Why dost thou sigh? Why dost thou tremble thus?
Why turn thee from me? Sure some dreadful thought
Hangs on the mind.

SEID.

It must be so: the times
Are full of terror.

ZOPIR.

If thou feelest remorse
Thy heart is guiltless; murder is abroad,
Let me preserve thy life.

SEID.

O gracious heaven!
And can I have a thought of taking thine?
Palmira! O my oath! O God of vengeance!

ZOPIR.

For the last time remember I entreat thee
To follow me; away thy fate depends
Upon this moment.

SCENE IX.

ZOPIR, SEID, OMAR.

OMAR.

Traitor, Mahomet
Expects thee.

SEID.

O I know not where or what
I am; destruction, ruin and despair
On every side await me: wither now
Shall wretched Seid fly?

OMAR.

To him whom God
Hath chosen, thy injured king, and master.

SEID.

Yes:
And there abjure the dreadful oath I made.

SCENE X.

ZOPIR.

The desperate youth is gone—I know not why,
But my heart beats for his distress; his looks,
His pity, his remorse, his every action
Affect me deeply: I must follow him.

SCENE XI.

ZOPIR, PHANOR.

PHANOR.

This letter, sir, was by an Arab given
In secret to me.

ZOPIR.

From Hercides! Gods,
What do I read? Will heaven in tenderest pity
At length replay me for a life of sorrows?
Hercides begs to see me—he who snatched
From this fond bosom my two helpless children;
They yet are living, so this paper tells me,
Slaves to the tyrant—Seid and Palmira
Are orphans both, and know not whence they sprang,
Perhaps my children—O delusive hope,
Why wilt thou flatter me? It cannot be;
Fain would I credit thee, thou sweet deceiver:
I fly to meet and to embrace my children;
Yes, I will see Hercides: let him come
At midnight to me, to this holy altar
Where I so often have invoked the gods,
At last, perhaps, propitious to my vows:
O ye immortal powers, restore my children,
Give back to virtue's paths two generous hearts
Corrupted by an impious, vile usurper!
If Seid and Palmira are not mine,
If such is my heart fate, I will adopt
The noble pair, and be their fathers still

End of the Third Act.

ACT IV. SCENE I

MAHOMET, OMAR.

OMAR.

My lord, our secret is discovered; Seid
Has told Hercides; we are on the verge
Of ruin, yet I know he will obey.

MAHOMET.

Revealed it, sayest thou?

OMAR.

Yes: Hercides loves him
With tenderness.

MAHOMET.

Indeed! What said he to it?

OMAR.

He stood aghast, and seemed to pity Zopir.

MAHOMET.

He's weak, and therefore not to be entrusted;
Fools ever will be traitors; but no matter,
Let him take heed; a method may be found
To rid us of such dangerous witnesses:
Say, Omar, have my orders been obeyed?

OMAR.

They have, my lord.

MAHOMET.

'Tis well: remember, Omar,
In one important hour or Mahomet
Or Zopir is no more; if Zopir dies,
The credulous people will adore that God
Who thus declared for me, and saved his prophet:
Be this our first great object; that once done,
Take care of Seid; art thou sure the poison
Will do its office?

OMAR.

Fear it not, my lord.

MAHOMET,

O we must work in secret, the dark shades
Of death must hide our purpose—while we shed
Old Zopir's blood, be sure you keep Palmira
In deepest ignorance; she must not know
The secret of her birth: her bliss and mine
Depend upon it; well thou knowest, my triumphs
From error's fruitful source incessant flow:
The ties of blood, and all their boasted power
Are mere delusions: what are nature's bonds?
Nothing but habit, the mere force of custom:
Palmira knows no duty but obedience

To me; I am her lord, her king, her father,
Perhaps may add the name of husband to them:
Her little heart will beat with proud ambition
To captivate her master—but the hour
Approaches that must rid me of my foe,
The hated Zopir: Seid is prepared—
And see, he comes: let us retire.

OMAR.

Observe
His wild demeanor; rage and fierce resentment
Possess his soul.

SCENE II.

MAHOMET, OMAR, retired to one side of the stage;
SEID at the farther end.

SEID.

This dreadful duty then
Must be fulfilled.

MAHOMET. To Omar.

Let us begone, in search
Of other means to make our power secure.
Exit with Omar.

SEID. Alone.

I could not answer: one reproachful word
From Mahomet sufficed: I stood abashed,
But not convinced: if heaven requires it of me,
I must obey; but it will cost me dear.

SCENE III.

SEID, PALMIRA.

SEID.

Palmira, art thou here? What fatal cause
Hath led thee to this seat of horror?

PALMIRA.

Fear,
And love directed me to find thee, Seid,
To ask thee what dread sacrifice thou meanest
To offer here; do heaven and Mahomet
Demand it from thee, must it be? O speak.

SEID.

Palmira, thou commandest my every thought
And every action; all depend on thee:
Direct them as thou wilt, inform my soul,
And guide my hand: be thou my guardian god,
Explain the will of heaven which yet I know not;
Why am I chosen to be its instrument
Of vengeance? are the prophet's dread commands
Irrevocable?

PALMIRA.

Seid, we must yield in silence,
Nor dare to question his decrees; he hears
Our secret sighs, nor are our sorrows hid
From Mahomet's all seeing eye: to doubt
Is profanation of the deity.
His God is God alone; he could not else
Be thus victorious, thus invincible.

SEID.

He must be Seid's God who is Palmira's:
Yet cannot my astonished could conceive
A being, tender, merciful, and kind,
Commanding murder; then again I think
To doubt is guilt: the priest without remorse
Destroys the victim: by the voice of heaven
I know that Zopir was condemned, I know
That Seid was predestined to support
The law divine: so Mahomet ordained,
And I obey him: fired with holy zeal
I go to slay the enemy of God;
And yet methinks another deity
Draws back my arm, bids me spare the victim.
Religion lost her power when I beheld

The wretched Zopir; duty urged in vain
Her cruel plea, exhorting me to murder;
With joy I listened to the plaintive voice
Of soft humanity: but Mahomet—
How awful! How majestic! Who can bear
His wrath? His frowns reproached my shameful weakness;
Religion is a dreadful power: alas!
Palmira, I am lost in doubts and fears,
Discordant passions tear this feeble heart:
I must be impious, must desert my faith,
Or be a murderer: Seid was not formed
For an assassin; but 'tis heaven's command,
And I have promised to avenge its cause:
The tears of grief and rage united flow,
Contending duties raise a storm within,
And thou alone, Palmira, must appease it;
Fix my uncertain heart, and give it peace:
Alas! Without dreadful sacrifice,
The tie that binds us is forever broke;
This only can secure thee.

PALMIRA.

Am I then
The price of blood, of Zopir's blood?

SEID.

So heaven
And Mahomet decree.

PALMIRA.

Love ne'er was meant
To make us cruel, barbarous, and inhuman.

SEID.

To Zopir's murderer, and to him alone,
Palmira must be given.

PALMIRA.

O hard condition!

SEID.

But 'tis the will of Mahomet and heaven.

PALMIRA.

Alas!

SEID.

Thou knowest the dreadful curse that waits
On disobedience—everlasting pain.

PALMIRA.

If thou must be the instrument of vengeance,
If at thy hands the blood which thou hast promised
Shall be required—

SEID.

What's to be done?

PALMIRA.

I tremble
To think of it—yet—

SEID.

It must be so then: thou
Hast fixed his doom; Palmira has consented.

PALMIRA.

Did I consent?

SEID.

Thou didst.

PALMIRA.

Detested thought!
What have I said?

SEID.

By thee the voice of heaven
Speaks its last dread command, and I obey:
Yon fatal altar is the chosen seat
Of Zopir's worship, there he bends the knee
To his false gods; retire, my sweet Palmira.

PALMIRA.

I cannot leave thee.

SEID.

Thou must not be witness
To such as a deed of horror: these, Palmira
Are dreadful moments: fly to yonder grove,
Thou wilt be near the prophet there: away.

PALMIRA.

Zopir must die then?

SEID.

Yes: this fatal hand
Must drag him to the earth, there murder him,
And bathe yon ruined altar in his blood.

PALMIRA.

Die by thy hand! I shudder at the thought:
But see! He comes; just heaven!
(the farther part of the stage opens, and discovers an altar.)

SCENE IV.

SEID, PALMIRA, on the side; ZOPIR, standing near the altar.

ZOPIR.

Ye guardian god's
Of Mecca, threatened by an impious sect
Of vile imposters, now assert your power,
And let your Zopir's prayers, perhaps the last
He e'er shall make, be heard! The feeble bonds
Of our short peace are broken, and fierce war
Vindictive rages; O if ye support
The cause of this usurper—

SEID.

Aside to Palmira.
Hear, Palmira,
How he blasphemes!

ZOPIR.

May death be Zopir's lot!
I wish for naught on earth but to behold,
In my last hour, and to embrace my children,
To die in their loved arms, if yet they live,
If they are here, for something whispers me
That I shall see them still.

PALMIRA.

Aside to Seid.
His children, said he?

ZOPIR.

Or I should die with pleasure at the sight:
Watch over and protect them, ye kind gods,
O let them think like me, but not like me
Be wretched!

SEID.

See! He prays to his false gods:
This is the time to end him.
(draws his sword.

PALMIRA.

Do not, Seid.

SEID.

To serve my God, to please and merit thee,
This sword, devoted to the cause of heaven,
Is drawn, and shall destroy its deadliest foe;
Yon dreary walk invites me to the deed,
Methinks the path is bloody, wandering ghosts
Glide through the shade, and beckon me away.

PALMIRA.

What sayest thou, Seid?

SEID.

Ministers of death,
I follow you; conduct me to the altar,
And guide my trembling hand!

PALMIRA.

It must not be;
'tis horrible: O stop, my Seid.

SEID.

No:
The hour is come, and see! The altar shakes.

PALMIRA.

'Tis heaven's assent, and we must doubt no more.

SEID.

Means it to urge no me on, or to restrain?
Our prophet will reproach me for this weakness:
Palmira!

PALMIRA.

Well!

SEID.

Address thyself to heaven;
I go to do the deed.
(he goes behind the altar where Zopir is retired.)

PALMIRA. (alone.

O dreadful moment!
What do I feel within! My blood runs cold:
And yet if heaven demands the sacrifice,
Am I to judge, to ask, or to complain?
Where is the heart that knows itself, that knows
Its innocence or guilt? We must obey:
But hark! Methought I heard the plaintive voice
Of death; the deed is done—alas! My Seid.

SEID.

(returns looking wildly around.

What voice was that? Where am I? Where is Palmira?
I cannot see Palmira; O she's gone,
She's lost forever.

PALMIRA.

Art thou blind to her
Who only lives for thee?

SEID.

Where are we?

PALMIRA.

Speak,
My Seid, is the dreadful sacrifice
Performed, and thy sad promise fulfilled?

SEID.

What sayest thou?

PALMIRA.

Zopir? Is he dead?

SEID.

Who? Zopir?

PALMIRA.

Good heaven, preserve his sense!—Come, my Seid,
Let us be gone.

SEID.

How will these tottering limbs
Support me!—I recover—it is you,
Palmira?

PALMIRA.

Yes: what has thou done?

SEID.

Obeyed

The voice of heaven, seized with this desperate hand
His silver hairs, and dragged him to the earth:
'twas thy command: O God! Thou couldst not bid me
Commit a crime! Trembling and pale a while
I stood aghast, then drew this sacred sword,
And plunged it in his bosom: what a look
Of tenderness and love the poor old man
Cast on his murderer! A scene so mournful
Ne'er did these eyes behold: my heart retains
And will forever keep the sad idea:
Would I were dead like him!

PALMIRA.

Let us repair
To Mahomet, the prophet will protect us;
Here you're in danger; follow me.

SEID.

I cannot:
Palmira, pity me.

PALMIRA.

What mournful thought
Can thus depress thee?

SEID.

O if thou hadst seen
His tender looks, when from his bleeding side
He drew the fatal weapon forth, and cried:
"Dear Seid, poor unhappy Seid!" Oh,
That voice, those looks, and Zopir at my feet
Weltering in blood, are still before my eyes:
What have we done?

PALMIRA.

I tremble for thy life:
O in the name of all the sacred ties
That bind us, fly, and save thyself.

SEID.

Away,
And leave me: why did thy ill-fated love
Command thy cruel order heaven itself
Had never been obeyed

PALMIRA.

Unkind reproach!
Couldst thou but know what thy Palmira suffers
How wouldst thou pity her!

SEID.

What dreadful object
Is that before us?
(Zopir rises up slowly from behind the altar, and leans upon it.

PALMIRA.

'Tis the murdered Zopir;
Bloody and pale he drags his mangled limbs
Towards us.

SEID.

Wilt thou go to him?

PALMIRA.

I must;
For pity and remorse distract my soul,
And draw me to him.

ZOPIR.

(comes forward leaning on Palmira.)
Gentle maid, support me!
(he sits down).
Ungrateful Seid, thou has slain me; now
Thou weepest; alas! Too late.

SCENE V.

ZOPIR, SEID, PALMIRA, PHANOR.

PHANOR.

O dreadful sight!

What's here?

ZOPIR.

I wish I could have seen my friend
Hercides—Phanor, art thou there?—behold
My murderer.

(points to Seid.)

PHANOR.

O guilt! Accursed deed!
Unhappy Seid, look upon—thy father.

SEID.

Who?

PALMIRA.

He?

SEID.

My father?

ZOPIR.

Gracious heaven!

PHANOR.

Hercides

In his last moments took me to his arms,
And weeping cried: "It there be time, O haste
Prevent a parricide and stop the arm
Of Seid;" in my breast the tyrant lodged
The dreadful secret; now I suffer for it,
And die by Mahomet's detested hand:
Haste, Phanor, fly, inform the hapless Zopir,
That Seid and Palmira are—his children.

SEID.

Palmira!

PALMIRA.

Thou my brother?

ZOPIR.

O ye gods!

O nature, thou hast not deceived me then,
When thou didst please for them! Unhappy Seid,
What could have urged thee to so foul a deed?

SEID.

(kneeling.

My gratitude, my duty, my religion,
All that mankind hold sacred, urged me on
To do the worst of actions:--give me back
That fatal weapon.

PALMIRA.

(laying hold of Seid's arm).

Plunge it in my breast;

I was the cause of my dear father's murder;
And incest is the price of parricide:

SEID.

Strike both: heaven hath not punishment enough
For crimes like ours.

ZOPIR.

(embracing them).

Let me embrace my children:

The gods have poured into my cup of sorrow
A draught of sweetest happiness: I die,
Contented, and resign me to my fate:
But you must live, my children; you, my Seid,
And you, Palmira, by the sacred name
Of nature, by the dying father's blood,
Fast flowing from the wound which thou hast made,
Let me entreat you, live; revenge yourselves
Avenge the injured Zopir; but preserve
Your gracious lives; the great, the important hour
Approaches, that must change the mournful scene:
The offended people ere tomorrow's dawn,
Will rise in arms and punish the usurper;
My blood will add fresh fuel to their rage;
Let us await the issue.

SEID.

O I fly
To sacrifice the monster, to take vengeance
For a dear father's life, or lose my own.

SCENE VI.

ZOPIR, SEID, PALMIRA, OMAR, ATTENDANTS.

OMAR.

Guards, seize the murderer; Mahomet is come
To punish guilt, and execute the laws.

ZOPIR.

What do I hear?

SEID.

Did Mahomet command thee
To punish Seid?

PALMIRA.

Execrable tyrant!
Was not the murder done by thy command?

OMAR.

'Twas not commanded.

SEID.

Well have I deserved
This just reward of my credulity.

OMAR.

Soldiers, obey.

PALMIRA.

O stop, ye shall not—

OMAR.

Madam,
If Seid's life is dear to you, submit
With patience, lest the prophet's anger fall
Like thunder on your head; if you obey,
Great Mahomet is able to protect you:
Guards, lead her to the king.

PALMIRA.

O take me death,
From this sad scene of never ending woe!
(Seid and Palmira are carried off.)

ZOPIR.

(To Phanor).
They're gone, they're lost: O most unhappy father,
The wound which Seid gave is not so deep,
So painful as this parting.

PHANOR.

See, my lord,
The day appears, and the armed multitudes
Press onward to defend the cause of Zopir.

ZOPIR.

Support me, Phanor: yet thy friend may live
To punish this vile hypocrite; at least
In death may serve my dear—my cruel—children.

End of the Fourth Act.

ACT V. SCENE I.

MAHOMET, OMAR, GUARDS AT A DISTANCE.

OMAR.

Zopir's approaching death alarms the people,
We have endeavored to appease their clamors,
And disavowed all knowledge of the deed;
To some, we called it the avenging hand
Of heaven that favors thus its prophet's cause:
With others, we lament his fall, and boast

Thy awful justice that will soon avenge it.
The crowd attentive listen to thy praise,
And all the danger of the storm is o'er;
If aught remains of busy faction's rage
It is but as the tossing of the waves
After the tempest, when the vault of heaven
Is placid and serene.

MAHOMET.

Be it our care
To keep it so: where are my valiant bands?

OMAR

All ready; Osman in the dead of night
By secret paths conducted them to Mecca.

MAHOMET.

'Tis strange that men either deceived
or forced into obedience: Seid knows not
it is a father's blood that he has shed?

OMAR.

Who could inform him of it? He alone
Who knew the secret is no more; Hercides
Is gone, and Seid soon shall follow him;
For know, he has already drunk the poison;
His crime was punished ere it was committed:
Even whilst he dragged his father to the altar
Death lurked within his veins; he cannot live:
Palmira too, is safe, she may be useful:
I've given her hopes of Seid's pardon: that
May win her to our cause; she dare not murmur,
Besides, her heart is flexible and soft,
Formed to obey, to worship Mahomet,
And make him soon the happiest of mankind:
Trembling and pale, behold! They bring her to thee.

MAHOMET.

Collect my forced, Omar and return.

SCENE II.

MAHOMET, PALMIRA, GUARDS.

PALMIRA.

O heaven! Where am I? Gracious God?

MAHOMET.

Palmira,

Be not alarmed; already I have fixed
Thy fate and Mecca's: know, the great event
That fills thy soul with horror is a mystery
'twixt heaven and me that's not to be revealed:
But thou art free, and happy: think no more
Of Seid, nor lament him; leave to me
The fate of men; be thankful for thy own:
Thou knowest that Mahomet hath loved thee long,
That I have ever been a father to thee;
Perhaps a nobler fate and fairer title
May grace thee still, if thou deserve it; therefore
Blot from thy memory the name of Seid,
And let thy soul aspire to greater blessings
That it could dare to hope for; let thy heart
Be my last noblest victory, and join
The conquered world to own me for its master.

PALMIRA.

What joys, what blessings, or what happiness
Can I expect from thee, thou vile impostor?
Thou bloody savage! This alone was wanting
This cruel insult to complete my woes:
Eternal father, look upon this king,
This holy prophet, this all-powerful god
Whom I adored: thou monster, to betray
Two guiltless hearts into the crying sin
Of parricide; thou infamous seducer
Of my unguarded youth, how darest thou think,
Stained as thou art with my dear father's blood,
To gain Palmira's heart? But know, proud tyrant,
Thou are not yet invincible: the veil
Is off that hid thee, and the hand of vengeance
Upraised to scourge thy guilt: dost thou not hear

The maddening multitude already armed
In the defense of injured innocence?
From the death's dark shades my murdered father comes
To lead them on: O that these feeble hands
Could tear thee piece-meal, thee and all thy train!
Would I could see them weltering in their blood;
See Mecca, and Medina, Asia, all
Combined against thee! That the credulous world
Would shake off thy vile chains and thy religion
Become the jest and scorn of all mankind
To after ages! May that hell, whose threats
Thou hast so often denounced 'gainst all who dared
To doubt thy false divinity, now open
Her fiery gates, and be thy just reward!
These are the thanks I owe thee for thy bounties,
And these the prayers I made for Mahomet.

MAHOMET.

I see I am betrayed; but be it so:
Wh'er thou art, learn henceforth to obey you;
For know, my heart—

SCENE III.

MAHOMET, PALMIRA, OMAR, ALI, ATTENDANTS.

OMAR.

The secret is revealed;
Hercides told it in his dying moments:
The people all enraged have forced the prison:
They're up in arms, and bearing on their shoulders
The bloody corpse of their unhappy chief,
Lament his fate, and cry aloud for vengeance:
All is confusion: Seid at their head
Excited them to rebellion, and cries out,
"I am a parricide;" with rage and grief
He seems distracted; with one voice the crowd
United to curse the prophet and his God:
Even those who promised to admit our forces
Within the walls of Mecca, have conspired
With them to raise their desperate arms against thee;
And naught is heard but cries of death and vengeance.

PALMIRA.

Just heaven pursue him, and defend the cause
Of innocence!

MAHOMET. (to Omar.)

Well, what have we to fear?

OMAR.

Omar, my lord, with your few faithful friends,
Despising danger, are prepared to brave
The furious storm, and perish at your feet.

MAHOMET.

Alone I will defend you all; come near:
Behold and say I act like Mahomet.

SCENE IV.

**MAHOMET, OMAR, and his party one side, SEID and the People on the other.
PALMIRA in the middle.**

SEID.

Avenge my father, seize the traitor.

MAHOMET.

People,
Born to obey me, listen to your master.

SEID.

Hear not the monster; follow me:
(he comes forward a little, and then staggers.)
O heaven!
What sudden darkness spread o'er my dim eyes?
Now strike, my friends—O I am dying.

MAHOMET.

Ha!
Then all is well.

PALMIRA.

My brother, canst thou shed
No blood but Zopir's?

SEID.

Yes: come on—I cannot;
Some god unnerves me.
(he faints).

MAHOMET.

Hence let every foe
Of Mahomet be taught to fear and tremble:
Know, ye proud infidels, this hand alone
Hath power to crush you all, to me the God
Of nature delegates his sovereign power:
Acknowledge then his prophet, and his laws,
'Twixt Mahomet and Seid let that God
decide the contest, which of us forever
is guilty, now, this moment let him perish!

PALMIRA.

My brother—Seid—can this monster boast
Such power? The people stand astonished at him,
And tremble at his voice; and wilt thou yield
To Mahomet?

SEID.

(supported by his attendant.).
Alas! The hand of heaven
Is on me, and the involuntary crime
Is too severely punished: O Palmira,
In vain was Seid virtuous: O if heaven
Chastises this our errors, what must crimes
Like think expect, detested Mahomet?
What cause hast thou to tremble—O I die;
Receive me, gracious heaven, and spare Palmira.
(dies).

PALMIRA.

'Tis not, ye people, 'tis not angry heaven
Pursues my Seid. No: he's poisoned—

MAHOMET.

(interrupting her, and addressing himself to the people.)

Learn

From Seid's fate, ye unbelievers, how
To reverence Mahomet whom heaven defends;
And this pale corpse hath witnessed their obedience;
The sword of fate hangs o'er your heads, beware
It fall not on you: thus will I reward
All impious rebels, all vile infidels,
And punish every word and thought against me.
If I withhold my rage, and let you live,
Remember, traitors, that you owe your beings
To my indulgence; hasten to the temple,
Prostrate yourselves before the throne of grace,
And deprecate the wrath of Mahomet.

(the people retire.)

PALMIRA.

O stay, and hear me, people—the barbarian
Poisoned my brother—monster, raised by crimes
To empire thus, and deified by guilt,
Thou murderer of Palmira's hapless race,
Complete thy work, and take my wretched life:
O my dear brother, let me follow thee!

(she seizes her brother's sword and stabs herself.)

MAHOMET.

Seize, and prevent her—

PALMIRA.

'Tis too late; I die: and dying hope a God more just than thine
has yet in store a state of happiness
for injured innocence: let Mahomet
reign here in peace: this world was made for tyrants.

(dies).

MAHOMET.

She's gone; she's lost; the only dear reward
I wished to keep of all my crimes: in vain
I fought and conquered; Mahomet is wretched
Without Palmira: Conscience, now I feel thee,
And feel that thou canst rive the guilty heart.
O thou eternal God, whom I have wronged
Braved and blasphemed; O thou whom yet I fear,
Behold me self-condemned, behold me wretched,
Even whilst the world adores me: vain was all
My boasted power: I have deceived mankind;
But how shall I impose on my own heart?
A murdered father, and two guiltless children
Must be avenged: come, ye unhappy victims,
And end me quickly!—Omar, we must strive
To hide this shameful weakness, save my glory,
And let me reign o'er a deluded world:
For Mahomet depends on fraud alone,
And to be worshipped never must be known.

End of the Fifth and Last Act.

A letter from M. de Voltaire to Pope Benedict XIV.

Most blessed Father—

Your holiness will pardon the liberty taken by one of the lowest of the faithful, though a zealous admirer of virtue, of submitting to the head of the true religion this performance, written in opposition to the founder of a false and barbarous sect. To whom could I with more propriety inscribe a satire on the cruelty and errors of a false prophet, than to the vicar and representative of a God of truth and mercy? Your holiness will therefore give me leave to lay at your feet both the piece and the author of it, and humbly to request your protection of the one, and your benediction upon the other; in hopes of which, with the profoundest reverence, I kiss your sacred feet.

Paris, August 17, 1745

Voltaire

The answer of Pope Benedict XIV. To m. de Voltaire.

Benedictus P. P. dilecto filio salutem & Apostolicam Benedictionem.

This day sevensnight I was favored with your excellent tragedy of Mahomet, which I have read with great pleasure: Cardinal Passionei has likewise presented me with your fine poem of Fontenoy. Signor Leprotti this day repeated to me your distich made on my retreat. Yesterday morning Cardinal Valenti gave me your letter of the 17th of August. Many are the obligation which you have conferred on me, for which I am greatly indebted to you, for all and every one of them; and I assure you that I have the highest esteem for your merit, which is so universally acknowledged.

The distich as been published at Rome, and objected to by one of the literati, who, in a public conversation, affirmed that there was a mistake in it with regard to the word hic, which is made short, whereas it ought to be always long. To which I replied, that it maybe either long or short; Virgil having made it short in this verse,

Solus hic inflexit sensus, animumque labantem.

And long in another,

Hic finis Priami fatorum, hic exitus illum.

The answer I think was pretty full and convincing, considering that I have not looked into Virgil these fifty years. The cause, however, is properly yours; to your honor and sincerity, therefore, of which I have the highest opinion, I shall leave it to be defended against your opposers and mine, and here give you my apostolical benediction. Datum Romae apud sanctam Mariam majorem die 19 Sept. Pontificatus nostril anno sexto.

A letter of thanks from m. de Voltaire to the Pope

The features of your excellency are not better expressed on the medal you were so kind as to send me, than are the features of your mind in the letter which you honored me with: permit me to lay at your feet my sincerest acknowledgments: in points of literature, as well as in matters of more importance, your infallibility is not to be disputed: your excellency is much better versed in the Latin tongue than the Frenchman whom you condescended to correct: I am indeed astonished how you could so readily appeal to Virgil: the popes were always ranked amongst the most learned sovereigns, but amongst them I believe there never was one in whom so much learning and taste united.

Agnosco rerum dominos, gentemque togatam.

If the Frenchman who found fault with the hic had known as much of Virgil as your excellency, he might have recollected a verse where hic is both long and short.

Hic vir hic est tibi quem promittis soepius audis.

I cannot help considerin this verse as a happy presage of the favors conferred on me by your excellency. Thus might Rome cry out when Benedict XIV. was raised to the papacy: with the utmost respect and gratitude I kiss your sacred feet.

Voltaire