

WHAT VOLTAIRE DIDN'T SAY...

**"I disapprove of what you say,
but I will defend to the death your right to say it"**

A column in the *Daily Telegraph* of February 2006 on freedom of speech referred to 'Voltaire's famous maxim – "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." '

In *De l'esprit* ['On the Mind'], published in 1758, the French philosopher Helvétius put forward the view that human motivation derives from sensation: a course of action is chosen because of the pleasure or pain which will result. The book was seen by many as an attack on religion and morality, and was condemned by the French parliament to be publicly burned. Voltaire is supposed to have supported Helvétius with these words. In fact, they are a later summary of Voltaire's attitude to the affair, as given in S. G. Tallentyre's *The Friends of Voltaire* (1907). What Tallentyre wrote was:

What the book could never have done for itself, or for its author, persecution did for them both. 'On the Mind' became not the success of a season, but one of the most famous books of the century. The men who had hated it, and had not particularly loved Helvétius, flocked round him now. Voltaire forgave him all injuries, intentional or unintentional. 'What a fuss about an omelette!' he had exclaimed when he heard of the burning. How abominably unjust to persecute a man for such an airy trifle as that! 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,' was his attitude now.

(The comment 'What a fuss about an omelette!' had been recorded earlier, in James Parton's 1881 *Life of Voltaire*.)

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Misquotations

by Elizabeth Knowles

Misquotations are often more than mistakes, and very much more interesting. From deliberate reworkings to unconscious changes, they show quotations on the move within the language, and can illuminate how we see famous people and notable events.

The term itself can cover a range of quoted material: wrongly remembered sayings, where the modified version has established its own identity, summaries (sometimes traceable to a particular coinage) of original thoughts, and apocryphal or unverifiable comments attributed to a particular person.

Some of the best established function as a kind of shorthand. **Beam me up, Scotty** recalls the characteristic patterns of *Star Trek* even if the nearest thing to it said by Captain Kirk was 'Beam us up, Mr Scott.' The conflation of two lines from *Casablanca* into **Play it again, Sam** evokes the romance and nostalgia of the film. **If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution** sums up a more detailed rejection of a comrade's puritanical views by the lively nineteenth-century revolutionary Emma Goldman.

Alterations and misattributions can have a positive effect in reinforcing a personal image. A written source may give 'the opposition of events' as Harold Macmillan's view of the greatest difficulty facing a prime minister, but **Events, dear boy. Events** catches the tone of his political persona. The American bank robber Willie Sutton never actually said **I rob banks because that's where the money is**, but was happy enough for the attribution to contribute to an insouciant image in the public mind. Conversely, a misquotation which is wholly or partly fictional can be very damaging to the person to whom it is attributed. The belief that she said **Let them eat cake** presents Marie Antoinette as a figure of frivolous and uncaring ignorance. The hostile cartoon caption **What are you going to do about it?** in connection with the nineteenth-century Tammany leader 'Boss' Tweed helped crystallize a public view of Tammany's arrogant confidence in corruption which contributed to Tweed's downfall.

Misquotations often flourish because they represent – more vividly and pithily than in the original wording – a view or understanding of a particular person or event. The historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, in *Reformation* (2003), has described the words **Here I stand; I can do no other** as 'the most memorable thing Luther never said' (he notes that they were composed by Luther's contemporary, and editor of his collected works, Georg Römer, to summarize the speech made by Luther at Worms in 1521). And the statement **I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it** summarizes exactly for many of us, as it did for the critic S. G. Tallentyre, the attitude of Voltaire.