



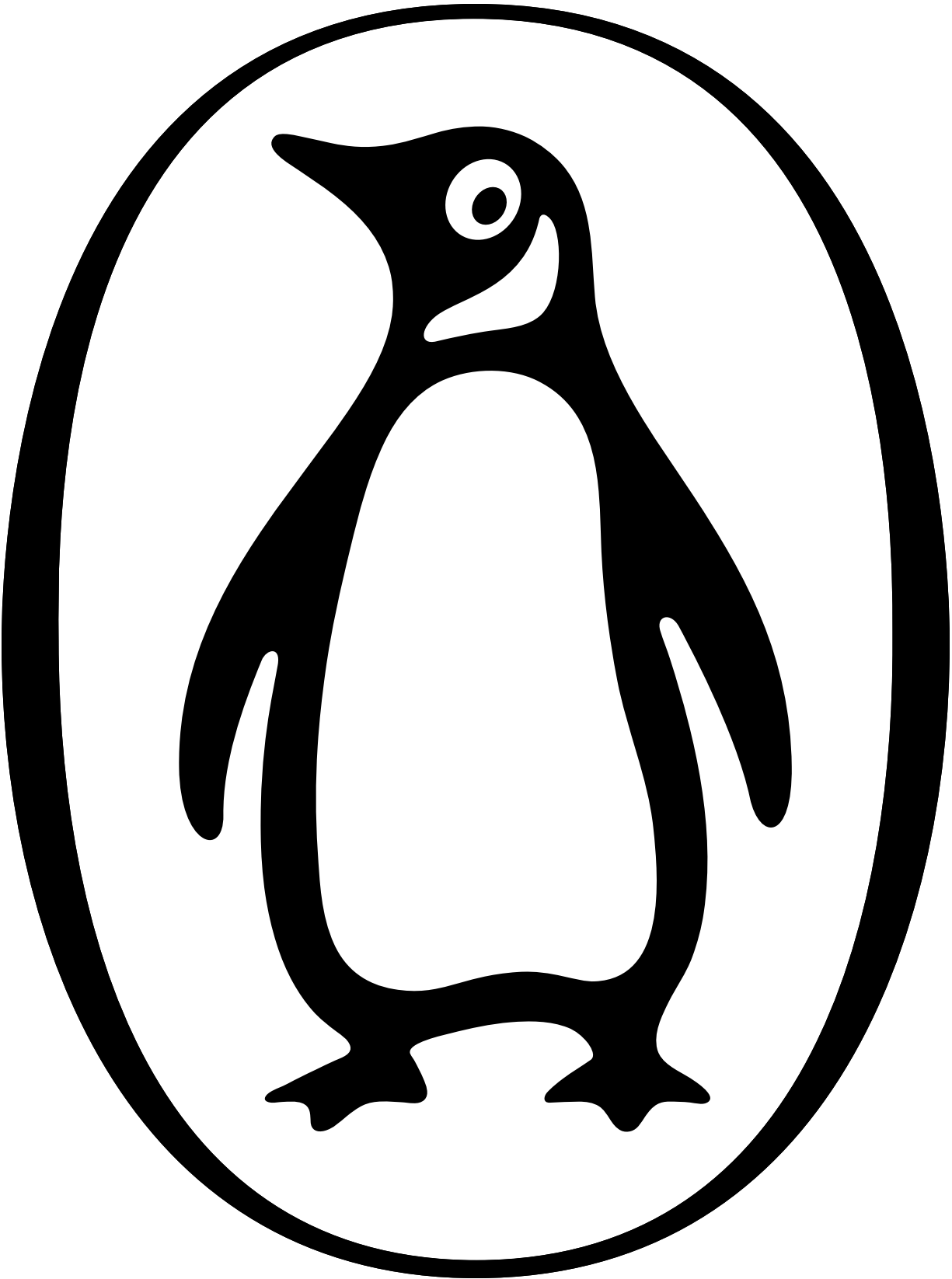
P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

DENIS DIDEROT

Jacques the Fatalist





JACQUES THE FATALIST

DENIS DIDEROT was born at Langres in eastern France in 1713, the son of a master-cutler. He was originally destined for the Church, but rebelled and persuaded his father to allow him to complete his education in Paris. For most of his twenties and early thirties, Diderot remained nominally a law student, but in fact led a rather precarious and Bohemian existence. He read extensively during this period, and this is reflected in his early works such as the *Pensées philosophiques* (1746) and the *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749) which show a keen interest in contemporary philosophical issues. During the early 1740s Diderot met three contemporaries of great future significance for himself and for the age: d'Alembert, Condillac and J.-J. Rousseau. In 1747 Diderot embarked on the most important task of his life, the editorship of the *Encyclopédie*, whose publication he oversaw until its completion in 1773. Diderot's boldest philosophical and scientific speculations are brilliantly summarized in a trilogy of dialogues collectively known as *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* (1769). With *Le Neveu de Rameau*, begun in 1761, and *Jacques le Fataliste*, written between approximately 1755 and 1784, Diderot produced his greatest works of prose fiction, works which are highly original and daring, both in their form and in their content. Towards the end of his life, by now one of the most famous French writers, Diderot visited Saint Petersburg at the invitation of one of his most powerful admirers, the empress Catherine the Great, to whom he had promised his extensive library in return for her financial assistance. He died in 1784.

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DENIS DIDEROT



JACQUES THE FATALIST
AND HIS MASTER



Translated by Michael Henry

with an Introduction and Notes
by Martin Hall

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INTRODUCTION



ABOUT DIDEROT

Denis Diderot was born in Langres in 1713, leaving the town in 1728 for Paris, where he lived until his death in 1784. What little evidence there is of Diderot's life and activities during his first dozen years in the capital suggests that he led the Bohemian life of an aspiring man of letters, often forced to resort to literary hack-work, private coaching and translation to make ends meet. His family helped him out for some years until Diderot quarrelled with his father in 1743 over his marriage plans. In spite of all these difficulties, these were the years in which Diderot developed his literary and intellectual talents and became keenly interested in contemporary developments in literature, philosophy and science.

In the late 1740s Diderot was approached by a consortium of Parisian publishers and asked to take over joint editorial control with the eminent mathematician d'Alembert of a project to translate and furnish suitable additions to Chamber's *Cyclopaedia*. In October 1747 Diderot signed a contract with the publishers, and so embarked on the single most important enterprise of his life. What finally emerged over the next twenty-odd years was one of the greatest and most representative monuments of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. This work – the first modern encyclopaedia – ran to seventeen folio volumes of text and eleven of plates. After d'Alembert withdrew in 1758, Diderot was left in sole editorial control. In addition to the normal tasks of an editor he also took on a major role as researcher and contributor to the *Encyclopédie*. His articles were among the best and most original and covered topics ranging from the technological to the metaphysical.

From its early days the *Encyclopédie* was at the centre of political and ideological conflict. Far from being allowed to carry on his work in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity, Diderot had to cope with the hostility of the *parlements*, the greater part of the Catholic Church, an important party at Court and various other influential groups as well as with the threat of prosecution and censorship.

His labours and difficulties were, however, justified by the importance of what was achieved. The *Encyclopédie* brought together the leading intellectual and scientific lights of the age. More than any other eighteenth-century work it defined the consensus of liberal and progressive ideas and values which was the Enlightenment. The *Encyclopédie* made Diderot a figure of European reputation and the acknowledged leader of the militant younger group of philosophes. The *Encyclopédie* also gave Diderot financial security and a large degree of independence besides stimulating the development of an omnivorous intelligence which made him the greatest polymath among the *philosophes*.

Nevertheless, the *Encyclopédie* never constituted Diderot's exclusive preoccupation, nor does it contain his most interesting contribution to the literature and thought of the period. This lies in writings that remained largely unknown to the general public during his lifetime, and which were written both during and after the publication of the *Encyclopédie*. Thus, Diderot's masterpiece of scientific speculation, *D'Alembert's Dream*, was unknown until 1831. Most of his prose fiction – novels, dialogues and short stories – remained unpublished until after his death, and included such major works as *Rameau's Nephew*, *The Nun* and *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*. One reason why Diderot published so little during his lifetime was that it was often dangerous for writers to do so under a regime which exercised a fierce, if inefficient, censorship. Diderot learnt this at first hand when, in 1749, he published anonymously a brilliant exposition of atheist and materialist ideas in a work entitled *Letter Concerning the Blind*. Diderot's authorship was soon known to the authorities, and he was arrested and imprisoned for three months. There are, however, other reasons which may explain why Diderot was reluctant to publish many of his works. For example, the content of some of his work might have offended friends, as was the case with *D'Alembert's Dream*, which Diderot suppressed at the request of D'Alembert and his mistress, who felt they had been represented in an offensive manner. Another reason may be Diderot's preoccupation with the usefulness of the intellectual to society. While this never came into direct conflict with his commitment to stating the truth, it is fair to say that Diderot sometimes felt that the public good would not be best served by his broadcasting his more heterodox flights of fancy. Finally – and here *Jacques*

the Fatalist might be taken as an example – it seems likely that Diderot believed his best and most original work would not be properly understood and appreciated in his own time and consciously accepted that, for him, true recognition had to be posthumous.

Jacques the Fatalist was conceived and written over a long period between the late 1760s and 1778 – a time of intense creative activity for Diderot after the depression accompanying the conclusion of work on the *Encyclopédie*. It was partially published in the *Correspondance littéraire* between 1778 and 1780. An early and enthusiastic reader was Goethe, but, for the most part, the reception of the work tended to confirm Diderot's suspicions about the likely reaction to his most original work. Even after the novel became more widely available after its publication in 1796, reactions tended to vary from incomprehension to patronizing indifference. At best it was deemed an amusing pot-pourri, at worst obscene and unreadable. It is only recently, in the last few decades, that both specialist and non-specialist readers have begun to catch up with Diderot and discover the strange originality of *Jacques the Fatalist*.

FICTION AND REALITY

Jacques the Fatalist is a novel which refers insistently to other novels, to story-telling and fiction. The reader soon becomes aware that a powerful attack is being mounted against a particular sort of novel, and will have little difficulty in recognizing what kind of fiction is under fire – undemanding, escapist literature, full of implausible plotting and stereotyped characterization, relying heavily on a strong love-interest. In its refusal of the romanticizing exaggeration of conventional fiction, *Jacques* belongs to a long and important tradition in the European novel, a tradition which can be defined by its rejection of the tawdry resources of ‘mere’ fiction and its proclamation of its own adherence to the superior claims of truth. *Jacques* repeatedly asserts not only that it is not an invented story, but also that it is a *true story* referring to the *real world*.

Readers who come to *Jacques* anticipating a ‘true story’ might find some initial reassurance in the Narrator’s repeated assurances of fidelity to the truth. This might even be reinforced by the presence in the text of some of the indicators readers have come to expect as evidence of the authenticity of the story they are being told. They are, for instance, given dates, places and proper names belonging to people who really existed. They are given explanations about the provenance of the story and its transmission via the Narrator to themselves. However, it soon becomes clear that the mere presence of these indicators does not mean that they work very successfully. A simple example is the matter of historical dates. One might imagine, on a first reading, that the presence of references to major events such as battles and great natural disasters secured the novel in a firm chronological framework. Closer examination reveals that, far from offering the reader the security of a stable historical context, dates are delusory. Jacques was wounded in the knee in 1745 at the battle of Fontenoy, and refers to himself as having limped for twenty years, thus locating the time in which he is telling the story of his loves somewhere in the mid-sixties. What then are we to make of the reference to Mandrin’s gang in the final pages of the novel? Mandrin himself died in 1755. The dates appear to be contradictory. A similar situation arises when the reader pauses to consider the provenance of Jacques’ life story. There seems to be a manuscript

somewhere which is the basis of the Narrator's claim to be telling a true story. At the same time, there appears to be direct contact between Jacques and the Narrator ('Jacques told me...'). In the final pages, however, this apparatus is thrown into doubt by the sudden intervention of an 'Editor' who inevitably reduces the Narrator from being a powerful authenticatory voice to a mere fictional device.

Once the readers' suspicions are alerted they will notice more and more instances in which the seemingly secure structures of the narrative start to look shaky. Contradictions and logical impossibilities begin to crop up with alarming frequency. A widow is mourned by her husband. Jacques takes up a point made by the Narrator. A character's death is fixed by two incompatible time sequences.

As a true story *Jacques* doesn't work, it doesn't fit together. Parts of the novel may maintain an internal coherence, but even these tend to look like exercises in style and rhetoric when replaced in their context. The story of Madame de La Pommeraye and the Marquis des Arcis is the most important instance of this. Taken by itself (and it has frequently been published as an autonomous novella), the story is convincing and moving. Replaced in the inn, where it is told to Jacques and his master by the innkeeper's wife, its implausibility is easily demonstrated by two questions: Who is this innkeeper's wife who speaks so eloquently? How has she learnt the story? What might, in one perspective, seem like a true story, becomes, in another, a fictional construct.

It gradually becomes apparent that what could initially have seemed mistakes – contradiction, incoherence, incompatibility – are 'deliberate mistakes', part of a strategy of disruption and subversion that seems designed to deny the reader any easy retreat into fictional illusion. *Jacques* not only points the finger of scorn at the inadequacies and artificialities of conventional fiction, but also points to its own fictional nature. When, for the umpteenth time, the Narrator asks us what is to prevent him from giving us whatever fictional continuation he chooses, we may well cease to take this as part of a rhetorical protestation of truthfulness, take the question literally and answer 'nothing'. The reference to truth is finally self-defeating. We cannot read *Jacques* straightforwardly as a chronicle of events, but must call into question our own expectations in reading fiction.

STORIES AND STORY-TELLING

‘When someone tells a tale, to a listener, and assuming that the tale goes on for some length of time, it’s unusual for the teller not to be interrupted by his listener.’ These lines, which open one of Diderot’s short-stories, might serve as the epigraph to *Jacques*, a novel that is remarkable not merely by the quantity of tales and anecdotes that it contains but also by its dramatization of the relationship between the teller of a story and the listener or reader.

As we read *Jacques*, we are constantly made aware that the tales we are reading are being told by one person to another. Nor is this a point which we can simply take note of and then ignore: the circumstances surrounding the telling of a story almost always serve as an intrusive reminder. The innkeeper’s wife, for example, finds her attempts to begin her story repeatedly thwarted by the interruptions of her husband, customers and staff. Jacques’ efforts to continue the story of his loves are frustrated by the distressing tendency of his horse to bolt. At another point, he is physically prevented from continuing by a sore throat.

Stories are not received in silence, but interrupted, commented upon, interpreted and judged. The Narrator wages a running battle with the Reader over the stories he relates, provoking, teasing and bullying him to the point where the convention of authorial address to the reader ceases to be a mere convention and becomes the means to explore the complex dynamics of the story-telling relationship.

This exploration is most fully and subtly worked out in the relationship of Jacques and his master. The underlying symbiosis of the couple is expressed in the one’s need to talk and the other’s need to listen. At the same time, the latent antagonism of master and servant also finds expression in story-telling. Jacques is irritated at his master’s interruptions and exasperated at his demands to side-track to other issues. His master in turn seeks to make of his servant an almost mechanical furnisher of tales for his satisfaction. Jacques frets and worries over the difficulties and ambiguities of story-telling, while his master, with characteristic complacency, simply tells

Jacques that the important thing is that one should tell stories and the other listen.

The dramatization of the story-telling relationship fulfils another important function: it highlights the quest for significance or meaning which the stories are intended to provoke. For instance, Jacques and his master are fascinated by the story that the innkeeper's wife tells them. They argue about the psychological coherence of the characters and how to interpret their behaviour; they argue about the morality of this behaviour and what judgement to pass on it. The Narrator then intrudes to provoke the Reader into discussion. The story has generated what might become an endless series of debates and discussions. The world of *Jacques* is not a fixed and settled one in which incidents and behaviour are easily assessed and interpreted. On the contrary, it is a world of dizzying variety and unpredictability, one which beckons its readers to embark on their own search for meaning rather than offering them ready-made answers.

THEMATIC ORGANIZATION

Is there any ordering principle to be discerned in the welter of anecdotes that make up such a large part of the novel? Certainly, readers may initially be inclined to think that they are being offered a representation of the sprawling untidiness and inconclusiveness of life itself. However, it is fair to say that, besides the major themes of master-servant relations and fatalism dealt with below, there are four other important thematic areas which can be discerned emerging from the confusion.

1. Mutability and Change

Among the great writers of the Enlightenment Diderot is distinctive by the importance which time and transformation play in his vision of the world, a world whose working can only be understood in terms of its perpetual change. This vision is evoked in one of the rare passages of high-flown rhetoric in *Jacques*, an invocation to the folly of two lovers swearing eternal constancy in a world whose every feature is witness of change. This theme of mutability emerges insistently in the motif of sexual inconstancy and infidelity and is most fully developed in the story of Madame de La Pommeraye and the Marquis des Arcis. This story also illustrates the closely related motif of jealousy, the counterpart of inconstancy, which might also be defined as the refusal of the harsh rule of universal change.

2. Rivalry

The second theme of rivalry, like that of jealousy, is frequently illustrated in the context of sexual relations but throughout *Jacques* there recurs a particularly bizarre figure of rivalry in the form of the compulsive duellists. The rivalry motif involves a succession of couples hardly distinguishable the one from the next and offers the reader a haunting image of inexplicability – two men closely attached to one another, unable to live apart and at the same time impelled to fight bloody and dangerous duels.