**Background for *Ridicule***

**Political Climate: An age of revolutions**

This was an age of political upheaval, with the American Revolution sparking change in other nations tired of monarchy and ready to denounce the “Divine Right of Kings.” However, to many others, the turn toward democracy represented a decline toward mob rule. Even in America these two opposing world views shaped our nation’s political foundations.

The film opens in **1783**, 6 years before the **French Revolution** that will sweep away the decadent court of Marie Antoinette and her king, Louis XVI. It is also the year that the **American Revolution** is officially concluded (the British and US sign the Treaty of Paris). The film ends (brief scene) in **1794**, 5 years after the French Revolution begins.

**Philosophical Climate: Enlightenment**

Overview from History.com: “European politics, philosophy, science and communications were radically reoriented during the course of the “long 18th century” (1685-1815) as part of a movement referred to by its participants as the Age of Reason, or simply the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, in France and throughout Europe questioned traditional authority and embraced the notion that humanity could be improved through rational change.

The Enlightenment produced numerous books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws, wars and revolutions. The American and French Revolutions were directly inspired by Enlightenment ideals and respectively marked the peak of its influence and the beginning of its decline. The Enlightenment ultimately gave way to 19th-century Romanticism. [. . . .] There was no single, unified Enlightenment. Instead, it is possible to speak of the French Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment and the English, German, Swiss or American Enlightenment. Individual Enlightenment thinkers often had very different approaches. Locke differed from Hume, **Rousseau** from **Voltaire**, [Thomas Jefferson](http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/thomas-jefferson) from Frederick the Great. Their differences and disagreements, though, emerged out of the common Enlightenment themes of rational questioning and belief in progress through dialogue.” <http://www.history.com/topics/enlightenment>

**Prominent historical people** featured in or alluded to in the film:

**Jean Jacques Rousseau** In the film, the Marquis de Bellgarde, a doctor and scientist, as well as a courtier, says he raised his daughter to be a free spirit because he was influenced by the ideas of Rousseau, whose ideas are summarized below.

Excerpt from [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](http://plato.stanford.edu/index.html)) Overview: “Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains an important figure in the history of philosophy, both because of his contributions to political philosophy and moral psychology and because of his influence on later thinkers. Rousseau's own view of philosophy and philosophers was firmly negative, seeing philosophers as the post-hoc rationalizers of self-interest, as apologists for various forms of tyranny, and as playing a role in the alienation of the modern individual from humanity's natural impulse to compassion.

The concern that dominates Rousseau's work is to find a way of preserving human freedom in a world where human beings are increasingly dependent on one another for the satisfaction of their needs. [. . . .] In the modern world, human beings come to derive their very sense of self from the opinion of others, a fact which Rousseau sees as corrosive of freedom and destructive of individual authenticity.

In his mature work, he principally explores two routes to achieving and protecting freedom: the first is a political one aimed at constructing political institutions that allow for the co-existence of free and equal citizens in a community where they themselves are sovereign; the second is a project for child development and education that fosters autonomy and avoids the development of the most destructive forms of self-interest.” [. . . .]

Rousseau’s ideas on education: “Rousseau's ideas about education are mainly expounded in Emile. In that work, he advances the idea of “negative education”, which is a form of “child-centered” education. His essential idea is that education should be carried out, so far as possible, in harmony with the development of the child's natural capacities by a process of apparently autonomous discovery. [. . . .] Rousseau depends here on his thesis of natural goodness, which he asserts at the beginning of the book, and his educational scheme involves the protection and development of the child's natural goodness through various stages, along with the isolation of the child from the domineering wills of others.”

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**Abbé de l'Épée**: A son of privilege in pre-revolutionary France (1712-1789), he opened the first free school for the Deaf in 1760. He didn’t invent sign language but improved it, and his system was built upon later by others. His school was hugely influential because it was open to the public and trained teachers to take its methods to other countries. One of his students brought the system to the US, co-founding Gallaudet University with American deaf educator Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. For more: <http://www.gallaudet.edu/>

**Voltaire**: (1694 -1778) One of the most important thinkers and writers of the French Enlightenment, he is most famous now as the writer of *Candide*, a satirical novel. He also wrote plays, poetry, treatises, and history books. He was famous as a wit, but continually in trouble for his iconoclastic ideas on politics, science, and religion. He was driven into exile, imprisoned in the Bastille, and refused a Christian burial. He is a hero to those who speak for reason and tolerance against the forces of dogma and bigotry.