

# André Chénier: Poet, Prodigy, Political Martyr

André Chénier could not have imagined, when his life was cut cruelly short at the age of 31, that he would one day be lauded as one of the greatest poets of the eighteenth century. After all, until the moment he was guillotined during the French Revolution, he had only published two poems. But 222 years after his death, Chénier is far more famous in death than in life: lauded as a poet-hero and political martyr of near mythological status, and providing inspiration for numerous plays, works of art, poems, and especially the opera *Andrea Chénier*.

Born in 1762 in Constantinople, where his father was French consul, Chénier became an ardent admirer of the language and civilization of ancient Greece while still in his teens. While studying at the Collège de Navarre in Paris, he excelled in the translation of verses from the classics. And a 1784 visit to Rome, Naples, and Pompeii cemented his ambitions to write in the neoclassical style of the time. Seeing no real reason to forge a new poetic genre, Chénier celebrated the old: “De nouvelles pensées, faisons des vers antiques” (“From new thoughts, let us make antique verses”).

Still, the world was not yet enchanted with the 25-year-old’s verses, and having failed to achieve publishing success, he took a post in 1787 as the secretary to the French consul in London. While there, he studied English poets like John Milton and James Thomson, but ultimately the excitement of political unrest in France proved irresistible. He returned in 1790 and became a member of the Society of ‘89 (the moderate wing of the revolutionary party), launching a secondary career as a political journalist.

Abandoning his gentle idylls for satirical poetry and essay, he attacked the extreme factions on both sides. His essay “Avis au peuple français” took the mobs to task. “This is the spirit of this great and frightening race of shameless pamphleteers,” he railed, “who under glitzy titles and convulsive demonstrations of love for the people and for the country, seek to attract public confidence; people for whom honesty is a painful yoke.”

He became a frequent contributor to the newspaper *Journal de Paris*, which featured his poems of the iambic genre—a form of ancient Greek poetry that often featured coarse language and insults. The insurrection of 1792 scattered the pieces of Chénier’s life, and he only escaped the September Massacres by fleeing Paris to the safety of Normandy. Disillusioned, he withdrew from public life for two years, but, too fascinated by political events, he couldn’t refrain from returning to Paris. It would prove to be a fatal decision.

On March 4, 1794, he was arrested by mistake at the home of friends in Passy when the police were looking for someone else, and taken to St. Lazare Prison, where he would spend the last four



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months of his life. There Chénier met the poet Jean-Antoine Roucher, who became his confidant; Louise de Laval-Montmorency, abbess of Montmartre (who has a role in the opera *Andrea Chénier*); and Aimée de Coigny, Duchess of Fleury.

The 23-year-old duchess would become the smitten Chénier’s last muse, inspiring his best verses, written during his imprisonment and smuggled out of the prison in a basket of soiled linen. Those poems contributed immensely to the legend—unfortunately untrue—of Chénier and de Coigny’s tragic love affair.

When Robespierre recalled Chénier’s incendiary poetry in *Journal de Paris*, Chénier was taken before the Revolutionary Tribunal and sentenced to death. A poet until the end, as he stepped onto the

cart with his friend Roucher, they both started reciting verses on their way to the guillotine. Chénier was executed on July 25, ironically only three days before the Reign of Terror would end with Robespierre’s own death.

During Chénier’s lifetime only two of his poems—“Jeu de paume” (1791) and “Hymne sur les Suisses” (1792)—had been published. He was finally discovered in 1819 when poet-novelist Henri de Latouche edited Chénier’s complete poems, and immediately became an idol of the Romantics, such as Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset, who saw in him a forerunner of their movement. Not only was Chénier’s literary influence felt on poetic stylings throughout the nineteenth century, the legend of his martyrdom also made him an enduring symbol of the poet-hero.

And rightly so. Chénier’s poems are a moving testimonial to the human spirit in the face of persecution. He came to view the role of poet as the conscience of a movement, and in his poetry wrote poignantly of his hopes to live long enough to continue the fight.

*It is a poor poet, oh majestic god of the armies,  
Who, alone in prison, as death he fights,  
Gluing to his verses the flaming wings  
Of your thunder that no longer stings...  
Just let me stay alive, and that filthy breed  
Will feel the power of my pen.*

And despite—and in some ways because of—his death, his poetry does indeed live on. ✨

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