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*Dramatic Battles in Eighteenth-Century France:
Philosophes, Anti-philosophes, and Polemical Theatre*

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Eighteenth-century specialists are well acquainted with the controversies surrounding the premieres of *Les Philosophes* (by Charles Palissot) and *Le Caffé, ou L'Écossaise* (by Voltaire) at the Comédie-Française in 1760. The affair is usually understood as a skirmish in the larger battle between the *philosophes* and their opponents waged during the 1750s and early 1760s around the multi-volume, multi-year publication of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. Logan J. Connors, while aware of the political and intellectual issues that animated these debates, has a different goal in mind in this study of the three-month stage struggle that amused and irritated Parisian theatergoers. In sympathy with the work of recent theater studies scholars and cultural historians, Connors argues that the tactics used by participants in this affair offered a new model for evaluating public theatre performances, and in so doing contributed to the broadening of French political debate. The author begins with nuanced readings of both plays, which, as he demonstrates, did not entirely align themselves with either *philosophes* or anti-*philosophes*. Palissot, while critical of some *encyclopédiste* claims, never truly broke with Voltaire and his supporters; Voltaire, while concerned with the fate of the ambitious *Encyclopédie*, could not resist implicitly criticising Diderot's theory of the *drame* when writing *L'Écossaise*. Beyond these readings, Connors offers new perspectives on the conflict by delving deeply into the pamphlet literature and periodical reviews of the

affair. For example, there is an insightful analysis of the short pamphlet *Les Philosophes manqués* by André-Charles Cailleau, written in the form of a play but never intended for the stage, which demonstrates how participants in the controversy appealed to both readers and spectators. The most important claim of the book, however, is that this moment in 1760 marks a turning point in French theater criticism. Until then, written reviews of plays evaluated the literary merit of the text, with little regard for the fate of the work in front of a live audience. In the first half of 1760, though, critics such as Elie-Catherine Fréron, Voltaire's inveterate opponent, claimed that playwrights and their followers manipulated audience response within the playhouse to ensure successful reception of their work. It is Connors' belief that from this moment forward audience response, or at least the retrospective reconstruction of audience response in print, began to rival "learned" opinion as the arbiter of theatrical affairs. The importance of criticism that acknowledged playhouse reception as well as literary analysis was on display, he argues, in subsequent controversies surrounding Pierre-Laurent Buiette de Belloy's 1765 *Siège de Calais*, Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais' 1784 *Mariage de Figaro*, and Marie-Joseph Chénier's 1789 *Charles IX*. One might take issue with some of the causal factors identified by Connors (did the elimination of onstage seating at the Comédie-Française in 1759 change the playhouse dynamic?), or with the exacting precision of his chronology, but this book is a welcome addition to recent interdisciplinary approaches to the interplay of public theater and political culture in Old Regime and Revolutionary France.

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