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Logan J. Connors, *Dramatic Battle in Eighteenth-Century France: Philosophes, Anti-Philosophes, and Polemical Theatre*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012. 284 pp. \$120 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0729410471.

Review by Síofra Pierse, UCD Dublin.

The pantomime stage satire of Rousseau on all-fours eating lettuce is one with which eighteenth-century scholars will be extremely familiar. The comedy in which this cruel satire appears, Charles Palissot de Montenoy's *Les Philosophes*, was staged at the Comédie Française in 1760 as a targeted criticism of the *philosophes* faction. Soon afterwards, Voltaire's *Le Café ou l'Écossaise* was staged as a deliberate theatrical riposte. The context of this theatrical play-off was the culmination of a long-simmering conflict between *philosophe* and anti-*philosophe* camps. For anyone who ever wondered how the Comédie française became embroiled in the contemporary, extra-theatrical polemical battles of 1760, this intriguing book by Logan J. Connors provides the answer. His captivating monograph takes a detailed look at the battles taking place behind the scenes between and among critics, commentators, spectators, writers and *philosophes*, on stage and off. Connors deftly negotiates literary, political, and historical materials as seamlessly as his key authors, Voltaire and Palissot, navigated between page and stage.

Analysis of the two core polemical texts and performances which lie at the heart of this study bursts into life with great flair in the third chapter of the book, "A critical performance: *Les Philosophes* hits the boards." Here the author assesses the actual performance of Palissot's *Les Philosophes* in May 1760. He identifies the significant, if perhaps unprecedented, overlap between contemporary pamphlets, anti-*philosophe* rhetoric in the play, and the comedy itself. Connors notes that much of Palissot's comedy is based in politics. He thus highlights key moments in the text that are clearly closer to the stuff of contemporary salon chat than to the classical French theatrical tradition. The infamous pantomime-inspired moment where the audience sees Rousseau on all fours chewing a leaf of lettuce is arguably more closely related to English satirical cartoons of the day than to contemporary French traditions of theatre. Connors delineates this incongruity persuasively by arguing that although Palissot and his ilk aspired to ridicule *philosophe* ideas, including Diderot's recent theatrical innovations, in reality they both absorbed and adopted many of these same ideas almost in spite of themselves. Connors also underlines the huge extent to which much of the text was aimed either at a pre-conditioned audience alert to the polemic in question, or indeed at the eventual reader, rather than viewer, of the play. But despite this intertextuality, he argues that the play ostensibly aspired to situate itself on stage within the continuum of comedy stretching back to Molière, even loosely borrowing from that earlier author in places.

Connors continues his study of Palissot's comedy in chapter four, "Parterre and balcony, spectator and reader: Palissot's dramatic strategies" by providing a close analysis of the play itself. This analysis is sharp and pertinent, drawing judiciously on previous critics and editors as well as on contemporary sources, while providing close reading and commentary of most of the polemical elements of the text. Connors identifies Palissot's strategic manipulation of contemporary theatre goes through his modification of their expectation of what a contemporary piece of theatre might offer to the audience. By evoking visceral reactions among spectators caused by his focus on contemporary polemical and topical arguments, Palissot created a new expectation in the audience of the *Comédie française* in 1760. But Palissot's didactic passages were nonetheless smoothed along by a predictable romantic plot, highly familiar in nature, and comfortably reminiscent of Molière.

Stage and page revert to Voltaire in chapter five, “Pamphlets on the stage: Voltaire’s *riposte philosophique*,” which focuses on both text and performance of Voltaire’s *Le Café ou l’Écossaise*. This is the famous moment so often trumpeted as the occasion where Voltaire stepped up to the plate as the father of the *philosophes*, embracing the challenge thrown down by Palissot’s comedy, and launching his counter-attack from the safe distance of Ferney on the Swiss border. Connors argues that Voltaire’s response mirrored Palissot’s own polemical approach by creating a play that was part of a polemical war. However, surely Voltaire’s work cannot “subscribe” (p. 113) to Palissot’s approach as the former’s text in fact predates that of his rival? In any case, Connors notes that Voltaire’s play functioned equally as a polemical tract and as a work of literature. Why the author chooses to italicise *literature* here (p. 114) is unclear, given that any work of theatre regardless of form or nature may arguably be considered, or read, as literature, but this is a minor quibble. While acknowledging the simplistic plot framework of *L’Écossaise*, Connors astutely identifies the more important agendas therein: the “multi-layered attack against the Counter-Enlightenment establishment” and Voltaire’s “own concerns about literature and its criticism” (p. 115). Voltaire significantly wrote in prose, thus permitting the characters to speak just like his spectators would. In an impressive, concise comparison of contemporary theatrical theories and practices, Connors highlights how in some aspects Voltaire even participated in Diderot’s emerging theories of the contemporary *drame*, but without actually signing up fully to his younger colleague’s vision. Voltaire, as per usual, put his own idiosyncratic stamp on both page and stage.

In drawing parallels between the Palissot and Voltaire texts, it would have been useful to draw on the chronology of composition of elements of Voltaire’s *L’Écossaise*, reportedly written long before *Les Philosophes* (“Voltaire penned the comedy in 1759”, p.149), yet which apparently followed Palissot’s compositional strategies (“Voltaire follows the example of Palissot’s character Valère” (p.118))? Slight clarification is provided on p.149, but this instead seems to contradict earlier assertions by noting that edits were actually relatively few before the performance of the already extant and previously published text. This rather nebulous chronological writing/editing/publishing textual zone surrounding *L’Écossaise* required adjustment and explanation at key points throughout that work. It is not as if the author actively suggests any new deviation from the chronology already provided in the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (vol. 50), but is the author suggesting a more subtle *zeitgeist* element, or perhaps literary influence?

Most importantly, Connors pinpoints exactly the damage Voltaire’s acid depiction of Fréron would have on the latter’s long-term reputation, “forever tainting Fréron’s status as a reputable literary critic.” Excluding Fréron from the Republic of Letters by condemning his production as journalistic fiction essentially equates to redefining pamphleteering as a non-literary activity. This distinction is in itself innovative, especially coming from one such as Voltaire, who was keenly involved in pamphleteering at this time and beyond, and who employed many of his literary wiles in so doing, with the sole difference that he, unlike Fréron, did not write his polemical pieces for financial gain. Connors argues that according to the text of *L’Écossaise*, the key difference between the production of the two polemicists hinges primarily on respective veracity and trustworthiness.

The ultimate connection between the two rival theatrical texts is shown to lie in their mutual focus on contemporary political and social issues. Connors notes that both Palissot and Voltaire were probably facilitated in staging their polemical and unprecedented rival plays by the finance minister Choiseul as a method of distracting public attention from the ongoing Seven Years’ War. The author also draws parallels between the plot of *L’Écossaise* and Corneille’s *Le Cid*, although another obvious parallel given Voltaire’s love of Shakespeare would be the Romeo/Juliet paradigm, albeit with a happy ending. Ultimately, the setting of Voltaire’s play in a café with interaction between such a broad mix of social classes made his play “ultra-contemporary” (p. 128). Connors displays keen awareness of the diversity of theatre goers at the time, and warns judiciously against critics making unsubstantiated claims regarding the nature of theatre audiences, their epistemological disparities, or indeed their actual reactions to either play.

In “Spectators or readers? Voltaire’s ‘public’ concerns in *L’Écossaise*,” the author places particular emphasis on the importance of the printed text in the Palissot vs. Voltaire battle, with Connors reminding readers that Voltaire’s play was published before it was performed, thus inverting the usual order of events at the time. Furthermore, Connors asserts that Voltaire “never planned to stage his play” (p.148), although this is different from asserting that the play was designed so that it *might not* ever be staged. It would have been fascinating to read further analysis or elaboration of this peculiar phenomenon of plays written but never destined to be staged, which was particularly apparent in the many plays written in the last decade of Voltaire’s life.

The exemplary literary analysis of chapter six is so rich and detailed that this reader felt it at times surpassed Voltaire’s original comedy in its dexterity and complexity. For example, the exploration of the literary topos of embroidery-cum-writing carried out by impoverished aristocrat Lindane, who attempts to live modestly from her needlework, is dextrously elaborated and well articulated.

Ultimately Connors makes the argument that Voltaire’s *L’Écossaise* was not merely another pamphlet among many in the libellous exchange between *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes*, but instead represented much more than a mere *oeuvre de circonstance*. He further emphasizes that the theatrical battle between Palissot and Voltaire was remarkable exactly for the amount of reflection given to the genre in which they both wrote, including serious aesthetic reflection on drama by both camps. In theatrical terms, he argues that the success, reception and longevity of Voltaire’s text ultimately enabled it to win the battle.

Subsequent chapters show the extent to which the intellectual, extra-theatrical battle of 1760 forever changed the nature of drama and theatre criticism in pre-revolutionary France. Connors traces Fréron’s counter-response to Voltaire’s satirical representation of him in *L’Écossaise* from within the pages of Fréron’s own anti-*philosophe* periodical *L’Année littéraire*. His first analysis was mild in response to the written text, but became vituperative as soon as the play appeared on stage. In an interesting assessment of critical responses to the published text and then to the staged performance, Connors identifies a change of focus from text to audience, or a crucial shift in the paradigm of contemporary theatre criticism from analysis of literary publication to a review of performance, staging and audience reception.

The author defines such performance criticism as part of the intellectual war being staged, but also highlights its innovative nature. Fréron himself adapted military terminology in one review of the audience reaction to *L’Écossaise*. Typically, such performance criticism was liable to be quite fictional in nature, with Fréron’s piece ending with a “Te Voltarium” sung after a *bal philosophique* (p. 184). Not only did the behavior of critics irrevocably change, but so too did spectatorship and the very nature of drama itself.

The tracking of Grimm’s own vision of theatre and of his three subsequent, different reviews of Voltaire’s play reads almost like a slow revolution of theatrical mores in the short space of a few short weeks. Connors acknowledges Olivier Ferret’s work on compiling the “goldmine” of written materials that followed the two comedies, and on which he draws extensively, but Connors’s analysis of the critical response to the two plays is outstanding.[1] He concludes with the observation that the public’s enthused response to Voltaire’s play finally silences Friedrich Melchior Grimm’s own initial reservations, a major change indeed, resulting in a radically altered approach to theatrical criticism after this binary “theatrical event.” Most radical of all is the battle-inspired reactive criticism itself. This new method of reviewing drama would be used to their advantage by subsequent authors including De Belloy and Beaumarchais and later revolutionary playwrights.

Connors has an unusual style of academic writing in that he reaches out to the reader, as if speaking to his twenty-first-century contemporary. He makes relevant comparisons between eighteenth-century theatre goers and modern-day cinema goers. His vast range of references never overcrowd his narrative, so readers have no sense of either insufficient or excessive reference. His prose is extremely clear and

fluid. I only noted one typo (“this” in place of “thus” on p. 143). Voltaire Foundation house style does not include translation of French citations, but most are astutely commented afterwards in such a way as to be clear to non-French readers. Connors draws quite liberally on a wide range of modern literary and theatrical theories or critics throughout. His model of criticism before and after *Les Philosophes* (p. 206) is perhaps not the most crucial moment of the book, while other visual diagrams work reasonably well. Yet, such criticism of entirely minor figures should in no way detract from the overall impact of his work. Indeed, it is intriguing to think that an entire book could be built essentially around two short comedies, but Connors has done exactly that with considerable success.

Much of the material at the start of this book is introductory, which includes the “Introduction: decision makers, ‘doctes’ and theatre” through chapter one “Culture wars: *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes* in eighteenth-century France” and chapter two, “The anatomy of a crime: polemics, pamphlets and preconditioning.” The minor problem with such detailed background material is that the reader is champing at the bit to get to the analysis of the actual staging of the two plays. While the introductory material is scintillating, much of it seems at times out of place until the two polemical texts and/or performances have been properly considered. Slight problems of anticipatory repetition arise in places. The book might profitably have begun at chapter three and worked backwards, but the organisation of such a raft of material must have been a mammoth task, and each chapter reads neatly as a cohesive unit in itself.

The conclusion underscores the fact that spectators became a key part of each stage of the dramatic process in the second half of the eighteenth century. Connors emphasises that published texts, public readings, café discussions and even polemical pamphlets were all to become a core part of the theatrical performance. He neatly suggests that in this manner eighteenth-century spectators do not differ so much from paying customers today, but that it represented a huge change from what had gone before.

Having attended the 2007 modern staging of *L’Écossaise* in Paris (to which Connors refers on p. 145) I can testify to the enduring nature of Voltaire’s play. Even outside its contemporary politico-social rubric, it functions on numerous levels as a light, entertaining and swift-paced comedy. It is truly apt that an entire monograph be devoted to positioning this work within the social, political, polemical, theatrical and *philosophe* paradigms in which it originated. That Connors manages this task with such sustained close analysis, discussion and detective work is admirable. Once readers propel themselves beyond the introductory moments, this is a monograph that students and colleagues will thoroughly enjoy reading and to which they will often return.

NOTE

[1] Olivier Ferret, *La Fureur de Nuire: Echanges Pamphlétaires Entre Philosophes et Anti-philosophes (1750-1770)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007).

Síofra Pierse
UCD Dublin
siofra.pierse@ucd.ie

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