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Education lay at the heart of the Enlightenment, since thinkers believed that it played a crucial role in bringing about progress. Nadine Bérgenguier’s monograph offers detailed close readings of nine authors to uncover the textual strategies developed by both male and female writers of conduct books for girls during the eighteenth century. Although portions of the volume are drawn from two articles dating from 1999 and 2007, the greater part of its contents consists of new material detailing authors’ approaches to the task of writing conduct books, and the types of behaviour their texts offered up for emulation. In particular, Bérgenguier’s careful and detailed examination of prefatory material and of the reviews the works received in the press reveals some of the anxieties surrounding the use of print as a means of reaching a young female audience. This issue is especially acute when the author is male. Her analysis also reveals the difficulties involved in balancing the need to show society’s dangers with focusing on the virtue and modesty required of young girls. And she highlights the extent to which writers were concerned about the effect of learning on women’s social standing and public image.

The final third of the monograph focuses on reception and reveals the extent to which extra-textual criteria affected the reception of conduct books. The Marquise de Lambert’s social standing, Mme d’Epinay’s relationship with Diderot, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont’s status as governess, for instance, all colour reviews in contemporary periodicals. A final chapter, on the nineteenth-century afterlives of these Enlightenment texts, reveals the extent to which nineteenth-century biobibliographical compilations drew on the reviews of the eighteenth. A study of the prefaces to these new editions also reveals how the readers’ expectations had changed, as well as the doubts the nineteenth century had about the Enlightenment project itself.

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Eighteenth-century specialists are well acquainted with the controversies surrounding the premieres of Charles Palissot’s Les Philosophes and Voltaire’s Le Caffè; on, L’Écossaise 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 theatregoers. In
sympathy with the work of recent theatre 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 philosophe or anti-philosophe. 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 criticizing 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 theatre 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 Élie-Cathérine 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’s 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 Buirette de Belloy’s Siège de Calais (1765), Beaumarchais’s Mariage de Figaro (1784), and Marie-Joseph Chénier’s Charles IX (1789). One might take issue with some of the causal factors that Connors identifies (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 theatre and political culture in Old Regime and Revolutionary France.

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Traditionally, the essay contest has occupied a relatively minor place in histories of the Enlightenment public sphere, discussion of its contribution to the intellectual and literary life of eighteenth-century France being largely limited to passing references in descriptions of the parent Academies. Jeremy Caradonna aims to rehabilitate the role of the essay contest, elucidating its distinctive contribution to Enlightenment practice and arguing that it provides an important new outlook on the contemporary public sphere. Making use of material from forty-seven Academies in Paris and the provinces, he outlines a well-defined and largely democratic practice in which anonymous submissions and complex judging procedures created an open and accessible route towards involvement in public debate, even for groups traditionally viewed as excluded from intellectual exchange. While the author touches on the concours as a tool of the monarchy under Louis XIV and discusses its appropriation by the Revolution after 1789, it is the intervening period that provides the most compelling evidence for his case. The mid-eighteenth-century concours was, in his account, a practical tool for communication
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