

Performing Criticism during Cultural War: The Case of Voltaire's *L'Écossaise* (1760)

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By examining various criticisms of Voltaire's comedy *L'Écossaise* (1760), I explain how pamphlets and publication strategies altered dramatic performance. Instead of separating non-theatrical writing from dramatic texts, I underline how pamphlets emerged as part of the author's construction of a "theatrical event." During the cultural battles of the mid-eighteenth century, participants sought to "ready" their public by any discursive means possible. This persuasive activity began before the premiere of plays, which were also attempts to push the spectator into thinking congruently with the author of the work. Drawing on reviews from members of both the philosophe and anti-philosophe camps, I highlight the ambiguity between pamphlet and dramatic text, playwright and polemicist, performance and "set up," and finally, fiction writer and theatre critic.

abstract

DURING THE middle of the eighteenth century, and notably after the first volumes of the *Encyclopédie* were published in 1749–50, the debate between France's philosophes and members of a politically powerful counter-Enlightenment intensified. Events such as the *Cacouacs* and the Pompignan affairs spawned a litany of polemical pamphlets, and epistemological or literary debates quickly degraded into nasty personal attacks.¹ As

¹ "Cacouacs" was a derogatory name for the philosophes. During this affair (1758), the Abbé Moreau and Fougeret de Monbron attacked members of the *Encyclopédie* project, denouncing it as an "entreprise de subversion qui trahit les intérêts de la France et ruine les notions de famille, de patrie, de religion." Cited in Maurice Descotes, *Histoire de la critique dramatique en France* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1980), 140. For a more detailed description of counter-Enlightenment pamphlets during the late 1750s, see Olivier Ferret, *La Fureur de nuire: Échanges pamphlétaires entre philosophes et anti-philosophes (1750–1770)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007), 289–92. The Pompignan affair refers to LeFranc de Pompignan's malicious induction speech at the Académie Française (March 1759), in which the anti-philosophe criticized Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, and "la nouvelle philosophie." I would like to thank Kate Jensen, Olivier Ferret, Pierre Frantz,

the war continued between members of France's intellectual circles, partisans used any media at their disposal, voicing their opinions in plays, prefaces, letters, novels, short stories, and, most importantly, in illegally printed (or at least, only covertly allowed) pamphlets. Olivier Ferret, in his *La Fureur de nuire*, follows these polemical *échanges pamphlétaires* between philosophes and anti-philosophes from 1750 to 1770—and in this article, which attempts to establish a triangular relationship among texts, performance, and society, Ferret's erudite analysis of the literary landscape in France during this period is an invaluable resource. At the centre of this period, 1760, the debate between philosophes and anti-philosophes reached its climax. Commenting on the atmosphere of the *belles lettres* at this time, Denis Diderot's encyclopedic co-editor, Jean Rond D'Alembert, summarized 1760 as a year which saw Charles Palissot de Montenoy's *Les Philosophes*, Voltaire's *L'Écossaise*, and the Pompignan affair—or, in short, a literary landscape marked by nothing but *querelles*.² At this precise moment, polemics dominated the Parisian *salons* and involved the most well-known personalities of the time, including Diderot, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—the latter officially cut ties with his philosophe friends just two years earlier, in a letter condemning the *encyclopédistes*' call to legalize theatre in Geneva.³

In addition to these famous *lumières*, lesser-known writers such as Élie-Catherine Fréron, Charles Collé, and Charles Palissot emerged as critical participants in an intellectual battle. Drawing on works from various eighteenth-century writers from both ideological camps, I will show how pamphlets, *avertissements*, *feuilles*, *libelles*, and other ephemeral media altered the ways in which spectators understood performances, thus serving as intermediary objects between dramatic scripts and audio-visual

and the two anonymous reviewers at *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* for their valuable input and support in preparing this article.

² Charles Palissot de Montenoy's *Les Philosophes* was a satirical comedy that put Diderot, Charles Pinot Duclos, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other philosophes up on the boards of the Comédie-Française on 4 May 1760. See O. Ferret's modern critical edition of *Les Philosophes* by Charles Palissot de Montenoy (St Étienne: Presses Universitaires de St Étienne, 2003). For D'Alembert's full quotation on the cultural atmosphere in 1760, see Ferret, *La Fureur de nuire*, 81.

³ See Rousseau's "Lettre sur les spectacles," in which the *citoyen de Genève* attacks philosophes for their disparaging remarks against ministers in Geneva and for their insistence that the city lift its ban on theatre.

performances. My goal in this essay is also to show the more “literary” side of some pamphlets and theatre reviews—and more precisely, to demonstrate how criticism emerged as a polemically charged, but complex literary product with characters, plots, and dénouements. In order to show how pamphlet-based theatre criticism emerged as a creative outlet, I will examine the critical response to Voltaire's *L'Écossaise*—a play that appeared at the Comédie-Française during the height of the intense battle between philosophes and anti-philosophes. In his dramatic comedy, Voltaire satirically stages Fréron and his counter-Enlightenment periodical, the *Année littéraire*.⁴ The play's genesis and performance were interesting events at the time, but rather than analyzing the historical, philosophical, or dramaturgical elements of the play, I will focus on the pamphlets generated by this theatrical event—ephemeral and generally overlooked cultural artefacts that exude a literary energy crucial role to this period's reception of stage performances.

The Curtain Rises on Voltaire's "L'Écossaise"

Voltaire weaves harsh, on-stage criticism of his anti-philosophe rivals into a dramatic narrative characteristic of the nascent *genre sérieux*, and in order to understand several of the critics' precise comments, it may be best to briefly examine the play's plot and character compositions.⁵ As soon as the actors appear on stage, Voltaire gives his spectators a glimpse of the vituperative critic, Frélon (or Wasp, depending on which edition and which performance)⁶ and Fabrice, the local coffee shop and guesthouse owner. The Scot Monrose, who is on the run after losing his family and land to the English crown, later joins the conversation

⁴ Voltaire, *L'Écossaise*, in *Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Colin Duckworth (1760; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1986), 50:1. References are to this edition. In his play, Voltaire stages Élie-Catherine Fréron's *Année littéraire* (Paris: Lejay, 1754–76).

⁵ The tone of *L'Écossaise* resembles Diderot's *Le Fils naturel* (1757) or *Le Père de famille* (1758). This dramatic *rapprochement* is another way in which Voltaire defends his fellow philosophes.

⁶ Duckworth's critical edition reveals that the censor banned the English word “Wasp” before the premiere of Voltaire's comedy, which forced Voltaire to come up with the creative term *Frélon* (from Fréron and Frelon). This royal enforcement, however, seems to have been forgotten in later Parisian performances, as well as performances during subsequent years in Lyon, Marseille, and Bordeaux. For more information, see Duckworth's “Introduction” to *L'Écossaise*, 359–63.

in his search for an empty room at the inn. Voltaire completes the image of a vibrant, English guesthouse by introducing Lindane, the suffering and impoverished heroine of unknown origins, and the comical London businessman, Friport (or Freeport). During the first few acts, it becomes clear that Lindane is in love with an English lord named Murrai (or Murray) and that Murrai has strong feelings for Lindane, but is hesitant to act upon them because of Lindane's unclear past. Lady Alton, the comedy's female antagonist, also loves Murrai and uses a repertoire of schemes to denounce Lindane as an *aventurière* and woo Murrai away from her. For example, Lady Alton intercepts and changes a love letter from Murrai to Lindane and tries to convince the latter to accept a large sum of money to relinquish her romantic claim on the embattled Murrai. As the story unfolds, the spectator finds out that Lindane is actually Monrose's (the Scot) long-lost daughter and that Murrai's family was responsible for impoverishing Lindane and murdering her mother (Monrose's wife).⁷ This history is clarified when Frélon reveals Monrose's true identity, denouncing both Scottish father and daughter in his polemical newspaper.

Voltaire also makes it known that the only reason Monrose has come to London is to avenge his family's honour and to kill the living members of the Murrai clan. Thus, Lindane is caught between a rock and a hard place when Voltaire uses the classical dramatic topos of a female protagonist who oscillates between personal love and family duty. But, even before Monrose calls for a duel with Murrai (act 5), the young Englishman—who was too young at the time of the rebellion and therefore had nothing to do with the initial crime against Monrose's family—insists on providing restitution for his father's crimes and on re-establishing Monrose's name in both England and Scotland. At the end of the story, Monrose's bitter urge for revenge cedes to both his daughter's love for Murrai and to his realization that the actions of a man's family do not necessarily shed light on that same man's character.

Inside this seemingly banal comedy with few complex characters and a predictably "happy ending," Voltaire employs a multilayered attack against the counter-Enlightenment establishment. The

⁷ The historical context of the play is loosely based on Charles-Edward's failed attempt to run the English out of Scotland (the Jacobite Rebellion) during the 1740s. Lindane and Monrose are criminals in England because their family, like the French government, supported the rebellion.

philosophe interweaves citations of written materials (lines from Fréron and the work of other anti-philosophes) with performative and narrative aspects (pantomime, soliloquies) into what will emerge as—because of this combinatory effort—a powerful and polemical theatrical product.

Critical Uncertainty during the Eighteenth Century

In *L'Écossaise*, Voltaire stages a deceitful journalist as the play's antagonist. Although Voltaire's comedy touches on themes as diverse as English legal practices and sentimental family relationships, contemporary critics usually described *L'Écossaise* as a *pièce de circonstance* about Fréron and his band of counter-Enlightenment journalists. Never one to back down from literary quarrels, Fréron did not waste any time in responding to Voltaire in the pages of his anti-philosophe periodical, *L'Année littéraire*. Fréron's first criticism of the play dates from 3 June 1760, weeks before *L'Écossaise* was performed at the Comédie Française and was thus in response to the published versions of Voltaire's play that circulated in Paris during the last half of May. Fréron does not stop his criticism there, writing another review of the play on 27 July.⁸

Fréron shows a distinct style and goal in each review, and the critical *suite* of the play takes on radically different forms when compared to typical eighteenth-century theatre reviews. The singularities in Fréron's reviews, then, speak to the uniqueness of this specific event and to a creative critical energy that marked this polemic. What emerges is a heterogeneous corpus of critical materials that underline a fragile normative process in literary criticism—especially when related to the dramatic arts—during the middle of the eighteenth century in France.⁹

⁸ Fréron's 1760 reviews of *L'Écossaise* appeared in the following order: *Année littéraire* 4 (3 June 1760): 73–114; and then *Année littéraire* 5 (27 July 1760): 209–13.

⁹ This critical uncertainty is no doubt the reason why, at present, scholars have yet to write the definitive monograph or collective work about theatre criticism during the eighteenth century. While works such as Marianne Bury and Hélène Laplace, *Le Miel et le fiel: La Critique théâtrale en France au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne PUPS, 2008); and Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Un Siècle de critique dramatique: De Sarcey à Poirot-Delpech* (Paris: Complexe, 2004) analyse the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, few scholars have tackled the critical discourse in the dramatic arts during the *siècle des Lumières*. See Martine de Rougemont, *La Vie théâtrale au XVIII^e siècle* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); Julie Candler Hayes, *Identity and Ideology: Diderot, Sade, and the Serious Genre* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991), 81–105; and Descotes.

In *La Vie théâtrale au dix-huitième siècle*, Martine de Rougemont analyses plays and theatre reviews, highlighting the critic's ambiguous profession and contested social status. According to de Rougemont, the critic at this time radically differed from his or her equivalent in periods anterior or posterior to the eighteenth century: "Au XVIII^e siècle la fonction de critique apparaît comme une fonction originale et autonome, qu'on aimerait pouvoir comparer à ce qu'elle est devenue dans les siècles suivants. Elle ne repose sur aucune légitime institutionnelle: les académiciens ne se font pas journalistes, ni les professeurs; on vient souvent à la presse du séminaire, d'une charge de secrétaire privé ou de précepteur, d'une tâche intellectuelle subalterne, et l'on y vient comme à une aventure libératrice."¹⁰ Literary writers during the eighteenth century inherited aesthetic norms from the previous century and thus adopted or diverged from poetic models such as Nicholas Boileau and Jean Racine, for example. Even if writers disagreed on the definition of "good writing," such as in the case of the debate between Ancients and Moderns, they at least claimed legitimacy by either connecting their works with classical ideals from antiquity or by emphasizing the unique "Frenchness" and novelty of seventeenth-century letters.¹¹ Critics, however, did not enjoy (or suffer from) the same institutional moulding. In the world of no-holds-barred critical journalism, institutions failed to provide norms to which authors could adhere in their articles' subject matters or styles. Nowhere is the demonstration of this "critical uncertainty" more clear than in responses to Voltaire's polemical comedy from 1760.

The "Textual" Critique, or Fréron Keeps His Cool

What is most startling to the reader of Fréron's first published review (3 June 1760), some eight weeks before the performance of *L'Écossaise*, is that the tone is relatively calm, even though the critic is satirized as early as the first scene of the play. It is important to keep in mind that this play appeared in print prior to the premiere at the Comédie-Française, and, at that time, the authorship was unknown or wrongly attributed by some

¹⁰ De Rougemont, 100.

¹¹ For more on the debate between Ancients and Moderns, see, for example, Marc Fumaroli, "Les Abeilles et les Araignées," introduction to *La Querelle des Ancients et des Modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); and Joan DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

to Diderot.¹² Fréron mitigates obvious disdain for the comedy with relative praise for certain aspects of the work, such as the character compositions of Lindane and Freeport, and the play's overall ability to "faire tableau" in the final scene.¹³ The counter-Enlightenment critic appears surprisingly bipartisan, writing that *L'Écossaise* is nothing more than a "tissu d'in vraisemblances" and a "fatras d'absurdités," but nonetheless admitting that "Lindane est un modèle de vertu, de noblesse, de patience et de douceur."¹⁴

In this first review, Fréron provides a lengthy (30-page) summary of the plot and cites excerpts that he feels are either excellent demonstrations of "vertu" on the one hand or, on the other hand, unfortunate examples of bad writing. Even though it is obvious that Fréron does not like *L'Écossaise*, his disinterested style gives the reader the impression that this opinion is owing to the play's shortcomings in verisimilitude or tone and not because Fréron himself is implicated in the affair. Then, when he finally addresses the staging of the *Frélon* character, Fréron brushes off the harsh satire by asserting that the author lacks originality: "Mais, si c'est moi réellement que l'auteur de la Comédie a eu en vue, j'en conclus que ce n'est pas M. de Voltaire qui a fait ce Drame. Ce grand Poète, qui a beaucoup de génie, surtout celui de l'invention, ne se serait pas abaissé jusqu'à être le plagiaire de M. Piron, qui, longtemps avant *L'Écossaise*, m'a très ingénieusement appelé *Frélon*; il est vrai qu'il avait dérobé lui-même ce bon mot, cette idée charmante, cet effort d'esprit."¹⁵ The unknown dramatist's harsh treatment of Fréron, according to the critic himself, is nothing new and merely another example of nasty pamphleteering from members of a "secte philosophique." By denying that Voltaire is the author of the play and mentioning Alexis Piron's name, Fréron accomplishes two different goals. First, the critic situates the play below Voltaire's level and into the more depraved realm of parodists, *chansonniers*, and jokesters.¹⁶

¹² Charles Collé argues that Diderot is the author until well into August 1760. Collé, *Journal Historique ou mémoires critiques* (1750–70; Paris: Imprimerie Bibliographique, 1807), 2:370–73.

¹³ Fréron, 4:105.

¹⁴ Fréron, 4:106, 76.

¹⁵ Fréron, 4:110.

¹⁶ Alexis Piron (1689–1773) was a noted parodist, dramatic author, and candidate for election to the *Académie française* (the vote was vetoed by Louis xv). Even if his more "serious" works such as the tragedies *Calisthènes* (1730) and *Fernand Cortez* (1744) earned him a legitimate literary reputation

Second, by still mentioning Voltaire's name, Fréron nonetheless makes an implicit criticism of the famous philosophe. If Voltaire is *L'Écossaise's* author—if the reader reads between the lines and understands Fréron's innuendo—then Voltaire's reputation as an author of genius is tarnished, and with his comedy he thus produces nothing more than an *exemple par excellence* of a new literary low.

Fréron's calm, reasoned tone probably stems from his inability to imagine that *L'Écossaise* would ever see the stage, let alone be performed at the Comédie-Française, one of Europe's most prestigious venues. Before providing his "exposition détaillée" of the plot, Fréron first asserts that *L'Écossaise* is nothing but a *libelle* that has made "une espèce de fortune dans la Capitale," but could never be "jouée sur aucun théâtre."¹⁷ To conclude his review, Fréron sticks to "standard" critical discourse in an attempt to dislodge the play from any sort of theatrical tradition. If, according to the critic, *L'Écossaise* is supposedly a comedy "dans la tradition anglaise," then its plot should echo contemporary plays from across the Channel:

Il y a plus, le *Caffé* ou *l'Écossaise* n'existe point en Angleterre; il est vrai qu'il y a plusieurs Comédies Anglaises sous le titre du *Caffé*, telles que *The Coffee House Politician* or *The Justice caught in his own trap*, le *Politique du Caffé* ou *la Justice prise dans ses propres filets*, par M. Fielding, Auteur de *Joseph Andrews*, de *Tom Jones*, etc.; *The Coffee-House a farce*, le *Caffé*, farce par M. Miller; *The Humours of a Coffee-House*, les *Amusemens du Caffé*, Comédie par M. Ward; *The Usurpers*, or *The Coffee House Politicians*, les *Usurpateurs* ou les *Politiques du Caffé*, par un anonyme. Toutes ces Comédies, véritablement Anglaises, n'ont aucun rapport, aucune affinité, aucun trait de ressemblance avec le *Caffé* ou *l'Écossaise*. Mais une preuve bien convaincante qu'elle n'a jamais été faite originairement en Anglais, c'est qu'on y voit une ignorance des usages d'Angleterre, dont un auteur de ce pays ne serait pas capable.¹⁸

By demonstrating his knowledge of contemporary English theatre, Fréron adds erudition to his argument against the

during his time, he was more well known throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for his clever epigrams, songs, and jokester comedies, such as *Ode à Priape* (1710) and *Les Belles jambes* (1730). For more on Piron's life and works, see Derek Connon, *Identity and Transformation in the Plays of Alexis Piron* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).

¹⁷ Fréron, 4:73.

¹⁸ Fréron, 4:109–110.

play's claim to British origins. What is more, the critic attaches the play to the lowly Gallic pamphleteering tradition instead of to France's important comedic history, which includes such dramatists as Molière and Marivaux. According to Fréron, *L'Écossaise* stems from neither British nor French theatre; it is nothing but the result of sectarian spite from social-climbing, pamphleteering philosophes.

*Fréron and the "propos normatif"
of Eighteenth-Century Theatre Criticism*

In his first review of *L'Écossaise*, Fréron shows what we might deem a normal tone in his review, or, what de Rougemont has called the "propos normatif" that marked some eighteenth-century critical discourse.¹⁹ In *La Vie théâtrale*, de Rougemont describes the methods used by "normal" critics during this period: "Ils racontent l'histoire, en font l'extrait comme d'une œuvre lue, et que leur lecteur ne pourra plus que reconnaître. Ils signalent les beaux vers, et préviennent contre ceux qui sont clinquants, qui se feraient admirer sur le moment."²⁰ In short, "normal" critics provide lengthy summaries of dramatic works with a reserved, neutral tone, quote heavily from the text itself, and sometimes insert complete scenes of the play into their reviews.²¹

De Rougemont also argues that some critics detach the text from any idea of performance in order to concentrate on the "vraisemblance de l'action, convenance des personnages, [et la] qualité de la versification."²² Even though Fréron is dealing with prose comedy and not tragedy in verse, he nevertheless ignores "theatrical" elements of the play such as potential staging techniques, acting considerations, and spectator reactions, thus asserting this normative style of theatre criticism that marked some eighteenth-century writing on drama. This is partly owing to his failure to envision the play's performance and dismissal of the *L'Écossaise* as another pernicious philosophe pamphlet. But Fréron never even questions how a Parisian might react to

¹⁹ Fréron's first review is normative in its treatment of the play's plot and tone, but nevertheless diverges from traditional reviews with its strong condemnation of philosophe pamphleteering.

²⁰ De Rougemont, 101.

²¹ In his first review, Fréron provides a clear example of this practice, quoting *L'Écossaise* act 1, scene 2 in its entirety.

²² De Rougemont, 101.

Voltaire's play, nor does he consider the play as a possibility for regional theatre or one of France's "théâtres de société" (Voltaire had his own).

This form of critical discourse—a formal review marked by a denial of performance—is evident in other eighteenth-century theatre reviews, and even in criticisms of performed theatrical works at the Comédie Française and other Parisian stages. Collé demonstrates at times this "textual" (as opposed to performance-based) sort of theatre criticism in his *Journal historique ou mémoires critiques*. In this work by the noted songwriter and master of *théâtre de société*, published monthly between 1748 and 1772, Collé reviews nearly every play that was put up on the boards at the Comédie-Française, the Comédie-Italienne, as well as *théâtres de société* such as the stages at Bagnole, Bagatelle, and Fontainebleau. Collé's style and focus in content exemplifies de Rougemont's definition of the "propos normatif" in eighteenth-century dramatic criticism. For example, in a critique of Antoine-Marin Lemièrre's *Hypermnestre*, Collé writes that the play was actually a "fable de quarante-neuf maris égorgés par leur femmes," rather than a theatrical production.²³ He goes on to argue that Lemièrre's tragedy "est assez ridicule" and that "le récit ... est nécessairement froid, et ne peut pas intéresser."²⁴ Nevertheless, the play enjoyed twelve performances, nearly a full, successful run at the Comédie-Française (a great success usually comprised 14 performances). In his (albeit short) review of *Hypermnestre*, Collé ignores spectator reactions or acting techniques, choosing instead to focus on textual elements of the tragedy. Rather than trying to examine why audiences genuinely enjoyed Lemièrre's tragedy, Collé disregards the play's reception and cites a few lines from the work, using a literary vocabulary ("récit", "fable") comparable to Fréron's early critiques of *L'Écossaise*. Collé repeats this style with his next criticism in *Journal historique ou mémoires critiques*, a review of Jean-Baptiste Messine de Collet's comedy, *L'Île déserte*.²⁵ Once again downplaying theatrical elements of the

²³ Antoine-Marin Lemièrre, *Hypermnestre, tragédie, par M. Le Mierre, représentée, pour la 1re fois, par les Comédiens françois ordinaires du Roi, le 31 août 1758* (Paris: Duchesne, 1771), Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-YTH-8812.

²⁴ Collé, 2:257.

²⁵ Jean-Baptiste Messine de Collet, *L'Isle déserte, comédie en un acte et en vers, par M. C. ... , représentée, pour la première fois, par les Comédiens françois ordinaires du Roi, le 23 août 1758* (Paris: Duschesne, 1758), Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-YTH-9177.

play, Collé writes that Messine's work "n'est pas une comédie" and that it is more a "petit roman" with "nul art théâtral."²⁶ Collé unfortunately fails to define "art théâtral," or, at the very least, how a playwright could admirably show it; instead, he then goes on to lament the ridiculousness of the plot and that he predicted the dénouement as early as the second scene of the first act.²⁷

Collé certainly did not invent this critical posture: "textual" theatre criticism naturally follows from seventeenth-century models—Aristotelian paradigms used by "doctes" who criticized Corneille's tragi-comedies for their divergence from classical rules.²⁸ According to seventeenth-century critics such as Georges de Scudéry and the Abbé D'Aubignac, the text is the primary object of criticism. Summarizing this critical method, Jean-Jacques Roubine emphasizes the selective nature of seventeenth-century writings on theatre, arguing that, "Le seul public 'légitime' aux yeux des 'doctes,' ces 'connaisseurs' qui savent les règles ou ces 'honnêtes gens' qui ont des lumières de tout, constituait davantage un lectorat que le vrai public des théâtres."²⁹ At first glance, it seems that Collé exhibits the same audience-denial scheme as his predecessors from one century earlier. We can easily distinguish this seventeenth-century ideal of a learned, reading public in Collé's reviews of *L'Île déserte* and *Hypermnestre*. Although both plays enjoyed relatively successful runs at the Comédie-Française, Collé ignores audience judgment, ticket sales, and acting techniques. He appears attached to seventeenth-century norms of criticism, and he judges the tragedy against his personal notions of good theatre, thus raising himself to the level of a "docte" and characteristically ignoring other methods of theatrical judgment.³⁰

It is not surprising that Fréron, an ardent counter-Enlightenment critic and *élogiste* of classical authors such as Racine and

²⁶ Collé, 2:258.

²⁷ Collé, 2:258.

²⁸ See, for example, the *querelle* surrounding Corneille's *Le Cid*.

²⁹ Jean-Jacques Roubine, *Introduction aux grandes théories du théâtre* (Paris: Nathan, 2000), 41.

³⁰ Although biography does not always influence ideology, Collé had strong, conservative ties to the Crown. Collé was, specifically during the 1750s and 1760s, a visible member of Louis xv's court at Versailles, and, perhaps more importantly, he was also reader to Philippe II of Orléans until well into the 1770s. For more information on Collé, see Jacques Truchet's *notice* in "Théâtre de société," in *Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1974), 2:1459–1465.

Boileau would take up a normative discourse that dated from an earlier century. However, Fréron was also a keen editor seeking to please the eighteenth-century reader, and thus not impervious to changing norms in critical discourse. De Rougemont highlights a diachronic transformation in theatre criticism that occurred during the eighteenth century. She writes that “peu à peu, les critiques accordent dans leurs articles plus de place à la comparaison entre l’effet littéraire et l’effet scénique, et commencent à reconnaître une valeur propre à ce dernier.”³¹ I now turn to Fréron’s second critique of Voltaire’s *L’Écossaise* in order to examine how a play’s performance trumps reflections on the versification, character composition, and the plot of a dramatic text.

Performance-Based Criticisms, or Fréron Loses His Cool

On 27 July 1760 (the night after Voltaire’s comedy premiered), Fréron “received” a pamphlet-critique of *L’Écossaise*, which he promptly published in the *Année littéraire*. By denying authorship, Fréron prepares his reader for a denunciatory text and all of the no-holds-barred critiques that mark this popular discursive style.³² First, he describes the atmosphere at the venue, writing that “hier Samedi 26 de ce mois, sur les cinq heures et demie du soir, il se donna au Parterre de la Comédie Française une des plus mémorables batailles dont l’Histoire Littéraire fasse mention.”³³ What follows is a fictionalized and polemical representation of the action that occurred in the parterre, a virtually unseen form of theatre criticism, a true predecessor to Victor Hugo’s *Bataille d’Hernani*,³⁴ and an interesting blend of fiction and journalistic reporting. An in-depth study of Fréron’s *Relation d’une grande bataille* reveals how this synchronic example may highlight

³¹ De Rougemont, 101.

³² As in the case of Voltaire’s anonymity, most readers probably realized that Fréron was the author of the “Relation.” This anonymous attribution is more likely a type of authorship denial described by Gérard Genette in *Seuils*: “Ce type d’anonymat n’avait généralement rien d’un incognito farouchement protégé: bien souvent le public connaissait, de bouche à oreille, l’identité de l’auteur.” Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 46–47.

³³ Fréron, 5:209.

³⁴ The intense battle between Hugo’s supporters and detractors during the 1832 premiere of the Romantic drama, *Hernani*. For more information on the “bataille d’Hernani,” see Evelyn Blewer, *La Campagne d’Hernani* (Paris: Eurédit, 2002); and Florence Naugrette, *Le Théâtre romantique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001).

diachronic issues in theatre and theatre criticism during the pre-Revolutionary period—and the difference between Fréron's *Relation* and his previous “calm” review of *L'Écossaise* emerges as early as the first paragraph:

Les gens de goût voulaient que cette pièce fût sifflée; les Philosophes s'étaient engagés à la faire applaudir. L'Avant-Garde de ces derniers, composée de tous les rimailleurs et *prosailleurs* ridiculisés dans *L'Année Littéraire*, était conduite par une espèce de *Savetier* appelé *Blaise* qui faisait *le Diable à quatre*. Le redoutable *Dortidius* était au centre de l'armée; on l'avait élu Général d'une voix unanime. Son visage était brulant, ses regards furieux, sa tête échevelée, tous ses sens agités, comme ils le sont, lorsque dominé par son divin enthousiasme, il rend ses oracles sur le trépede philosophique. Ce centre renfermait l'élite des troupes, c'est-à-dire, tous ceux qui travaillent à ce grand Dictionnaire dont la suspension fait gémir l'Europe, les Typographes qui l'ont imprimé, les Libraires qui le vendent, et leurs garçons de boutique.³⁵

At the beginning of his review, Fréron splits the audience into two rival sides, asserting that people with good taste booed the play, whereas the philosophes made a mission out of rallying spectators to applaud. Next, the critic introduces a military vocabulary (*avant-garde, armée, Général, troupes*) to describe the way philosophes organized themselves and members of the parterre into units with specific behaviours and choreographies. Fréron also separates the audience into socio-literary classes, attesting that the “élite des troupes” (those who worked on the *Encyclopédie*) controlled and manipulated less important, but nevertheless *philosophique* spectators. In addition, Fréron, following Palissot's example of public denunciation in his play, *Les Philosophes*, names specific philosophes who were at the premiere, such as Diderot (*Dortidius*), Sedaine (*Blaise*), and Grimm (*Le prophète de Boëhmischbroda*).³⁶ Besides deriding the various philosophes, Fréron confirms that partisans sought

³⁵ Fréron, 5:209–10.

³⁶ For Sedaine (*Blaise*), Fréron's attribution no doubt refers to Sedaine's 1759 play, *Blaise le Savetier*. Regarding Grimm (*Le prophète de Boëhmischbroda*), this is a reference to Melchior Grimm, whose pamphlet, *Le Petit prophète de Boëhmischbroda*, satirized contemporary French music during the “Querelle des Bouffons” in 1754. For more information on this important cultural battle that pitted the composer Rameau's traditional French supporters against the *Buffons italiens*, see Downing A. Thomas, *Music and the Origins of Language: Theories from the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4–9. Duckworth provides a more detailed account of Fréron's nomenclature in his “Introduction” to *L'Écossaise*, 267–68.

to precondition audience members with pre-performance publications:³⁷

La veille et le matin de cette grande journée, on avait eu soin d'exercer tous ces nobles combattants, et de leur bien marquer les endroits où ils devaient faire feu, et applaudir à toute outrance. Le sage *Tacite*,³⁸ le prudent *Théophraste*,³⁹ et tous les graves Sénateurs de la République des Philosophes ne se trouvèrent point à cette affaire; ils ne jugèrent pas à propos d'exposer leurs augustes personnes. Ils attendaient l'événement aux Tuileries, où ils se promenaient inquiets, égarés, impatients. Ils avaient donné ordre qu'on leur envoyât un courrier à chaque Acte. Les gens de goût s'avancèrent tranquillement, mais en très petit nombre, sans Commandants, sans dispositions, et même sans troupes auxiliaires; ils se reposaient sur la justice de leur cause: confiance trop aveugle!⁴⁰

Fréron's opinion of the performance is partisan and little more than a nasty fictionalization of possible events that occurred at the Comédie Française in late July 1760: we will never know for sure what happened at the premiere of *L'Écossaise*.

As a polemical rhetorician or as a witness to actual behaviour, Fréron nevertheless writes about an organized choreography that responded to specific moments of the performance ("les endroits où ils devaient faire feu"). He emphasizes the concerted effort by philosophes to alter audience behaviour before the performance ("la veille" and "le matin"). According to the critic, the *secte* had already determined how spectators would respond to specific moments in the play before the Comédie-Française raised its curtain. What is more, Fréron diverts the attention of his reader from the play to the Tuileries, the location where Parisians went to buy illegal pamphlets and exchange literary and political gossip.⁴¹ In Fréron's view, exterior locations to the

³⁷ Voltaire published a pamphlet, *À Messieurs les parisiens*, one night before the premiere of *L'Écossaise*.

³⁸ This is probably a reference to D'Alembert, the famous mathematician and encyclopedist who published a translation of *morceaux choisis* by Tacitus in 1743.

³⁹ Duckworth argues that this is a reference to either Duclos or d'Argental ("Introduction" to *L'Écossaise*, 267).

⁴⁰ Fréron, 5:211–12.

⁴¹ In his *Mémoires*, the Abbé Morellet provides an interesting correlation between reading practices and exact geographical locations in Paris during this precise period. After the publication of a few pamphlets about Palisot in June 1760, Morellet noticed that "aux Tuileries et au Palais Royal, on voyait des groupes de lecteurs riant aux éclats." Morellet, *Mémoires sur le dix-*

Comédie-Française (the Tuileries, the Palais-Royal) emerge as equally important to understanding the “event” as what is happening onstage. The critic develops this theory even further, arguing that philosophes created a communication system from the Tuileries to the Comédie-Française that relayed orders from “Senators” in the gardens to “troops” at the theatre. Keeping Fréron’s partisanship in mind, with this last description the critic highlights either a relatively atypical experience in theatregoing or, if he is lying, a novel way to critique an adversary’s dramatic work by denouncing the entire theatrical experience as nothing more than a set up.

In the next paragraph, Fréron continues his overt citation of philosophes, such as Jean-François Marmontel, Diderot, and Grimm, while at the same time describing the mobilization of spectators during the performance:

La toile se lève; le signal est donné; l’armée philosophique s’ébranle; elle fait retentir la Salle d’acclamations; le choc des mains agite l’air, et la terre tremble sous les battements de pieds. On sut quelque temps sans dépêcher le courrier, parce qu’on ne savait si le premier Acte était fini; lorsqu’on en fut certain, le Général honora de cet emploi un de ses plus braves Aides de Camp, *Mercure*⁴² exilé de l’Olympe et privé de ses fonctions Périodiques; il partit plus prompt qu’un éclair, arriva aux Tuileries, annonça ce brillant début aux Sénateurs assemblés, leur dit qu’on avait applaudi à tout rompre, même avant que les Acteur ouvrissent la bouche; que le seul nom de *Wasp* (mot anglais qui signifie *Guêpe*) avait excité des transports d’admiration; que rien n’était échappé, et qu’on avait saisi tout l’esprit, tout le sel, toute la finesse des épigrammes d’*Araignée*, de *Vipère*, de *Coquin*, de *Faquin*, de *Fripon*, etc., etc.⁴³

When the curtain rises, the philosophe “army” immediately jumps into action by stomping its feet in unison. In this excerpt, Fréron argues that spectators undermined the role of actors by cheering at specific lines of the play before their enunciation by the characters on stage. Fréron’s fictional account may not be a complete manipulation of the truth given that Voltaire published

huitième siècle et sur la Révolution (Paris: Librairie française, 1822), 91. The Comédie-Française was located in the same neighbourhood as the Tuileries (until 1770) and then right next to them (1770–1782).

⁴² Most definitely a reference to Jean-François Marmontel, who had recently spent two weeks in the Bastille and lost his position as editor of the *Mercure de France* for publishing a derogatory satire about the Duc d’Aumont.

⁴³ Fréron, 5:212–13.

his dramatic text nearly two months before the performance, which would have enabled spectators to know (and memorize) the actors' lines before they were delivered. Although Fréron focuses this critique on the play's performance, the dramatic text was important in providing the spectators with the ability to cheer at lines they knew were coming, even before the actors could open their mouths.

In the final paragraph of *La Relation*, Fréron moves past the performance of the play and describes a concerted effort by philosophes to control the work's critical destiny:

Le Sénat fut très satisfait de tout ce qu'il venait d'entendre. Le Général lui présenta la liste des Guerriers qui s'étaient le plus distingués. Sur la lecture qui en fut faite à haute voix, on ordonna au petit Prestolet⁴⁴ de l'inférer en entier dans sa première Gazette Littéraire, avec de grands éloges pour chaque héros; ensuite les Sénateurs tendirent la main à l'un, fourrèrent agréablement à l'autre, promirent à celui-ci un exemplaire de leurs *Œuvres Mêlées*, à celui-là de le louer dans le premier ouvrage qu'ils feraient, à quelques-uns des places de courtier dans l'Encyclopédie, à tous des billets pour aller encore à *l'Écossaise* gratis, en leur recommandant de ne point s'endormir sur leurs lauriers, et de continuer à bien faire leur devoir; ils leur représentèrent qu'il était à craindre que la vigilance des ennemis ne profitât de leur inaction pour leur dérober le fruit de leur victoire. Après ce discours éloquent et flatteur, le Sénat les congédia, et invita à souper le Général et les principaux Officiers. Avant le Banquet, on tira un beau feu d'artifice; il y eut grande chère, un excellent concert de Musique Italienne, un Intermède exécuté par des Bouffons, des illuminations à la façade de tous les hôtels des Philosophes. Un Bal philosophique qui dura jusqu'à huit heures du matin, termina la fête. Les Sénateurs, en se retirant, ordonnèrent qu'on eût à s'assembler aux Tuileries sur les six heures du soir pour chanter un TE VOLTARIUM.⁴⁵

Fréron asserts that the philosophes, with an air of self-congratulation, patted themselves on the back after controlling *L'Écossaise's* performance. After paying Parisians to come see their partisan play gratis, according to the critic, philosophes then began to write a review of *L'Écossaise*, lauding each member of the party and doling out gifts for a job well done against the enemy. In his first review of *L'Écossaise*, Fréron emphasizes the plot of the work as well as the author's compositions of characters Lindane, Lady Alton, and Freeport. Switching gears

⁴⁴ According to Duckworth's critical edition of *L'Écossaise*, this could be a reference to the playwright and critic, Joseph de Laporte.

⁴⁵ Fréron, 5:214–16.

in his *La Relation d'une grande bataille*, Fréron then underlines the importance of the “Wasp” reference in determining the overall success of the play. Whereas the satirical reference was nothing more than anecdotal in his first review, in *La Relation* it emerges as the *condition sine qua non* of the play's contested reception. Fréron's change in emphasis highlights the important performative function of Voltaire's *Wasp* character. Reviewing just the printed version of the play, Fréron treats the *Wasp* as nothing more than a polemical anecdote—a minor character from a philosophe pamphlet. However, when *L'Écossaise* finds a live audience at the Comédie-Française, this once minor aspect of the comedy, through extra-scenic planning and choreography by spectators, emerges as central to the boisterous reception of the theatrical performance.

The disparity between the two reviews highlights the qualitative difference between texts and performances as cultural weapons in the Republic of Letters. Because of the larger and more visible receptive field inherent to theatre, Fréron is forced to change his outlook on the entire affair. Fréron's *La Relation d'une grande bataille* is the critic's overt reaction to *L'Écossaise*'s performance.⁴⁶ However, behind the scenes and through covert epistolary channels, Fréron's response to Voltaire's play takes on more political overtones. Fréron's loud and somewhat hilarious tone in *La Relation* quickly changes into complaints to the censor and high-level governmental officials. When *L'Écossaise* was nothing more than a pamphlet, Fréron could afford to shrug off the references to his personality and place in society. For example, in a letter to Charles-Simon Favart from the late spring of 1760, Fréron dismisses the play and expresses his dismissal using logic: “Je n'ai pas porté de plaintes contre *l'Écossaise*, parce que je n'y suis point nommé et que je ne m'y suis point reconnu, et que tous ceux qui m'ont suivi depuis mon enfance n'ont point vu le moindre trait qui pût me convenir. Ainsi j'ai pris le parti

⁴⁶ Fréron might also be responding to edits that Voltaire made to the text in order to emphasize *Fréron's* nefarious character and make more general criticisms of counter-Enlightenment personalities. In his critical edition of the play, Duckworth argues that the philosophe changed the text because, “Voltaire's attention was no doubt brought by d'Argental and Mme d'Épinay to points raised in the reviews, but the incorporation of references to the philosophes in act 1, scene 3 of the stage version can be seen as his attempt to make it fulfil an additional function as a reply to Palissot's play” (“Introduction,” *L'Écossaise*, 253).

de mépriser cette satire maussade et brutale.”⁴⁷ Fréron trivializes the play in his letter to the dramatist Favart. Because *L'Écossaise's* author never uses the explicit word “Fréron” in his text, the critic Fréron sees no reason to pursue the affair with the royal censor. As a polemical critic himself, Fréron knew the censor's specific rules about denunciation and overt criticism, and Fréron was certainly no stranger to the occasional altercation with authorities.⁴⁸ Fréron's early silence indicates that in pamphlet form, Voltaire's denunciatory digs at the critic fall under the guise of accepted norms in the genre—all seems fair in the nasty world of pamphleteering. But, similar to the critic's abrupt rhetorical transformation from measured calmness in his first review to sarcasm in his second review, Fréron's silence in front of authorities changes after the play's performance.

In a letter to the royal censor, Guillaume de Malherbes, on 21 August 1760, Fréron seems to have swallowed all of the harsh criticism that he can bear:

Je sais bien, Monsieur, que j'étais libre de ne point prendre pour moi les injures qui sont dans *L'Écossaise* parce qu'il n'y a ni nom propre ni faits allégués. Cette idée m'était même venue; mais comme Voltaire, et les philosophes, et leurs croupiers, et les petits auteurs que j'ai critiqués, avaient eu soin de répandre que c'était moi qu'on avait eu en vue, mon silence à cet égard aurait passé pour dissimulation, pour fausseté, pour crainte ... Ainsi j'aurais mauvaise grâce de dissimuler ces injures atroces, et j'ai mieux aimé m'abandonner à ma franchise bretonne; j'ai compté que cela me ferait plus d'honneur, et que la honte rejaillirait sur mes ennemis.⁴⁹

The performance of *L'Écossaise*, coupled with the revelation that not just a low-level philosophe but Voltaire penned the comedy, proves too powerful a trauma for Fréron to combat alone. In his letter to the censor, the critic highlights his modest Breton origins and how he is facing an attack from a unified army. He understands that Voltaire's omission of Fréron's “nom propre” mitigates the harshness of the criticism; nevertheless, he argues that the philosophes have made it so clear that the *Wasp* is nobody else but Fréron that he must turn in the playwright to the authorities. Fréron's desperate plea attests to the power of

⁴⁷ Jean Balcou, *Fréron contre les philosophes* (Geneva: Droz, 1975), 207.

⁴⁸ For example, the governmental suppression of Fréron's *Lettres de la Comtesse de ...* in 1749 or the temporary suspension by authorities of his *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps* in 1752.

⁴⁹ Cited in Balcou, 207–8.

performance as a form of criticism. *L'Écossaise's* dramatic text is toxic enough, but extra-textual performative events during the premiere surpass the written words on the script and emerge as just as important (if not even more important) than the insinuations in the original manuscript.

When philosophes deliver lines before the actors, stomp their feet at certain moments, and highlight the incendiary moments of the performance, they are also subverting the ensemble of textual elements. They choose exactly what to emphasize (the disparagement of Fréron) and centre the entire performance on those precise elements. Fréron's critical accounts of the performance, as well as his behaviour as indicated in correspondence, attest to an ephemeral form of literary criticism: the live spectator critique. But what if the whole episode did not really happen? What if Diderot never led an army of philosophes or Mme Fréron remained quiet and self-effacing during the performance—instead of strong-willed and impervious to the “secte philosophique,” as indicated in several criticisms? Whether or not spectators acted in the precise manner described by Fréron is difficult, if not fruitless, to pursue. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of spectator criticism is its use as a rhetorical weapon. Maybe Fréron described fictitious spectator behaviour as a critical tool, or as justification to go to the censor.

When we weigh Fréron's *La Relation d'une grande bataille* against his correspondence with Favart, Palissot, and other anti-philosophes, we can discern two conflicting criticisms. On the one hand, Fréron is the text's author and his criticism of *L'Écossaise* attempts to show that the play is inherently worthless and that it is only through concerted efforts by philosophes that *L'Écossaise* gained any sort of public success. But on the other hand Fréron's desperate pleas to the censor underline the play's “eventful” nature and its ability to subvert norms in spectator behaviour, dramaturgical construction, and publication practices. Fréron's view of the event speaks to a more powerful spectator—one who can determine the overall success of a play without regard to the opinions of established theatre critics. Fréron's actions show that the play's overall quality as determined by critics paled in comparison to how the general public felt about the play—perhaps best illustrated by the ability of such a mediocre “fatras” to cause a powerful critic to run to the censor and friends for help.

Fréron's multiple assessments of *L'Écossaise* produce a complex, but extremely interesting picture of how theatrical performance and pre-performance pamphleteering altered the opinions—and more precisely—the vocabulary of literary critics. In addition, his example may even serve as a miniature version of larger problems in critical literary discourse from the middle of the eighteenth century. In his voluminous *History of Modern Criticism*, René Welleck argues that this precise epoch stands out in the larger history of criticism and that “the strongest and most obvious change in the middle of the 18th century was the shift of critical concern to the reaction of the audience.”⁵⁰ Welleck mitigates this sweeping claim by adding that discursive movements during the Enlightenment were neither “unified” nor all-encompassing.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Fréron's turn from formal, textual elements of the play towards spectator reactions to (and manipulations of) theatrical experience parallels this complex movement towards a more audience-centred literary criticism.

Fréron was likely more implicated than any other person in the polemics surrounding the play, and one has to wonder if the tone of his writing is more the exception than the rule. But his review of Voltaire's *L'Écossaise* demonstrates the fragile and exciting nature of eighteenth-century theatre criticism—a genre that emerges as a distinct departure from the “docte” treatises of the seventeenth century and the more standardized “feuilletons” that dotted nineteenth-century newspapers. Although these energetic texts have long served as testimony to the vituperative philosophical war between *Encyclopédistes* and their detractors, they also, with a little more critical inquiry, reveal fictive and exciting elements in theatre criticism and polemical pamphleteering.



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⁵⁰ René Welleck, *A History of Modern Criticism: The Later Eighteenth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 41.

⁵¹ Welleck, 25.