Charles Palissot
The Philosophes

In 1760, the French playwright Charles Palissot de Montenoy wrote Les Philosophes – a scandalous farcical comedy about a group of opportunistic self-styled philosophers. Les Philosophes emerged in the charged historical context of the pamphlet wars surrounding the publication of Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie, and delivered an oblique but acerbic criticism of the intellectuals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, including the likes of Diderot and Rousseau.

This book presents the first high-quality English translation of the play, including critical apparatus. The translation is based on Olivier Ferret’s edition, and renders the text into iambic pentameter to preserve the character of the original. Adaptations are further provided of Ferret’s introduction and notes.

This masterful and highly accessible translation of Les Philosophes opens up this polemical text to a non-specialist audience. It will be a valuable resource to non-Francophone scholars and students working on the philosophical exchanges of the Enlightenment.

Moreover, this translation – the result of a year-long project undertaken by Jessica Goodman with six of her undergraduate French students – expounds the value of collaboration between scholar and student, and, as such, provides a model for other language tutors embarking on translation.

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Endnotes

1 When Voltaire republishes this preface in the *Facéties* (see above, Introduction), he adds a number of notes, which are presented here. Notes here are drawn both from Ferret’s edition of this preface (pp. 113–19), and my own edition of Voltaire’s re-publication, in *Facéties*, pp. 221–44.

2 Voltaire writes: ‘Alas! Did he have any other views other than the hope of earning a little money?’

3 Voltaire writes: ‘Where then is this support? What gratitude does he owe the public? Was his play performed again? Will it be performed? Is it read?’


5 The *Encyclopédie*.

6 Scepticism: the philosophy of Pyrrho, founded in 4BC.

7 Voltaire writes: ‘What an insolent denunciation! What anger! What public and atrocious slander! And why? All because Palissot’s *Sardanapale* was booed.’

This refers to Zarès, in which the eponymous character is the unrecognized son of Sardanapalus. The implication is that Palissot’s critiques come from wounded pride rather than any moral stance.

8 Voltaire writes: ‘This, then, is a whole part of the nation that Palissot has insulted.’

9 Voltaire writes: ‘But this original purpose was a licence controlled by laws: *Venere modum formidine fustis.*’

The quotation, meaning ‘Men changed their tune, and terror of the cudgel [led them back to goodly and gracious forms of speech]’, is

10 Palissot’s note in one of the 1760 editions: ‘Helvétius.’

11 Voltaire writes: ‘At the second performance it was necessary to cut fifty lines that outraged women and citizens with their most revolting brutality.’

12 Palissot’s note: ‘Voltaire.’

13 A reference to the ‘précieux’ salon of the Marquise de Rambouillet, implicitly mocked in Molière’s *Les Précieuses ridicules* (1659).

14 Charles Cotin (1604–1681) and Gilles Ménage (1613–1692), both members of contemporary academies, and satirized as Trissotin and Valdius in *Les Femmes savantes*.

15 Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1664) was accused of mocking religious believers; *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673), among many other of his titles, satirized the medical profession.

16 A reference to Racine’s only comedy, the 1678 *Les Plaideurs*.

17 Voltaire writes: ‘And it is a minor administrator, known only for being a scoundrel and for *Sardanapale*, who recalls to us these ancient models.’

18 Palissot’s note: ‘These words are taken from the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique*, in the entry for *Encyclopedia*. They were recently cited in a very interesting article in the *Année littéraire*.’


Voltaire adds his own note here, reading: ‘Reponse. Yes, Palissot, they prove that it is necessary to show strong hatred against baseness and envy, but they do not prove that baseness and envy have any right to slander men of merit for no other reason than that they have scorned you.’

19 Voltaire writes: ‘There is no question that the truly evil one is the author of several plays that have been booed, who writes a satirical piece to be performed occasionally in favour of satire.’

20 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie to the public; these words are not in the book that you cite.’
Indeed, instead they are a paraphrase of Boyer d’Argens’ *La Philosophie du bon sens*, 3 vols (The Hague, 1768), II, p. 226.

21 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie to the public; *l’Homme plante* is not by any of the *encyclopédistes* against whom you are raging.’

The text in question is a 1748 piece by La Mettrie.

22 This is the text by La Mettrie known as the *Anti-Sénèque* (1750); see Ferret, p. 117.

23 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie to the public; *La Vie heureuse* is not by any of the *encyclopédistes*.’

24 Ferret notes that the following quotations can be compared to passages in Helvétius’ *De l’esprit* (p. 117).

25 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie, *idem.*’

26 Voltaire writes: ‘*Idem.*’

27 Voltaire writes: ‘*Idem.*’

28 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie to the public: not a word of this appears in the ‘Discours préliminaire.’


29 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie to the public, for you cut these passages short.’

Four passages from the same article are presented here dissociated, when in fact they follow more closely. Palissot’s fragmented version gives a far stronger impression of the support for civil disobedience than Jaucourt puts forward in the original: Jaucourt condemns the arbitrary seizing of power, but Palissot cuts this element entirely.

30 Voltaire writes: ‘*Idem.*’

31 Voltaire writes: ‘*Idem.*’

Again, Palissot removes an element of Jaucourt’s argument, which supports filial obedience, in order to present the philosophes as anarchic.

32 Voltaire writes: ‘You lie with inconceivable impudence, there is not a word of what you quote.’

Indeed, François-Vincent Toussaint’s 1749 *Les Mœurs* contradicts the sentiments Palissot attributes to it.
Voltaire writes: ‘You lie with a punishable artifice. Here are the words of the author. After having shown how important it is to honour one’s father and mother, filial love, says he, even the most tender and affectionate, is not such a general obligation that it cannot be susceptible to certain exemptions; a father who shows only hatred can only be loved as much as is necessary to love one’s enemies: though a father may have faults in his mood, in his thoughts; these are vain pretexts for ingratitude; fall at his feet, hard and ungrateful heart, embrace his knees.’

Voltaire writes: ‘You lie more than ever; there is not a word of this in the passage you cite; but the very opposite is found on the final page of the chapter on wisdom; there the author gives these maxims: prefer honesty to utility, put a break on your desires.’

Voltaire’s criticism is not quite so easily explained here — in fact, Toussaint does imply that passions should be followed. However, he contextualizes his claims in a later paragraph: Voltaire might have done better to point to this later contradiction.

Voltaire writes: ‘You lie again, for though La Mettrie’s book might be bad, you imply that the author says what in fact he puts in the mouth of a debauched individual.’

On the possible identification of this ‘débauché’ with Hobbes, see *Facéties*, p. 244, n. 35.

Voltaire writes: ‘You are right to lay down your pen, but you are most guilty and most punishable for having taken it up in the first place, and at the same time entirely senseless, to have vomited up so many deceptions that it is so easy to confuse.’

Cf. the opening of Gresset, *Le Méchant*, I, i: ‘Things are going badly, and the marriage is off’.

Cf. Molière, *Les Femmes savantes*, I, I: ‘And not every mind is cut from the right cloth / To be made into a philosophe.’


A reference to the ‘Querelle des bouffons’, a dispute about the respective value of French and Italian music. The Italian comic opera troupe, the Buffoni, had visited Paris in 1752–1753, and enjoyed huge success. Supporters of the musical traditions of the French Académie Royale attacked the Italian emphasis on melody and lyrics, whilst those on the side of the Italians critiqued the French focus on harmony, as employed by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764, whose fictional nephew features in
the Diderot text that responds to Palissot’s play, see Introduction). It is implied that Cydalise, said here to spend time with ‘buffoons’, gave her support to the Italian side of the quarrel; placing her alongside Rousseau, whose Lettre sur la musique française claimed that ‘the French have no music and are unable to have one’ (in Essai sur l’origine des langues et autres textes (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), pp. 127–84 (p. 184); my translation).


42 The original text mentions Homer and Lycophron specifically: the latter was a tragic poet of the 3rd century BC, whose Alexandra contains a monologue from the eponymous heroine which is full of erudition and intentional obscurity. See also II, iii, below.

43 Cf. Clitandre in Les Femmes savantes, I, iv: ‘Marriage to Henriette is the only prize I crave’.

44 Cf. the exchange between Lisette and Chloé in Le Méchant, I, vi.

45 One of the more explicit references to Molière: Georges Dandin; or, the Thwarted Husband (1668) is a comedy-ballet, which tells the story of a rich peasant who marries the daughter of a pair of country nobles, by whom he is mocked for his lack of culture at every turn, all the while being cuckolded by his wife.

46 Cf. Palissot’s Petites lettres sur les grands philosophes: ‘They declared that they thought very little of the public; that they no longer wrote for them’.

47 Crates of Thebes (365–285 BC) was a philosopher and cynic. Delafarge suggests this is probably a reference to Helvétius’ De l’esprit, which was condemned by the Parisian Parlement when it appeared in 1758, but whose author was known to be generous and kind (p. 160).

48 Cf. Palissot, Petites lettres, ‘They tried to pull the wool over the eyes of the public, by yoking together the ideas of cricitism, satire, personalities, and pamphlets; by dint of complaining about persecution, they became the persecutors, and intolerance, which in all other circumstances is rejected, took its place in the sanctuary of the muses.’

49 The comparison between Socrates and the persecuted philosophes is a commonplace of philosophical literature between 1757–1760. It appears in a number of texts produced as part of the quarrel surrounding Les Philosophes, including Un disciple de Socrate, aux Athéniens, in Ferret, pp. 261–70.

50 Summary of the doctrine set out by Helvétius in De l’esprit.
51 Cf. Les Qu’est-ce?, in Ferret, p. 128.

52 Socrates (according to the writings of Plato, Apologia) claimed to have an inner voice that guided him, which in some sources is referred to as his daemon.

53 Gerardus Johannis Vossius, Dutch humanist (1577–1649) or his son Isaacus (1618–1689).

54 Casaubon, an erudite French Greek scholar (1559–1614).

55 Grotius, a Dutch jurist and diplomat (1583–1645).

56 Byzantine jurist, who was involved in the writing of the Code of Justinian in the 6th century AD.

57 Thales of Miletus (625–546 BC), mathematician, physicist, astronomer and philosopher, the oldest and most famous of the seven sages. The original line then mentions Anaxagoras (500–428 BC), another Greek philosopher — for the purposes of versification, we chose to replace him in our translation with Democritus (460–370 BC).

58 The first direct attack on Diderot. Le Fils naturel had already been the target of the second of the Petites lettres, published in 1757.

59 On Lycophron see above, note 140.

60 Here Palissot added a note: ‘The start of the useless book, Considérations sur les mœurs.’

This text, by Duclos, had appeared in 1751. The phrase, along with the sentence cited later in the scene, taken from Diderot, had already been attacked in the Petites lettres.

61 The Suda or Souda is a Byzantine dictionary, composed at the end of the 10th century, which was for a long time attributed to an author known as Souidas.

62 Palissot’s note here reads ‘This is the magnificent opening of the book entitled L’Interprétation de la nature.’

Diderot’s Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature appeared in 1753. The cited phrase, which appears at the start of the address ‘To those young people who are disposed towards the study of natural philosophy’, earned Diderot numerous sarcastic comments (cf. among others the Nouveau mémoire pour servir à l’histoire des Cacouacs, p. 27, and Discours du patriarche des Cacouacs (Cacopolis: [n. pub.], 1758), p. ix).

63 Cf. Philaminte in Les Femmes savantes.
Cf. the *Nouveau mémoire pour servir à l’histoire des Cacouacs*, p. 10: ‘Cacouacs who, standing up in public, shouted out at passers-by until they were hoarse’.

The sarcasm employed regarding the word ‘humanity’ incited a strong reaction from Voltaire, who wrote to Palissot in June 1760 (D8958): ‘I am one of the first to have had frequent recourse to that terrible word ‘humanity’, against which you make such a strong attack in your play.’

Although Rousseau was known for having abandoned his children (see *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), pp. 155–56), Delafarge argues this jibe is more likely to refer directly to Cydalise, who has just expressed a preference for humanity over her own daughter, as well as dismissing the memory of her dead husband on purely rational grounds (pp. 155–56).

The accusation seems to have some weight. In Chapter IV of his *Mémoires*, Morellet recalls the meetings between d’Alembert, Raynal, Helvétius, Galiani, Marmontel, Thomas and others in the Tuileries: ‘we often went to the Tuileries […] to meet other friends, hear the latest news, mock the government, and philosophise at our leisure.’ During the Seven Years War, whilst a change of alliances meant that France was allied with Austria and thus at war with Prussia, the sympathies of the philosophes’ ‘circle’ nonetheless remained with Frederick II of Prussia: ‘We took a close interest in the success of the King of Prussia, distraught when he had suffered some loss, and delighted when he had beaten the Austrian forces. We were indignant at this banding together of the European powers against a King who was known to us as a philosopher, and who was indeed much more favourable than any of his contemporaries to the establishment of truths that we regarded as useful, and that we made every attempt to broadcast to the world.’ (*Mémoires sur le dix-huitième siècle et sur la révolution* (Paris: Petit, 1818), p. 97).

Here Palissot opposes what must be believed (religion, dogma, tradition) to the purported new truths of the philosophes.

Palissot uses one of Diderot’s own *Pensées philosophiques* against him: ‘Incredulity is sometimes the vice of an idiot.’ (No. 32).

Allusion to Regnard’s comedy *Démocrite*, performed at the Comédie-Française in 1700: Strabo is the name of the comic valet who accompanies the Greek philosopher of the title.
The original French ‘copiste’ alludes to Rousseau, who was well-known for having taken on the job of copying music in order to earn a living (Confessions, p. 440).

An allusion to the pensions enjoyed by men of letters: Rousseau reports in the Confessions (pp. 445–50) that he could have received one for his Dévín du Village. See also Les Qu’est-ce?, in Ferret, p. 126.

At this point in the original, Dortidius switches from using the informal ‘tu’ to the more formal ‘vous’, signaling a breaking apart of the intimacy.

In Les Femmes savantes, Vadius and Trissotin argue in the presence of Philaminte (III, iii). Another argument between pedants is found in L’Amour médecin (II, iv and III, i).

Cf. Les Qu’est-ce?, in Ferret, p. 128.

Greek woman from Miletus, the lover and subsequently the wife of Pericles, famous for her beauty and wit. Her private life and her influence on politics were mocked in ancient Greek comedy.

Palissot notes that the French here (‘je suis sous le charme’) is drawn from Le Fils naturel. In fact, the line he cites (‘Je m’écria, presque sans le vouloir, il est sous le charme.’), is drawn from the second of the Entretiens sur le fils naturel, printed following the original edition of the play. See also the Nouveau mémoire pour servir à l’histoire des Cacouacs, p. 68.

Cf. Le Méchant, II, iii: ‘And the art of enjoying the world lies in mocking all who are in it. / My faith, when I examine all that compose it / I find no-one but us that is worth anything.’

Palissot notes: ‘See the Entretiens following the Fils naturel.’

Allusion to the resistance of Clairon, who tried — in vain — to prevent Les Philosophes from being received by the Comédie-Française. See Introduction.

This scene may have been deliberately suppressed in the printed text, but was performed in 1760. See Baring, pp. xxvii–xxviii, and Introduction.

Palissot’s note in the 1788 edition reads: ‘Diderot, author of the Bijoux indiscrets, a most obscene book, of the Lettre sur les sourds, of L’Interprétation de la nature, and of several other works of an often unintelligible metaphysics, desired to add to his reputation as philosophe that of dramatic author. He had performed Le Fils naturel, which was unfinished, and Le Père de famille, which remained in the theatre only thanks to the talent of the actor who played Saint-Albin. These two comedies, written in a most overblown
prose, served as models for all the lugubrious *drames* which have since afflicted our stages.’

*Les Bijoux indiscrets* had appeared in 1748, the *Lettre sur les sourds* in 1751, and *Le Père de famille* in 1758.

83 Probably an allusion to the *Réflexions sur l’existence de l’âme et sur l’existence de Dieu*, published in the collection of *Nouvelles libertés de penser*, and quoted in particular in the *Catéchisme* [...] *des Cacouacs.*

84 A note to the 1788 edition reads: ‘Here is what M. de Voltaire wrote to the author of this strange discourse: ‘I have received, sir, your new book against the human species. Never has anyone employed so much wit in an attempt to make us stupid. The reader feels the desire to walk on all fours when he reads your text: however, since it is more than sixty years since I have done so, I believe unfortunately that it will be impossible for me to take on this attitude once more.’ N.B. that these most bizarre paradoxes, so degrading to reason, enjoyed then, and perhaps still enjoy now, the title of philosophy. It is therefore true, as Bayle himself recognized, that the abuse of reason leads to madness. The moral aim of the play was to prove this; but since comedy allows for no better argument than ridicule, the new and bold presentation of Crispin walking on all fours produced in the theatres of Paris the effect that it would have produced on the stages of Athens; and truly, French theatre has few examples of such a comic situation.’

Cf. Voltaire’s famous letter to Rousseau of August 1755 (D6451).

85 A 1788 note reads: ‘Pamphlet, now forgotten, but famous at the time thanks to the context. In that strange period when our philosophes formed an alliance with a group of buffoons against French musique, this text was one of their manifestos. This scene, the only one that demands notes, and the only one belonging to the genre of vaudeville, was applauded for its novelty; but the play only being performed for a second run more than twenty years after the first, the author thought it wise to cut this scene, which had become too incomprehensible for the majority of spectators.’

*Le Petit prophète de Boehmischbroda* was a pamphlet pastiching the prophecies of the Old Testament, written by Grimm in 1753 during the Querelle des Bouffons.

86 A note from 1782 reads: ‘All the lines describing Crispin’s stance were cut for the second performance [of the 1781 reprise], since at the first a number of loud and clearly important voices were raised with apparent fury at this scene, on the false and ridiculous pretext that it was insulting to the memory of the famous citizen of Geneva. The author preferred to spoil his denouement than to expose the actor performing the role of Crispin to any more slights. We know that in 1760 the same scene, in the hands of the famous Préville, had the most brilliant success; and if the author, forced
to cede to circumstances, thought it necessary to sacrifice himself for a
handful of performances, we might imagine that the flattering memory of
such a success might have rendered such a sacrifice less painful. But out of
respect for the public, and for this earlier support, he not only retains here
but will retain in all future editions this most comic situation, to which
provincial actors are accustomed, and which will certainly be demanded
again one day in the capital.'

87 Palissot’s note here reads: ‘He takes a lettuce from his pocket.’

88 Cf. the ending of Le Méchant, V, ix.