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Author: Passeron, Irène

Title: How to read d'Alembert's correspondence?

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Review text:

This is an interesting paper for historians of science and for mathematicians interested in historiographical specifics. It deals with the details and difficulties of editing the correspondence of one of the most renowned mathematicians and intellectuals of the 18th century: Jean le Rond d'Alembert. It is a result of the recent research developed on the occasion of the tercentenary of his birth. D'Alembert's is a large correspondence, with more than 2,000 letters written in a period of around 40 years. It is the correspondence of a mathematician, and also of an intellectual, social and political figure in the convulsed period previous to the French Revolution. D'Alembert corresponded not only with mathematicians and scientists but also with other intellectual and political figures from all over Europe—including King Frederic II of Prussia and Queen Catherine II of Russia. In this paper, Passeron explains not only all these factors but also the constitutive elements of a letter—what makes a letter to be a letter—that have to be taken into account in order to understand and interpret the correspondence: the movement (the origin and target of the letter), the sender and the recipient. Other difficulties in interpretation reside in deciding which ones are private letters and which ones are destined for a wider audience, written with the knowledge that the recipient will read them publicly. All these factors require editorial choices in order to present an edition of the correspondence that aims to be more than a grouping of the letters, like the edition made by Passeron herself.