The 1760s was a pivotal decade for the *philosophes*. In the late 1750s their cause had been at a low ebb, but it was transformed in the eyes of public opinion by such events as the Calas affair in the early 1760s. By the end of the decade, the *philosophes* were dominant in key literary institutions such as the Comédie-Française and the Académie française, and their enlightened programme became more widely accepted.

Many of the essays in this volume focus on Voltaire, revealing him as a writer of fiction and polemic who, during this period, became increasingly interested in questions of justice and jurisprudence. Other essays examine the literary activities of Voltaire’s contemporaries, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Chamfort, Rétif, Sedaine and Marmontel.

It is no exaggeration to describe the 1760s as Voltaire’s decade. It is he more than any other author who set the agenda and held the public’s attention during this seminal period for the development of Enlightenment ideas and values. Voltaire’s dominance of the 1760s can be summed up in a single phrase: it is in these years that he became the ‘patriarch of Ferney’.

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