



## Who gets to dispute? Gender, nation and representation in two versions of Pierre de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais*

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In his work on the representation of historical events in theatre, Freddie Rokem writes that “[c]ollective identities, whether they are cultural / ethnic, national, or even transnational, grow from a sense of the past; the theatre very forcefully participates in the ongoing representations and debates about these pasts, sometimes contesting the hegemonic understanding of the historical heritage on the basis of which these identities have been constructed, sometimes reinforcing them”.<sup>1</sup> With this tension in mind – that the staging of history can both strengthen and question dominant narratives of the past *and* present – I would like to provide an interesting case study from the “performance of history” in eighteenth-century France: Pierre-Laurent de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais*, affirmed by its author as “the first French tragedy with which the Nation is given the pleasure of taking an interest in itself”.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, my goal is to describe the critical reception of De Belloy's tragedy – a play about the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), which was performed at the Comédie-Française in 1765 and on the heels of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), and which was then performed at the Théâtre de la Nation during the French Revolution from 1789 to 1791. Then, moving from an examination of the play's public import to a close analysis of the play-text's contested legacy, I will focus on some gaps and manipulations of remembrance – memories lost; memories invented; memories disputed – owing to an alternative version of de Belloy's play. In both of these receptive contexts – the first staging of the play in 1765 and *Le Siège de Calais* during the Revolution – the ideas of what is disputable and who gets to participate in that dispute are fundamentally different. This textual fragility, inscribed into the play through editorial changes to the *manuscrit de souffleur*, ultimately challenges conceptions of the play's overall meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Iowa City, University of Iowa, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> “la première Tragédie Française où l'on ait procuré à la Nation le plaisir de s'intéresser pour elle-même”. Pierre-Laurent Burette de Belloy, “Préface”, *Le Siège de Calais, tragédie, dédiée au Roi, par M. de Belloy, représentée pour la première fois, par les Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi, le 13 Février 1765. Suivie des notes historiques*, Paris, Duchesne, 1765, p. 1. All references to *Le Siège de Calais* are from this edition.

based solely on the 1765 event.<sup>3</sup> With the discovery and the analysis of an alternative “*Le Siège de Calais*”, the tragedy emerges as a dynamic example of how theatre influenced and was influenced by stakeholders in major socio-political and aesthetic debates – debates focusing on the role of women in political discussion, the use of historical fact and fictional narrative in theatre, and the depiction of French patriotism during the twilight of the *ancien régime*.

*Le Siège de Calais* recounts the story of the city’s bombardment by the English King Edward III in 1346. After bringing the city to its knees, Edward allows Calais’s municipal staff, led by the play’s hero, Eustache de Saint-Pierre, to negotiate a peace treaty. The agreement, however, includes a difficult stipulation: in addition to handing over political control to the English, Saint-Pierre and six of his fellow *bourgeois* are to walk the gallows as punishment for the entire town’s insolence.

Edward gives the *bourgeois* chances to live at various moments throughout the play, but only if Saint-Pierre convinces his compatriots to openly support the English crown (act II) or support French traitors, like Count Harcourt, whom Edward hopes to install as a puppet ruler of the city in act III. Undeterred, Saint-Pierre and his men will only back Philippe de Valois (Philip VI), whom they view as France’s legitimate sovereign. Walking to their deaths in the final act, Saint-Pierre and his accomplices nonetheless stave off execution, thanks to a persuasive intervention by Aliénor, the niece of the local governor, Jean de Vienne. Aliénor convinces Edward that by executing Saint-Pierre and his men, the English king will lose the hearts and minds of the people he so eagerly hopes to conquer (v.v). Convinced by both Aliénor’s arguments and by the actions of the *bourgeois*, Edward frees the prisoners but hoists the English flag over Calais, where it would fly for approximately the next two hundred years.<sup>4</sup>

### Disputed popularity: the critical reception of *Le Siège de Calais* (1765)<sup>5</sup>

*Le Siège de Calais* premiered at the Comédie-Française on 13 February 1765 and quickly became a popular sensation. De Belloy’s tragedy was performed fourteen times between February and late March 1765. The play was then reprised at the Comédie-Française ten times in 1769; three times per year in 1773, 1775, 1778, 1781, and 1784; and once or twice in most years until the Revolution. It then had a stellar season in 1789 – a very patriotic year – when it was performed nine times.<sup>6</sup> De Belloy’s play also was performed in private for Louis XV and his family at Versailles and it was quickly published in March 1765. Charles Collé, at the time a successful playwright, critic and official reader to Monsieur (Louis XV’s brother), attested that the play “was received with the grandest applause”<sup>7</sup> –

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed assessment of the play, see Logan J. Connors (ed.), *Le Siège de Calais*, Introduction, London, MHRA, 2014, p. 1-59.

<sup>4</sup> Calais remained under English control until January 1558, when an army led by the Duke of Guise retook the city for the French.

<sup>5</sup> Parts of the following section are reprinted here from my “Introduction” to *Le Siège de Calais* (2014). I would like to thank the editors at the MHRA for allowing me to reuse material from the edition.

<sup>6</sup> For a complete list of all the performances of *Le Siège de Calais* from 1765 to its final performance in 1814, see A. Joannidès, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1900, dictionnaire général des pièces et des auteurs* (Paris, 1901), Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1970. See also the *Calendrier Electronique des spectacles sous l’ancien régime et sous la Révolution* (CESAR), [www.cesar.org.uk](http://www.cesar.org.uk) [accessed 10 August 2014].

<sup>7</sup> “fut reçue avec les plus grands applaudissements”. Charles Collé, *Journal historique ou Mémoires critiques et littéraires sur les ouvrages dramatiques et sur les événements les plus mémorables depuis 1748 jusqu’en 1772* (Journal), ii, Paris, Imprimerie bibliographique, 1807, p. 162.

a bit of praise from an author who was certainly jealous of de Belloy after his own "pièce nationale", *Le Roi et le meunier* (the early title of *La Partie de chasse de Henri IV*), failed to pass the king's censorship rules just a few months earlier, in autumn 1764.<sup>8</sup>

Collé was not the only critic to notice the energetic reception of de Belloy's tragedy. In their *Anecdotes dramatiques*, Clément and de La Porte described the premiere of the play as "one of the most remarkable events in the history of our Theatre".<sup>9</sup> Grimm wrote that "Providence" had chosen

the tragedy of *Le Siège de Calais* to mark an era of important events: what happened today at the Comédie-Française will be seen in posterity as one of those surprising revolutions that no possible effort of human wisdom could have predicted or planned.<sup>10</sup>

Criticism of *Le Siège de Calais* reveals an uncommon public reaction to the play. In their reviews, Clément and de La Porte, Collé and Grimm refuse to comment at first on the play's versification, character composition, or plot; above all, visceral public reaction to performance dominates the criticism because *avant tout*, the premiere of *Le Siège de Calais* was an *événement public*.<sup>11</sup>

For critics, *Le Siège de Calais* had become a State affair and their reviews reflected this change of fields. Due to the play's overt governmental and public support, harsh criticism – or even honest judgment of the play – was a risky undertaking for Parisian writers. For example, the critic "Manson" warns other writers that in February 1765, "*Le Siège de Calais* has become, one might say, an affair of the State. It would be dangerous to say something about it other than praise".<sup>12</sup> And the authors of the *Mémoires secrets* argue that "the fanaticism is at the point where experts dare not give their opinions anymore. You are called a bad patriot for even raising your voice".<sup>13</sup> Critics at the *Mercure de France*, despite being the first to actually provide their readers with excerpts from the dramatic text, focus like other critics on the atmosphere surrounding the play instead of on *Le Siège de Calais* itself:

Not only are the reserved seats filled until the closing of the theatre, but the other seats are full so early and with such a mass of people, that there are crowds pouring out onto the

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<sup>8</sup> Collé describes his ambivalence toward de Belloy in his *Journal*: "J'aurais pu espérer d'obtenir une partie de ces honneurs, si le Roi eût permis la représentation de mon *Henri IV*. C'était pareillement un poème national, et plus intéressant peut-être que le *Siège de Calais*", *Journal*, ii, p. 171-172.

<sup>9</sup> "un de ces événements remarquables, qui font époque dans l'Histoire de notre Théâtre". Jean-Marie Bernard Clément and Joseph de La Porte, *Anecdotes dramatiques*, ii, Paris, Duchesne, 1775, p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> "la tragédie du *Siège de Calais* pour marquer l'époque des plus grands événements: celui qui s'est passé aujourd'hui à la Comédie-Française sera compté par la postérité au nombre de ces révolutions étonnantes qu'aucun effort de sagacité humaine n'aurait pu ni prévoir ni prévenir." Melchior Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, vi (1765), Paris, Garnier frères, 1878, p. 256.

<sup>11</sup> For more critical accounts of *Le Siège de Calais*'s reception, see Charles Collé, *Journal*, ii, p. 8-32; Grimm, *Corr. litt.*, vi, p. 243-244; *Mercure de France*, i, Paris, April 1765, p. 186-191; *Les Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la République des Lettres en France depuis 1762 jusqu'à nos jours*, ii, London, 1784, p. 157-160; Jean-François de La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, Paris, 1801, p. xiii; Clément and de La Porte, *Anecdotes dramatiques*, ii, p. 170-171; *Le Journal encyclopédique*, Paris, 15 May 1765, p. 97-99. For a synthesis of the critical reception of the play's premiere, see Logan J. Connors, "L'esthétique du patriotisme dans la critique théâtrale à l'époque de la guerre de sept ans. Le cas du *Siège de Calais* (1765)", in *Le public et la politique des arts au Siècle des Lumières*, ed. Christophe Henry and Daniel Rabreau, Bordeaux, William Blake, 2011, p. 113-120.

<sup>12</sup> "Le *Siège de Calais* étant devenu, pour ainsi dire, une affaire d'État, il serait dangereux d'en oser dire autre chose que du bien". Manson, *Examen impartial du Siège de Calais, poème dramatique de M. de Belloy*, Calais (Paris?), 1765, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> "le fanatisme gagne au point que les connaisseurs n'osent plus dire leur avis. On est réputé mauvais patriote, pour oser élever la voix". *Mémoires secrets* (February 1765), reprinted, Paris, Garnier, 1874, p. 135.

Rue de la Comédie, just like in the orchestra at the most popular venues. M. de Belloy's new production is giving him so many honours that the Nation seems to be adopting his popularity as its own glory.<sup>14</sup>

Then, after providing a long excerpt from the fifth act (and after apologising to readers for not including a copy of the *entire* play in their review), the writers at the *Mercure* assert that "after the ninth performance, the play was still as successful as after the premiere".<sup>15</sup>

With so little commentary on the actual substance of de Belloy's play, what do we know now about how *Le Siège de Calais* was performed in February 1765? It was indeed a star-studded cast that took to the stage for the 13 February premiere and the subsequent performances in Versailles and Paris until the Easter holiday. Claire Josèphe Hippolyte Leris (known as Mlle de Clairon or just "la Clairon"), one of the most famous eighteenth-century actresses, played the sentimental role of Aliénor; Le Kain, Voltaire's favourite actor and arguably the most famous tragic actor in France, interpreted the role of treacherous Edward III and Brizard (or Brizart), took on the role of Eustache Saint-Pierre.<sup>16</sup>

The play was an obvious hit among government officials; upon seeing a performance of the tragedy at his private theatre in Versailles, Louis XV ordered *Le Siège de Calais* to be performed at the Comédie-Française on 12 March at the crown's expense for those who could not afford to normally attend a show there. According to the *Mémoires secrets*, this performance was nothing short of a tumult:

It is difficult to imagine the amount of people who showed up at the Theatre for the free performance of *Le Siège de Calais*: the street and the surrounding area were full as of the morning. The show started at half past one, and it was heard with utmost attention by the spectators. We don't doubt that there were tricksters who implored the public to applaud at specific moments. The author was obliged to come forth, and he was received with a round of applause; the audience honored him by linking his name with the king's, as they yelled: *Long live the King and Monsieur de Belloy!* There were many courtesans at the ceremony: they left after the performance and promptly returned to Versailles.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Non seulement les places qui peuvent être retenues le sont jusqu'à la clôture du théâtre; les autres sont remplies de si bonne heure, et avec tant de foule, qu'il y a chaque jour des flots du public dans la rue de la Comédie, comme au parterre dans les plus nombreuses assemblées. Cette nouvelle production de M. de Belloy lui fait d'autant plus d'honneur, que la Nation semble l'avoir adoptée pour sa propre gloire". *Mercure de France*, March 1765, Paris, Duchesne, 1765, p. 160.

<sup>15</sup> "après la neuvième représentation, le succès est égal à celui de la première". *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> According to the *Mémoires secrets*, Brizart was eventually replaced by the actor Molé at the third or fourth performance.

<sup>17</sup> "On ne peut rendre l'affluence du peuple qui s'est présenté à la Comédie, où l'on donnait gratis la tragédie du Siège de Calais: la rue et les alentours étaient pleins dès le matin. On a commencé le spectacle à une heure et demie, et il a été écouté avec une attention surprenante de la part des spectateurs. On ne doute pas qu'il n'y eut là des gagistes qui les avertissaient d'applaudir aux endroits désignés. L'auteur a été obligé de se montrer, et a été reçu avec les acclamations les plus réitérées; on lui a fait l'honneur insigne de joindre son nom à celui du roi, et l'on a crié: Vivent le roi et M. de Belloy! Des courtisans en grand nombre étaient présents à cette cérémonie: ils sont partis sur le champ pour en rendre compte à Versailles." *Mémoires secrets* (March 1765), p. 138.

Other critics confirm the *public* bedlam at the free performance – a moment with ambiguous origins, given the possibility that it was caused by the efforts of “gagistes” and other paid officials.<sup>18</sup>

In the early spring of 1765, reviewers of *Le Siège de Calais* hesitated to underscore any of the play’s shortcomings, despite sometimes finding spectator responses to the play “surprising” or “exaggerated”. Writers were quick to focus on the play’s reception but slow to comment on its plot, character compositions or versification. As soon as the initial burst of energy subsided, however, and especially after the theatre closed during the Lenten season, Parisian critics resurfaced with lukewarm opinions of *Le Siège de Calais*. De Belloy’s dazzling rise to fame was rapid but increasingly contested as the energetic atmosphere at the theatre subsided and print copies of the play circulated around Paris and the provinces.

The *philosophe* clan launched the most severe critiques of the tragedy. Diderot and Grimm saw in *Le Siège de Calais* less of a patriotic tragedy and more of a continuation of simplistic antagonism, bad writing and anti-*philosophe* slandering from the previous decade. The *philosophes* first pointed to Mauni’s comments on national sentiment in act III – comments that were for *philosophes* just as much a reflection on medieval patriotism as a slight against France’s cosmopolitan intellectuals in 1765:

MAUNI.

I hate those cold hearts; dead for their country,  
Who see any misfortune with deep tranquility.  
They honor themselves as Citizens of the World.  
Pretending, anywhere they turn, to love humanity  
Just in order to not serve it in their own city.  
Ungrateful sons, vile burdens to the breast that birthed them,  
And worthy of nothing by the loss of their being. (III.iii)<sup>19</sup>

“Citizens of the World”, “Ungrateful sons”: de Belloy’s claim that he was “reunifying” France after a crushing military defeat is not exactly true: internationalists, cosmopolitans and humanitarians are apparently not invited into the author’s patriotic society.<sup>20</sup>

The *philosophes* responded to this social critique in de Belloy’s tragedy, showing how *Le Siège de Calais* was part of a suite of anti-*philosophique* plays and pamphlets that appeared in France during the late 1750s and early 1760s. According to the *philosophes*, de Belloy had rehashed themes from works such as Palissot’s *Les Philosophes*, Poinsonnet de Sivry’s *Les Philosophes de bois*, Pierre-Nicolas Brunet’s *La Rentrée des théâtres ou l’Invention* and André Cailleau’s *Les Petits philosophes* – plays in which authors harped on

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, “Lettre VI”, in *Lettres et observations à une dame de Province, sur Le Siège de Calais, ornées d’une Carte Géographique de cette Ville*, Paris, chez L’Esclapard, 1765.

<sup>19</sup> “Je hais ces cœurs glacés et morts pour leur pays, / Qui, voyant ses malheurs dans une paix profonde / S’honorent du grand nom de Citoyens du Monde. / Feignent, dans tout climat, d’aimer l’humanité. / Pour ne la point servir dans leur propre cité. / Fils ingrats, vils fardeaux du sein qui les fit naître, / Et dignes du néant, par l’oubli de leur être.” (III.iii)

<sup>20</sup> De Belloy never changed his mind about the *philosophes*. Summarising his opinion of them in a *Traité de Tragédie* (unfinished at the time of his death in 1775), the author wrote that “l’abus de la Philosophie a été plus funeste que la Philosophie elle-même n’aurait pu être utile [...]”. In *Fragments d’un Traité de La Tragédie, par M. De Belloy de l’Académie française, citoyen de Calais* (1773-1774), in *Œuvres complètes du Belloy*, vi, Paris, Cussac, 1787, p. 161.

the *philosophes'* proclivities towards anti-clericalism, internationalism and anglophilia.<sup>21</sup> In his critique of *Le Siège de Calais* Diderot mixes his disdain for de Belloy's play with a broader complaint about theatre criticism in Paris:

The success of the *Siège de Calais* is one of those rare and unexpected phenomena that it would be impossible to see, I think, outside of Paris. The play was a real State event, and I haven't seen such a warm and enthusiastic public reception since *Ramponneau* and the *Comédie des Philosophes*. Those who even dared to talk about the play disinterestedly and without admiration – I'm not even talking about critiquing it – were seen as bad citizens, or even worse, as *philosophes*: for the *philosophes* were known to not have been convinced by the sublime nature of the play.<sup>22</sup>

Diderot changes the trajectory of the discussion surrounding *Le Siège de Calais*. The *philosophe* avoids any mention of *nations*, *patries* or *patriotisme* in order to focus on what he views as a totalitarian rhetoric about *Le Siège de Calais* that fails to let dissenting voices into the mix. Then, instead of attaching de Belloy's play to a long tradition from Antiquity or from the seventeenth century (de Belloy's strategy in his preface and with his various "paratexts") or ending his criticism with shallow praise of the play, Diderot links *Le Siège de Calais* to Jean Ramponneau, the owner of a bawdy cabaret, and to Palissot's *Les Philosophes*, a slanderous, anti-*philosophe* play that was one of the biggest scandals in the history of the Comédie-Française.<sup>23</sup>

Diderot replaces patriotism with polemics and then turns toward traditional modes of theatre criticism by attacking the character composition and dialogue in de Belloy's tragedy: "One of the main faults of this play is that the characters, instead of saying what they should say, almost always say what their speeches and their actions should make me think and feel; these are two very different things".<sup>24</sup> Diderot, in perhaps the first close analysis of the tragedy's aesthetic or intellectual merits, criticises de Belloy for his facile, emotive scenes. According to the *philosophe*, de Belloy's characters are obvious, two-dimensional, and transparent; *Le Siège de Calais* speaks at the spectator instead of for the spectator. For Diderot, de Belloy's tragedy, like Palissot's *Les Philosophes*, is a

<sup>21</sup> For more information on the pamphlet wars between *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes*, consult Olivier Ferret, *La Fureur de nuire: échanges pamphlétaires entre philosophes et anti-philosophes (1750-1770)*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2007, and Didier Masseur, *Les ennemis des philosophes*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2000. For specific information on the theatrical arm of this debate, see Logan J. Connors, *Dramatic Battles in Eighteenth-Century France: Philosophes, Anti-Philosophes and Polemical Theatre*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> "Le succès de la tragédie du Siège de Calais est un de ces phénomènes imprévus et singuliers qu'il serait, je crois, impossible de voir ailleurs qu'à Paris. Cette pièce a fait réellement un événement dans l'État, et depuis Ramponneau et la Comédie des Philosophes, je n'ai rien vu dont le public se soit occupé avec autant de chaleur et d'enthousiasme. Ceux qui ont osé, je ne dis pas la critiquer, mais en parler froidement et sans admiration, ont été regardés comme mauvais citoyens, ou, ce qui pis est, comme philosophes: car les philosophes ont passé pour n'être pas convaincus de la sublimité de la pièce." "Lettre de M. Diderot" in Grimm, *Corr. litt.* vi (1 April 1765), p. 243.

<sup>23</sup> In his *Les Philosophes*, Charles Palissot staged real life *philosophes*, such as Diderot, Duclos and Helvétius in a scathing attack against them and their works. For more information on the successful and polemical debut of Charles Palissot's *Les Philosophes*, see Ferret, Introduction to *Les Philosophes*, Saint-Etienne, Presses universitaires de Saint-Etienne, 2002; Christophe Cave, "Le Rire des anti-philosophes", *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, 32 (2000), p. 227-239; and Connors, *Dramatic Battles*, p. 73-112.

<sup>24</sup> "L'un des principaux défauts de cette pièce, c'est que les personnages, au lieu de dire ce qu'ils doivent dire, disent presque toujours ce que leurs discours et leurs actions devraient me faire penser et sentir, et ce sont deux choses bien différentes". Grimm, *Corr. litt.*, vi, p. 241.

mere example of opportunism – an overzealous representation of French fear and institutional bickering hoisted up in front of French society at the right time and at the right place.

The critical quarrel following the play's debut was complex and surprisingly void of discussions about the "patriotic genre", the author's so-called invention and what would emerge as the reason behind de Belloy's election to the *Académie française*. Several authors, such as Grimm and Collé, focus intently on the public "bruit" surrounding the play; others, like Diderot and Elie-Catherine Fréron, harp on formal elements, arguing that *Le Siège de Calais* is not just a bad example of *théâtre patriotique* – it is a bad example of theatre *tout court*. What is intriguing about the critical debate surrounding *Le Siège de Calais* is the refusal by commentators to appraise patriotic drama as a genre. Despite the fact that de Belloy insists on the novelty of his "invention" throughout the preface to *Le Siège*, critics are reluctant to provide their opinion on this type of theatre: they seem to either support tacitly de Belloy's use of the genre or construe patriotic theatre as nothing new – as just another popular form of theatre in eighteenth-century France.

The *philosophes* were not the only critics of *Le Siège de Calais*. Fréron, despite liking some of the play's characters, reproves what he sees as several anachronisms in de Belloy's narrative. Focusing on Mauni's previously quoted anti-*philosophe* statement in act III, Fréron writes:

What we can critique in Mauni's lines is that, under *Philippe IV* and under *Edward III*, just as under *Louis XV*, there were no great *Philosophes* who deserved the title, *Citizens of the World*. This fault will not escape a reading of *Le Siège de Calais*; the author makes his actors speak as if they lived in our own time.<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, Fréron cannot pass over an opportunity to lambast his *philosophe* enemies: according to the editor of the *Année littéraire*, the word *philosophe* is not only anachronistic but it also does not even apply to his adversaries in 1765. But in his review, Fréron supports the *philosophes*, *de facto*, by rebuking de Belloy for including the criticism of them in his tragedy. Fréron, like his enemies, is unhappy that de Belloy has reinvigorated the *philosophe* vs. anti-*philosophe* debate that had stained the Comédie-Française with controversy after Palissot's *Les Philosophes* and Voltaire's *Le Café ou l'Écossaise* in 1760.

Reviews of *Le Siège de Calais* show how traditional critical factions reorganised during the 1760s, and especially, how the dichotomy between *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes* – an essential division inside the Republic of Letters during the late 1750s and early 1760s – became less pertinent after the Seven Years' War. After an oppressive undercurrent initially prevented critics from accurately portraying the positive and negative aspects of *Le Siège de Calais*, a critical division emerged, which pitted government officials and France's war-weary spectators on one side and erudite *hommes de lettres* – *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes* alike – on the other side.

This growing divide is clearly illustrated in a summer 1765 review of *Le Siège de Calais* by the *Journal des savants*. The anonymous author is surprised that several writers have criticised such a powerful, *public* play. The author concludes an overwhelmingly

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<sup>25</sup> "Ce qu'on peut reprocher à ces vers que dit Mauni, c'est que, sous Philippe de Valois et sous Edouard III, il n'y avait point, ainsi que sous Louis XV, de grands Philosophes qui s'honorassent du titre de Citoyens du Monde. Ce défaut ne nous aura pas échappé, Monsieur, en lisant *Le Siège de Calais*; l'auteur y fait quelquefois parler ses Acteurs comme s'ils vivaient de notre temps." Fréron, *Année littéraire*, IV, Paris, Lejay, 1765, p. 315.



positive review of the tragedy with the statement: "Therefore, it is the steady and unyielding judgment of the Public that we hope to provide for our Readers".<sup>26</sup> The author's assessment that the "Public" should judge the quality of theatre is key to understanding the critical response to *Le Siège de Calais*. Who is the "Public"? The king and his cronies? The theatre's spectators? The author of the critique himself? The author fails to provide a precise definition of his "Public" but it is clear that the critics and *philosophes* like Fréron and Diderot are excluded. Disappointed by the posture of these established critics, the *Journal des savants* confirms that an unidentified, ambiguous "Public" should decide the merits of *Le Siège de Calais*. The author of this critique, by possibly indicating that the audience had assumed the role of "le Public", shows how spectators garnered more agency as critical decision-makers during this precise time.<sup>27</sup> *Le Siège de Calais*, and other plays that critics scorned and the public adored, illuminates a contrast between the tastes of experts and those of what was perceived as a larger "Public". This division is essential in understanding the rise and fall of de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais* as well as the similar trajectories of a host of other "public successes" during the eighteenth century.

Whatever one's opinion of *Le Siège de Calais*, the meteoric rise of de Belloy's career after 1765 is indisputable. Soon after the play's February premiere, de Belloy emerged as a star in French political, literary and artistic milieus. In May 1765, Calais's mayor invited de Belloy to receive a cash prize as well as the title of "Citoyen honorable de Calais" – a title he would continue to use until his death. A month after the premiere, Louis XV invited de Belloy to Versailles, where he awarded him the prestigious *médaille dramatique*. De Belloy was the first and last recipient of the *médaille*, a prize created by the king for playwrights with three public successes at the Comédie-Française (de Belloy only had one real success with *Le Siège de Calais* and a modest success with *Zelmire* in 1762). Collé recounts this atypical compensation in his *Journal*:

M. de Belloy is the first poet of the theatre to obtain the *Medal for Drama*. It consists on one side of a portrait of the King; on the other, Apollo, who wears a laurel crown interlaced with ribbon, where the names Corneille, Molière, and Racine are written, as well as these words in latin: *Et qui nascentur ab illis*.<sup>28</sup> In the space next to this, M. de Belloy was allowed to engrave the fact that he is the first author to receive the prize.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> "C'est donc le jugement fixe et irrevocable du Public que nous prétendons offrir ici à nos Lecteurs". This review was strategically republished in de Belloy's *Œuvres complètes*, ii, p. 232.

<sup>27</sup> There is a considerable amount of scholarship on the advent and proliferation of a critical public sphere related to theatre. For the origins of "public criticism" in seventeenth-century French dramatic productions, see Joan DeJean's discussion of spectators and *doctes* in *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 35-50; also see chapter 5 of Hélène Merlin-Kajman, *Public et Littérature en France au xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Société des Belles Lettres, 2004, p. 154-177. For more information on the proliferation of "public criticism" that characterised discourse on eighteenth-century French theatre, see the introduction to Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791*, Ithaca and London, Cornell, 1999, p. 3-12; see also chapter 6, "The Consumers of Culture", in Lauren R. Clay, *The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies*, Ithaca, NY, and London, Cornell, 2013, p. 163-195.

<sup>28</sup> "And those that spring forward from them".

<sup>29</sup> "M. de Belloy est le premier des poètes de théâtre qui ait obtenu la médaille dramatique. Elle avait d'un côté le portrait du Roi; de l'autre un Apollon qui tient une couronne de laurier, entrelacée d'un ruban, où sont écrits les noms de Corneille, Molière et Racine, et ces mots latins: Et qui nascentur ab illis. Dans la place qui reste sur ce côté, on a permis à M. de Belloy de faire graver qu'il est le premier qui ait remporté ce prix." Collé, *Journal*, ii, p. 169.



De Belloy received invitations to balls and parties in Paris and the provinces. Despite several fears that the play would lose some of its lustre in print form, *Le Siège de Calais* was published in March with praise from several literary journals and personalities.<sup>30</sup> It was then published several more times in 1765 and the late 1760s, and eventually, found its way into anthologies of dramatic literature from the period.

### Critical changes: two versions of de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais*

If our judgement of *Le Siège de Calais* is based solely on the events of 1765, the play emerges as little more than a testimony of the tastes and practices of theatrical life under the *ancien régime*. De Belloy's tragedy hoists the monarchy up on the boards of France's national theatre; spectators are thrilled; critics have a more ambiguous relationship to the play. While the tragedy had its share of critics during the 1760s – mainly, the *philosophes* – it is essential to note the close proximity between the government's agenda and the most important political messages depicted in the plot – a story that was warmly received by spectators throughout France. Critics of the tragedy's 1765 premiere nonetheless took de Belloy to task for several historical incongruences between his play and his supposed sources,<sup>31</sup> even if they failed to take on the patriotic genre or any of de Belloy's political messages.<sup>32</sup>

For example, several critics disparaged de Belloy for replacing Queen Philippa of Hainault, Edward III's wife – who convinced the King not to kill the bourgeois according to the sources – with a fictionalised character, Aliénor. Aliénor did not exist historically – a fact underlined by Collé in his *Journal*.<sup>33</sup> What some critics found disturbing was the powerful role that Aliénor plays in creating, or at least influencing, real historical events and international policies, such as Saint-Pierre's decision to stand and fight and Edward's release of the bourgeois prisoners. Commenting on the future of Europe in a moving speech to conclude the tragedy, Aliénor offers advice to the leaders of both France and England:

ALIÉNOR.  
Great prince, with my King, because of our plot you are together!  
The heavens were made for hearts that are alike.  
Ah! Re-establish the rights of humanity!  
To Europe, both of you, make your laws cherished;  
So that, by you, the virtues of this fertile Mother,  
Will be the Queen of Kings, and the Oracle of the World! (v.vii)<sup>34</sup>

Aliénor's concluding remarks call for an end to an international dispute between powerful monarchs. This was no doubt an example of how de Belloy sought to use his medieval setting to prescribe how war-weary French men and women ought to feel

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Voltaire wrote an acclamatory letter to de Belloy after receiving a copy of the tragedy. See *Voltaire to Pierre Laurent Buiette de Belloy*, 31 March 1765 (D12512, *Corr. de Voltaire* xxviii, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Clément and La Porte, *Anecdotes dramatiques*, II, p. 170; *Mercure de France*, I, Paris, April 1765, p. 186-191; *Le Journal encyclopédique*, Paris, 15 May 1765, p. 97-99.

<sup>32</sup> De Belloy's main source was Froissart's *Chronicles*, but he also commented on more modern histories like Rapin Thoyras's *Histoire de l'Angleterre*, François Mézeray's *Histoire de France* and the abbé Dubos's *Histoire de la Monarchie française*.

<sup>33</sup> Collé, *Journal*, III, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> ALIÉNOR. *Grand prince, avec mon roi que nos nœuds vous rassemblent! / Le ciel fit pour s'aimer les cœurs qui se ressemblent. / Ah! De l'humanité rétablissez les droits! / À l'Europe, tous deux, faites chérir ses loix; / Que, par vous, des vertus cette Mère féconde, / soit la Reine des Rois, et l'Oracle du Monde!* (v.vii).

about their English counterparts in 1765, less than two years after the embarrassing conclusion to the Seven Years' War, which saw France cede many of its overseas territories to England, Spain and other European foes. In this version of the play – the version performed at the play's premiere and printed in the first edition – de Belloy concludes his play by bolstering both nobility and fiction. At the end of the tragedy, Aliénor (who is both noble and *invented*) presents spectators with an emotional and political resolution: forgive your enemies and trust that Europe's noble leaders will come to their senses to do what is right for their loyal subjects.

The 1765 edition of the play is not, however, the only version of *Le Siège de Calais* that actors presented to Parisian spectators. A manuscript of the play, currently housed at the *Bibliothèque-musée de la Comédie-Française*, in addition to having an interesting alternative title, *Le Siège de Calais, ou le Patriotisme*, reveals several textual variants to the Duchesne *Première édition*. These variants are achieved with small but thick pieces of paper glued to the manuscript in order to conceal the original lines underneath. In addition to the glued pages, several sections of the text are crossed out, with numerous additions in the manuscript's margins.

At least two important questions emerge from these visible acts of editing: when were the lines of the manuscript concealed? And, are these changes important enough to alter our interpretation of the play? Given the fact that journalists in 1765 reprinted or criticised several of these blocked out sections;<sup>35</sup> that each of these blocked out sections exist in editions of the play from 1765,<sup>36</sup> 1767,<sup>37</sup> 1778,<sup>38</sup> and 1787;<sup>39</sup> and that this type of editing was not uncommon for Revolutionary censorship,<sup>40</sup> it is plausible that the sections were blocked out for, perhaps, the nine performances of the play in 1789, the two in 1790, or for the single performance of the play in 1791 (needless to say, the play, with all its *vive le roi* enthusiasm did not quite make it into the Republican years). Analysis of these editorial manipulations reveals a unique context of desired reception, a new reflection on the value of historical fact, a notably post-revolutionary take on gender roles in political disputes and sentimentality in the tragic genre; also, it calls into question the typical ways that scholars have talked about *Le Siège de Calais* over the past few centuries.<sup>41</sup>

What is blocked out in the manuscript? Most importantly, Aliénor's reconciliatory final speech, mentioned above, is covered by a thick piece of paper. The tragedy ends instead with a heated dispute between Edward and Saint-Pierre. Edward vows to reign

<sup>35</sup> For example, the *Mercure de France* reprinted Aliénor's concluding remarks in their review of the play. See *Mercure de France*, March 1765, p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> *Le Siège de Calais, tragédie, dédiée au Roi, par M. de Belloy; représentée pour la première fois, par les Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi, le 13 Février 1765. Suivie de notes historiques*. Nouvelle édition, Paris, Duchesne, septembre, 1765.

<sup>37</sup> *Le Siège de Calais, tragédie par M. de Belloy. (Paris, par les Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi, 13 février 1765.)*, Paris, Duchesne, 1767.

<sup>38</sup> *Le Siège de Calais, tragédie par M. de Belloy. (Paris, par les Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi, 13 février 1765.)*, Paris, Didot l'aîné, 1778.

<sup>39</sup> *Le Siège de Calais. Œuvres complètes de M. de Belloy, i*, Paris, Cussac, 1787.

<sup>40</sup> For an excellent discussion of censorship and theatre during the French Revolution, see the introduction to Mark Darlow and Yann Robert's edition of J.-L. Laya's *L'Ami des lois*, London, MHRA, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Christian Biet reduces the significance of the play down to mere propaganda, arguing that *Le Siège de Calais* was nothing more than an example of how the monarchy used the tragic genre to defend its principles during the eighteenth century. See Biet, *La Tragédie*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010, p. 162.

over the Calaisians with his “*épée*” now that he is convinced they will never support his claim to the French throne. Saint-Pierre responds unapologetically that only a Frenchman can legitimately govern Calais (v.vii).

This difference between the version of the text performed and printed in 1765 and the version of the play that was possibly performed in a revolutionary context reveal several important points concerning the representation of political and diplomatic disputes in history through dramatic fiction.<sup>42</sup> First, Aliénor is the only character absent from Froissart’s 1361 *Chronicles*;<sup>43</sup> she is also the only member of the *French* nobility depicted in the play besides the traitor, Harcourt. With her lines deleted and her role diminished, Saint-Pierre, the *bourgeois* hero, plays a more prominent part in the tragedy’s denouement. With the “silencing” of Aliénor, Saint-Pierre gains more autonomy as the French political voice against a foreign enemy. He emerges as the representative of a grassroots medieval patriotic mind-set when his argument in the political-historical dispute over the Salic Law<sup>44</sup> with a social superior, King Edward, concludes the play. The edits to the manuscript render the production more bellicose and less reconciliatory. Without Aliénor’s concluding remarks on forgiveness – a statement that was emblematic of a cosmopolitan, *philosophe* discourse in 1765<sup>45</sup> as well as typical of the government’s cultural policies after the Treaty of Paris<sup>46</sup> – the edited manuscript ends with a scene of dispute. This better reflects a post-1789 spirit of international aggression during a period which saw France fight against Prussia, Austria, the Low Countries as well as a call-to-arms against the invading *Piedmontese*; sentimental calls for peace did not exactly gel with a population that was supposed to be at war with almost every European country.

Second, the edits better reflect prescribed gender roles in *institutionalised* political and social contexts during the Revolution. Criticising de Belloy’s tragedy in the “Discours préliminaire” to his own tragedy, *Charles IX ou l’École des rois*, Marie-Joseph Chénier argues in 1789 that de Belloy, like other *Ancien régime* writers, lacked the virtues

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<sup>42</sup> The present article only highlights manipulations to the play’s conclusion; for analysis of other edits to the manuscript, see Connors, “Patriotismes à l’épreuve de la rédaction: variantes du *Siège de Calais*, tragédie de Pierre de Belloy (1765)”, in *Changements de dénouement et réécritures de la fin dans le théâtre européen des XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles: causes, modalités, enjeux*, ed. Sylviane Robardey-Eppstein and Florence Naugrette, Paris, Classiques Garnier, forthcoming 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Jean de Froissart, *Chroniques* I, chapter CXLVI, Paris, Lettres gothiques, 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Edward’s “legitimacy” argument hinges upon the debate over his ancestor, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor served as both queen of England and France. Edward is issued from the Plantagenet family, Eleanor’s “English” family, and thought this granted him the original sovereignty over the French land. The Calaisians, defending the Salic Law (the Frankish rules for agnatic royal ascension that denied women and unrecognised male children from taking the throne) obviously do not view Edward’s claim as legitimate.

<sup>45</sup> For an example of *philosophe* cosmopolitanism, see D’Alembert’s *Discours préliminaire de l’Encyclopédie*: “L’histoire de l’homme a pour objet, ou ses actions, ou ses connaissances; et elle est par conséquent civile ou littéraire, c’est-à-dire se partage entre les grandes nations et les grands génies, entre les rois et les gens de lettres, entre les conquérants et les philosophes”. Paris, Briasson-Durand, 1751; repr. Paris, Les Libraires associés, 1965, p. 65. See also J.-R. Suratteau’s synthesis of several strands of *philosophe* cosmopolitanism in “Rapport de Synthèse: Cosmopolitanism and patriotism”, *Transactions of the Fifth International Congress on the Enlightenment*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1980, p. 411-444.

<sup>46</sup> France’s foreign minister, the duc de Choiseul, commissioned Claude-Simon Favart to write and stage *L’Anglais à Bordeaux* to “celebrate” France’s signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. This treaty essentially admitted French defeat in the Seven Years’ War and turned much of the French colonial enterprise over to England and Spain. For more information, see Jacques Truchet’s “Notice” to *L’Anglais à Bordeaux* in *Le Théâtre français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. 2, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 1421-1423.

necessary to create *la tragédie, vraiment nationale*.<sup>47</sup> Pre-1789 dramatic characters, according to Chénier, were too effeminate, too emotional and too focused on *amour propre* to care about anything as self-effacing as *la patrie*. Chénier then equates the “feminine” writing of the *Ancien régime* with the politically seditious elements of revolutionary France:

The constant enemy [...] is this spirit of gallantry, a fruit of ignorance from our ancestors; a spirit contrary to the true goal of society, a humiliating spirit for the sex who is usually cuckolded, and even more for the one who cuckolds.<sup>48</sup>

Chénier’s 1789 call for a more masculine aesthetic and plot and, in general, for a less sentimental tragic genre attempts to show how the “*sexe convenu d’être trompé*” (men) can avoid the pitfalls of an all too powerful “*sexe qui trompe*” (women). This sexual prescription for drama perhaps also explains how the edits could have taken on new meaning and intention. It is important, however, to stress the word *intention* because, as Cecilia Feilla argues, there was a stark difference between Chénier’s and the government’s theatrical mandates and the actual plays that were performed and enjoyed *en masse* during the decade of 1789-1799. According to Feilla, sentimental *dramas* and comedies far outperformed tragedy – “national” or not. This fact jars with the objectives of the National Convention, which, in an effort to bolster both tragedy and nationalism, required Parisian theatres to perform Voltaire’s *Brutus*, Antoine-Marin Lemierre’s *Guillaume Tell* or Chénier’s *Caius Gracchus* at least three times per week in 1793.<sup>49</sup> Feilla underlines the disparity between the required performances (none of these three tragedies were in the top fifty of performed plays from 1789 to 1799) and the decade’s blockbusters, which included light-hearted and sentimental plays by Molière, Marivaux, Beaumarchais and Diderot. Despite this discrepancy, the playwright’s words indicate an institutional goal if not a cultural description of theatre during the Revolution. If we read Chénier’s comments on gender and the repertoire as a prescription for other writers of the “national genre”, it is easy to see how the elimination of Aliénor’s political conclusion in favour of the dispute scene between two men is part of a practice during the Revolution, which Florence Lotterie and Pierre Frantz call “an interdiction of feminine presence in civic space”,<sup>50</sup> in any real or fictionalised public dispute.<sup>51</sup> Was this dramaturgical edit to de Belloy’s play thus microcosmic of what Carla Hesse terms a

<sup>47</sup> For more information on Chénier’s terminology, see François Jacob, “Tragédies nationales: de Belloy et Marie-Joseph Chénier”, in *Tragédies tardives: actes du colloque de Besançon des 17 et 18 décembre 1998*, Paris, Champion, 2002, p. 111-121.

<sup>48</sup> “*L’ennemi constant [to the new nation] [...] c’est cet esprit de galanterie, fruit de l’ignorance de nos ancêtres; esprit contraire au vrai but de la société, esprit humiliant pour le sexe qui est convenu d’être trompé, et plus encore pour celui qui trompe*”. Chénier, “Discours préliminaire” à *Charles IX ou l’École des rois* (1789), Paris, GF Flammarion, 2002, p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> Cecilia Feilla, *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution*, Surrey and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2013, p. 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> “*un interdit de présence féminine dans l’espace civique*”, Florence Lotterie et Pierre Frantz, Présentation, *Sexes en Révolution, Orages*, 12, March 2013, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Post-revolutionary writers also critiqued de Belloy for the gender calibration of his characters. In his introduction to a 1803 anthologised version of *Le Siège de Calais*, the critic Petitot argues that that Aliénor’s role is “trop mâle: en général on n’aime point à voir les femmes vaincre si aisément la faiblesse naturelle de leur sexe [...]”. Petitot, “Examen du *Siège de Calais*”, in *Répertoire du Théâtre François ou Recueil des tragédies et des comédies restées au théâtre depuis Rotrou*, vol. 5, Paris, Perlet, 1803, p. 247.

feminine “exclusion” from the Revolutionary polity<sup>52</sup> or what Joan Wallach Scott calls a “paradoxical” position of physical presence coupled with discursive absence in representations of women at the time?<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, might the textual edits have emerged as a way to make de Belloy’s play more *national*, meaning, more bellicose, masculine and explicitly anti-monarchical? There are as many questions as there are answers when interpretation hinges upon ambiguous textual editing, authorial intent and possible receptions. But by treating *Le Siège de Calais* as an open cultural site rather than as an example of bad eighteenth-century tragedy in the wake of good seventeenth-century tragedy; or worse, as a mere sample of *Ancien régime* propaganda, we can see how writers, censors and possibly even actors<sup>54</sup> attempted to alter the memory of past events in order to weigh in on contemporary political, social and sexual disputes through theatre. By adding a layer of complexity to current definitions of the play’s “intended” or “received” meanings, the edits to the manuscript change the critical legacy of *Le Siège de Calais*. Lastly, by analysing these changes to the play-text, we can discern how meaning in a play can pivot on the inclusion or subtraction of a particular scene – a dispute or reconciliation at the end of the tragedy, depending on whether a spectator watched the play in 1765 or in 1789. This very *mouvante* play thus emerges as a fascinating example of the desire to prescribe meaning (i.e. to determine who gets to dispute and through what types of discourse) as well as an example of the confusion over that precise prescription – a confusion, which characterises late eighteenth-century and Revolutionary historiography, and more specifically, the theatre that performed historiography during those turbulent times.

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<sup>52</sup> Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton, 2001, p. xiv.

<sup>53</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard, 1996.

<sup>54</sup> It is important to note that we do not know who was responsible (actors, government officials, etc.) for editing the manuscript of *Le Siège de Calais*.

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