

*From tragédie nationale to pièce militaire:
Pierre-Laurent de Belloy's Le Siège de Calais*

The first performance of *Le Siège de Calais*, France's putative "première tragédie nationale," prompted this reaction from the *philosophe* and literary critic Melchior Grimm:¹

Un orage imprévu éclate presque aussitôt qu'il se forme: une catastrophe subite porte la combustion dans le parterre, dans les loges, dans la salle entière; et, après avoir fait lever brusquement le *Siège de Calais*, ce feu se répand en dehors de proche en proche avec la même rapidité, se glisse dans tous les cercles, gagne tous les soupers, et communique à tous les esprits une chaleur qui produit un incendie universel: tel, au dire des poètes auvergnats et limousins, le nocher, trompé par un calme profond, se trouve assailli par la tempête sans même en avoir soupçonné les approches.²

An unforeseen storm blows almost as soon as it forms: a sudden catastrophe brings combustion to the pit, to the boxes, to the entire auditorium; and, after having caused the *Siege of Calais* to be raised abruptly, this fire spreads outside step by step with the same rapidity, slips into all the circles, wins over all the suppers, and communicates to all minds a warmth which produces a universal fire: so that, according to the poets of Auvergne and Limousin, the boatman, deceived by a deep calm, finds himself assailed by the storm without even having suspected its approach.

Le Siège de Calais, Pierre-Laurent de Belloy's tragedy about French bravery in the Hundred Years' War, rolled into Paris like a gale. *Le Siège de Calais* was a hit on the stage and among readers of the print version, published just weeks after the February 1765 premiere. Elie-Catherine Fréron, the counter-Enlightenment enemy of Voltaire and editor of the *Année littéraire*,

¹ A section of this chapter draws from the introduction to my critical edition of de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais*. I thank Simon Davies and the editorial staff at the Modern Humanities Research Association for granting me permission to reuse parts of that introduction here. See Logan J. Connors, "Introduction," in *Le Siège de Calais* by Pierre-Laurent de Belloy (London: MHRA, 2014), 1–60. All quotations from de Belloy's play are from this edition.

² Melchior Grimm, Denis Diderot, Jacques-Henri Meister et al., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, vol. vi (March 1765) (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878), 256.

praised the play as “unique dans les fastes du théâtre” (singular in the theater’s history), and attested that “jamais tragédie n’a excité dans la nation un enthousiasme aussi vif” (never has a tragedy excited in the nation such a vivid enthusiasm).³ Even intellectual enemies like Grimm and Fréron could agree that de Belloy’s *Le Siège de Calais* was an unprecedented *public* event.

De Belloy’s play was soon performed all over France and Europe, from Bordeaux to Nancy and from Vienna to Maastricht. It was the first play to be printed in a French colony (Saint-Domingue), and it earned its author the *médaille royale* for dramatists – a prize that Louis XV created for de Belloy and that nobody ever won thereafter. Appearing two years after the Seven Years’ War with Great Britain, Prussia, and other European foes and representing many important socioeconomic, geopolitical, and dramatic tensions of the time, *Le Siège de Calais* marks a confluence of art and national military concerns that energized spectators, altered critical discourses, and sought to reassess the role of both theater and wartime service in society.

Le Siège de Calais was a popular multimedia event. The play-text subjected spectators and readers to various, and at times contradictory, strands of French patriotism – a term to which we will return and that remains a subject of rich debate.⁴ This chapter describes *Le Siège de Calais* as a cultural phenomenon with social and political goals that were reinforced by free performances, group readings in military barracks, mission-focused parodies, and government interventions. Not just one successful play among others in eighteenth-century France, de Belloy’s tragedy was a force of media management, military–artistic programming, and propaganda. Close analysis of the play, its deployment in provincial and colonial spaces, its links to France’s evolving military apparatus, and its contested reception in eighteenth-century elite circles indicates that de Belloy’s historical tragedy was a categorically different phenomenon when compared with previous “nationally themed” plays. The strategies and themes deployed by de Belloy and by government officials served as a

³ Clarence Brenner, *Histoire nationale dans la tragédie française du XVIII^e siècle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1929), 260.

⁴ John Shovlin writes that some writers “believed patriotism would counter what they perceived as the increasing despotism of the monarchy. Monarchists, meanwhile, hoped to harness patriotism to increase the popularity of the Crown. Many commentators believed that society had been corrupted by an excessive interest in wealth and that patriotism would reverse this troubling development. With such stakes attached to it, by the 1760s patriotism had become a powerful legitimating category of French politics.” John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 5.

script for future interactions among dramatic literature, theatrical performance venues, and the French military.

The insights that can be gained from the play are earned not only from the dramatic script but also from a host of ancillary texts and experiences: the dozens of letters, parodies, critiques, eyewitness reports, and pamphlets, as well as readings, ceremonies, and events that helped create, disseminate, and even fictionalize the work's *bruit public*. This corpus of para-texts and para-performances was a vital component of de Belloy's theatrical success and legacy. The deployment and aftermath of the play previewed military-theatrical relationships of the French Revolution and set the stage for a series of overlaps between military and theatrical cultures immediately following de Belloy's success.

A Medieval Conflict Play in Post-war France

According to de Belloy's biographer, Gabriel-Henri Gaillard, *Le Siège de Calais* originated in a conversation between the author and Emmanuel-Félicité de Durfort, the duc de Duras, a military hero who served Louis XV in campaigns across Italy, Flanders, Bavaria, and elsewhere.⁵ The duc de Duras, who would later receive the prestigious military honor of *Maréchal de France*, was a *Premier Gentilhomme de la chambre du Roi* and the Director of the Comédie-Française in the 1760s. De Belloy began work on *Le Siège de Calais* in 1763, soon after the end of the Seven Years' War and the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which transferred large territories of France's colonial empire to Britain and Spain. *Le Siège de Calais* was finished in autumn 1764, in the wake of this defeat and during a crucial moment of introspection.

As John Shovlin writes, "the [Seven Years'] war stirred the loyalties and national sentiments of French elites" and "patriotic feeling, which had ebbed and flowed in cultural importance over the previous half century, flowered during the hostilities so that by the end of the war patriotism had become a leading feature of public life."⁶ Perhaps nobody recognized this cultural change and sought to capitalize on it more than de Belloy. *Le Siège de Calais* effectively changed his personal and theatrical trajectories, and supposedly, from that point on, "M. de Belloy se consacra, par goût et par reconnaissance, aux sujets Français [. . .] il regardait les Français comme

⁵ Gabriel-Henri Gaillard, "Vie de M. de Belloy, écrite par un homme de lettres, son ami," in Pierre de Belloy, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Moutard, 1779), 31–3.

⁶ Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue*, 49.

incontestablement supérieurs à tous les autres peuples”⁷ (Mr. de Belloy consecrated himself, in taste and in recognition, to French subjects [. . .] he viewed the French as uncontestedly superior to all other people).

Le Siège de Calais presents the bombardment and subsequent occupation of Calais by the English King Edward III and his army during the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453). By imparting a story of English aggression, de Belloy hoped to connect with audience members who, in 1765, had just witnessed their own share of ill feelings toward the English. The author’s vision of patriotism tapped into the post-war consciousness by representing a new bourgeois intellectual agency, an emotional family-based intrigue, and a defense of the French military and ruling monarchy, which was nervous about its recent defeat and eager to reaffirm the legal underpinnings of its sovereignty through the Salic Law.⁸

Act one opens with a description of Calais, the often-contested city in northern France. Edward and his English forces have brought the city to its knees after six months of bombardment and starvation. Despite local efforts, Calais is in a desperate state, and its inhabitants are ready to surrender. Early in the play, Eustache Saint-Pierre, the city’s bourgeois mayor, oscillates between what he views as a natural, French patriotic instinct, his “vive flamme” (bright flame) for the country, and his anguish at having a son lost in battle and feared dead.⁹ Visibly affected at the end of the first scene, Saint-Pierre hesitates between his desire to surrender to Edward’s forces and a drive urging him to fight.

Several characters confirm that they last saw Saint-Pierre’s son, Aurèle, wounded on the battlefield. Saint-Pierre assumes the worst and thinks his son is dead. At this point in the play, de Belloy presents an emotional dilemma between patriotism and familial love. At first, it seems as if the author polarizes patriotism and family sentiment by showing that defending the country often comes at the expense of the demise of one’s family. But, toward the end of the first act, de Belloy changes gears by combining the two motivations. Choosing patriotism as a means of mitigating grief, Saint-Pierre unites, rather than separates, his personal and public goals. This psychological process combines private family obligations with France’s public policy into a difficult sublimation that de Belloy hoped would strike a chord with spectators and readers who had recently faced their own wartime sacrifices.

⁷ Gaillard, “Vie de M. de Belloy,” 40.

⁸ The Salic Law refers to the Frankish rules for agnatic royal ascension that prevented women and unrecognized male children from taking the throne.

⁹ De Belloy, *Le Siège de Calais*, I.1, 76.

As the play progresses, the spectator learns that the comte de Vienne's French forces – a last bastion of support against Edward – have been beaten on the battlefield. Aliénor, Vienne's daughter, arrives in Act one, scene three with news that Saint-Pierre's son is indeed alive, but that Edward is ready to burn Calais to the ground unless the city's elected leaders – Saint-Pierre and his cohort – swear their allegiance to the English crown.¹⁰ Aliénor, Aurèle, Amblétuse (Saint-Pierre's rustic associate), and the other *bourgeois calaisiens* debate whether they should surrender to Edward. Significantly outnumbered and faced with a city on the verge of destruction, Saint-Pierre concedes.¹¹ The English monarch accepts, but with one condition: that Saint-Pierre and his staff agree to walk the gallows as punishment for all the citizens' insolence. Now the fates of Calais and Saint-Pierre are united.

Act two presents Harcourt, a French noble who has decided to fight alongside Edward instead of with his countrymen. But, after hearing that he was responsible for his own brother's death and learning about the Calaisians' bravery in the face of defeat, Harcourt changes course with the following declaration: “plus je vis d'étrangers, plus j'aimai ma patrie”¹² (the more I see foreigners, the more I love my fatherland). Harcourt's reversal comes too late: Saint-Pierre and the other *bourgeois* dismiss him as a traitor, and Aliénor, whom he had been destined to marry, repudiates him.

Adding a layer of complexity to his tragedy, de Belloy refuses to always contrast good French characters with supposedly “evil” English counterparts. The author draws a distinction between Harcourt, a local French traitor of noble birth, and Mauni, a reasonable and compassionate English general with a kind streak for Calais. Mauni cannot help but shed tears when Amblétuse exclaims: “Ce n'est point à mourir que la gloire convie,/ C'est à rendre sa mort utile à sa patrie”¹³ (It is not at death that glory is bestowed,/ It comes at rendering one's life useful to the country). For the first time in the play, Mauni questions his monarch's punishment of Saint-Pierre and his cohort. The English soldier pleads with his new Calaisian friends to renounce their overt support of Philippe de Valois, the French monarch. But the citizens of Calais are resolute; Act two concludes with a patriotic compact between Aliénor, Saint-Pierre, and the rest of the group that they will not save themselves if it means rebuking France and its Salic law of royal ascension, which, in prohibiting matrilineal succession,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I,1, 77–79. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, I,6, 85. ¹² *Ibid.*, 2,3, 89. ¹³ *Ibid.*, 2,5, 94.

means that Edward has no legitimate grounds for claiming the French throne (2.5).¹⁴

In Act three, the audience finally meets the English monarch. Here, de Belloy's strand of emotionally charged and *egalitarian* patriotism comes to light. Aurèle and Saint-Pierre speak defiantly to the king after Edward claims legitimacy for the French crown:

ÉDOUARD:

Perfides! Qui longtemps illustrés par vos crimes,
Outragiez le vainqueur et le roi des Français . . .

AURÈLE: *l'interrompant.*

Vous leur roi?

SAINT-PIERRE, *à son fils:*

Titre vain, sans l'aveu des sujets!¹⁵

ÉDOUARD:

Traitors! Who, for long have been painted by your crimes,
Offend the winner and the King of the French . . .

AURÈLE, *interrupting:*

You, their king?

SAINT-PIERRE, *to his son:*

A vain title, without the oath of the people!

Edward may have won a military victory, but he fails to convince Calais' citizens that he is their sovereign. To Edward's long tirades on the history of the Plantagenet family, his family's claim to the throne, or the legality of earning political sovereignty through military spoils, Saint-Pierre and his group remain defiant.

The last few scenes of Act three present a desperate English monarch when Edward attempts to either threaten or bribe Saint-Pierre and Aliénor with instant death or worldly riches. Exasperated, Edward exclaims: "Qui peut d'un droit si saint me priver désormais?/ Quel autre doit régner sur la France?" (With such a holy right, who can now refuse me?/ Who else should reign over France?). The answer for the other characters is clear; Aliénor responds, "Un Français."¹⁶ Edward calls for their imprisonment and declares that they shall hang at dawn. Act four takes place in the Calais

¹⁴ Edward's "legitimacy" argument hinges on the debate over his ancestor, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor served as queen of both England and France. Edward issued from the Plantagenet family, Eleanor's "English" family, and thought this granted him sovereignty over the French land. The Calaisians, defending the Salic Law, view that claim as illegitimate.

¹⁵ De Belloy, *Le Siège de Calais*, 3,3, 101. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3,4, 107.

jail where Saint-Pierre and his municipal staff await their punishment. The general Mauni watches over the prisoners, and, in an emotional scene (4.2), he and Saint-Pierre trade conciliatory remarks – a strategy that perhaps shadowed the French government’s wish to bolster domestic sentiments of patriotism while at the same time reconciling with England. Saint-Pierre exclaims that the English and the French were never *truly* enemies, but mere “rivals” and that both nations consist of “magnanimous people.”¹⁷ De Belloy presents authentic international bonds as possible among soldiers and more modest officials, rather than between monarchs and nobles. At the end of the Act, Mauni once again doubts Edward’s harsh punishment, and again shares tears with the French prisoners (4.6). The act, however, ends on a grim note after the Calaisians refuse the traitor Harcourt’s offer to secretly free them from Edward’s prison (4.7).

In Act five, Edward tries one last time to convince Saint-Pierre that preserving the lives of oneself and one’s family is more important than patriotic ideals. Saint-Pierre responds by calling into question Edward’s character: “Vous me forcez, Seigneur, d’être plus grand que vous”¹⁸ (You are forcing me, lord, to be better than you). Furious, Edward is about to send the *bourgeois* to the gallows, when Valois’ emissary arrives to announce that the French king is ready to dispute Edward on the battlefield if he lets the Calaisians go in peace. At a moment when one might believe that the immediate familial conflict is resolved and that peace is restored in Calais, military history intrudes on fiction. It would be disastrous for the French monarch to face Edward on the battlefield, for he was significantly outnumbered following defeats at Caen, Blanchetaque, and Crecy.¹⁹ The French general Melun arrives in scene four to state that Philippe’s sacrifice would be too great and that the French people will not let their monarch take such a dire risk. This conclusion, however, was discerned by Saint-Pierre and his cohort even before Melun’s entrance, and the bourgeois await their death despite the rejoicing around them.

In the last moments of his play, de Belloy’s characters show an unyielding commitment to the Valois dynasty, matched by a sentimental devotion to their friends and family. Aurèle, Saint-Pierre’s son and a military hero, throws himself at Edward’s feet, begging the king to kill him first so that he does not have to watch his father die. All the characters immediately burst into tears and after witnessing this tableau, Edward is overwhelmed by the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.2, 115. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.2, 129.

¹⁹ For more information on the sequence of battles in the Hundred Years’ War, see Anne Curry, *Essential Histories: The Hundred Years’ War 1337–1453* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002).

bourgeois' commitment to their *patrie* as well as to their friends and family. He abandons the harsh punishment as well as his legal claim to the French throne:

ÉDOUARD:

Un peuple si fidèle est un peuple indomptable.
Lorsque sur les Français je prétendis régner,
Je cherchais leur amour, que j'espérais gagner;
Mais il faudrait les vaincre en tyran sanguinaire.
S'il n'est un don des cœurs, le sceptre peut-il plaire?
Je renonce à leur trône.²⁰

ÉDOUARD:

A people so loyal are an indomitable people.
When I tried to reign over the French,
I went looking for their love, which I hoped to win;
But as a bloody tyrant they must be convinced.
If it is not by a generous heart, can the scepter please them?
I renounce their throne.

Edward frees Saint-Pierre and his council but learns something from his experience in Calais. Although there is cause for rejoicing at the end of the play, any happiness is offset by the fact that Edward and the English are now in control of the city. Calais was a major military defeat, one that would hinder French diplomatic and military aspirations for centuries. Political aspirations cede to a matter-of-fact military logic as Edward wonders whether, now that persuasion and bribery have failed, “le sceptre peut-il plaire?” Sentimental and patriotic, tragic and uplifting, grounded in historical fact yet with pure inventions added by the author, *Le Siège de Calais* avoids facile theatrical and intellectual divisions and earned significant success upon its debut at the Comédie-Française.

Le Siège de Calais was not a typical eighteenth-century theater production. De Belloy did not write a script, submit it to the actors at France's storied stage, and enjoy his premiere – the traditional route for productions at the Comédie-Française. The first performance of de Belloy's play was a carefully orchestrated event involving military authorities, government intervention, rumors of paid spectators, and partisan critics. Several of the tragedy's central themes and strategies – the military heroism of bourgeois characters, the representation of French battles with historical accuracy, and the creation of a masculine militarized space of sentimental

²⁰ De Belloy, *Le Siège de Calais*, 5.7, 138.

bonding – provided a blueprint for military drama in France during the late Old-Regime and Revolutionary periods. More analysis of the dramatic text and the successful performance run of *Le Siège de Calais* show an increasingly salient and attractive relationship between the French armed forces and theatrical institutions at a crucial juncture in the history of an emerging *nation*.

“Un événement remarquable”: The Premiere of *Le Siège de Calais*

After France’s wartime woes, members of the military elite were concerned that the “nation n’a plus l’esprit militaire” (the nation no longer has a military spirit).²¹ The dour geopolitical situation after the Treaty of Paris was supposedly the reason why Duras asked de Belloy to remedy the country with an inspiring and patriotic play. The crown’s possible intervention in the staging of *Le Siège de Calais* was not the first time that associates close to the king had meddled in theatrical affairs. In 1763, the duc de Choiseul, France’s War Secretary, commissioned Charles-Simon Favart to write *L’Anglais à Bordeaux* to commemorate the end of the conflict with Britain.²² And, as I describe in detail in [Chapter 3](#), it was again Choiseul who played a heavy hand in the establishment and subsequent financing of the navy’s theater in Brest, where military officers were required to attend performances, starting in 1766.

The performance history of *Le Siège de Calais* began in controversy. It was not the only play about the Hundred Years’ War to appear in 1765. Choiseul influenced the premiere of *Le Siège de Calais* by preventing a rival play, Firmin (or Farmian) de Rosoi’s *Décis français*, a somber tragedy about the French defeat in Calais, from appearing on the same stage.²³ Choiseul wrote several letters in the winter of 1764–1765 to François-Louis Marin, the official censor, and Joseph d’Héméry, the police inspector. In his correspondence, Choiseul criticizes de Rosoi’s *Décis français* and

²¹ “Letter from the comte de Saint-Germain to Joseph Pâris Duverney,” in Margaret M. Moffat, “Le Siège de Calais’ et l’opinion publique en 1765,” *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 39, no. 3 (1932), 347.

²² For more information on the relationship between the Seven Years’ War and Favart’s play, see Beatrijs Vanacker, *Altérité et identité dans les “histoires anglaises” au XVIII^e siècle: Contexte(s), réception et discours* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 28–35.

²³ See Gregory Brown, “Reconsidering the Censorship of Writers in Eighteenth-Century France: Civility, State Power, and the Public Theatre in the Enlightenment,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 2 (2003): 235–68. See also Barnabé Farmian (or Firmin) de Rosoi, *Le Décis français, ou le Siège de Calais sous Philippe VI, par M. de Rozoi* (Paris: Cuissart, 1767).

praises the uplifting final Act of de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais*,²⁴ which had, at Choiseul's urging, been read aloud in its nascent forms at military bases around France.²⁵ Gregory Brown argues that the Foreign Minister went so far as to persuade the actors at the Comédie-Française to alter the dates of when each play was received for its official reading.²⁶ By changing the arrival date of *Le Siège de Calais* to before *Décimus*' date, the actors could justify performing de Belloy's play before de Rosoi's.

The author of *Décimus français* was furious about the intervention. De Rosoi quickly published a series of letters proclaiming himself the victim of a conspiracy by Choiseul, Duras, and other members of the First Gentlemen of the Chamber. Then, de Rosoi added fuel to the fire by publishing two illegal editions of *Décimus*, even altering the title to his second version, calling it *Décimus français, ou le Siège de Calais*.²⁷ The government intervened, and the censor, Marin, was asked to decide which Calais-based tragedy warranted a performance at the Comédie-Française. After receiving a flurry of letters from Choiseul, the First Gentlemen, military commanders, and other supporters of de Belloy's (more optimistic, pro-military, and patriotic) play, Marin ruled in favor of *Le Siège de Calais* sometime during the first week of February 1765. Marin's directive was clear: de Belloy's tragedy was slated for performance and the police inspector d'Héméry was ordered to destroy copies of *Décimus* and throw de Rosoi in prison for insubordination.²⁸ By the 1760s, the military was desperate to stage an uplifting example of French patriotism and support for its armed forces.

²⁴ De Rosoi's *Décimus* is less "political" and "patriotic" than de Belloy's *Siège*. In *Le Décimus*, de Rosoi represents an estranged relationship between Saint-Pierre and his wife (Julie), who is condemned to die for allegedly having a secret relationship with Talbot, an English General. Talbot, not King Edward III, is the author of the treacherous plan to hang Calais' bourgeois citizens. In the play, the Calaisians' punishment is presented more like a lover's revenge than as a legitimate penalty for political insubordination.

²⁵ Brown, "Reconsidering the Censorship of Writers," 252; see also the analysis in Anne Boës, *La lanterne magique de l'histoire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1982), 93–102.

²⁶ The precise date when the actors received de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais* remains unknown. However, de Rosoi's play was sent in autumn 1762, well before de Belloy would have started working on his tragedy. Brown argues that "a second entry in the theatre's register records that *Siège de Calais* had been 'received' on June 11, 1762. This second entry follows other entries in the same register dated from January 1765, suggesting that this second register entry, the fictive date for the reception of Belloy's play, was added just before the premiere." This strategy made it appear that de Belloy's *Siège* was sent and accepted before de Rosoi's *Décimus*. For more information, see the registers at the Comédie-Française: for the reception of Belloy's play, see Bibliothèque de la Comédie-Française (BC-F)-124a, f. 66; for the reception of de Rosoi's play, see BC-F-124a, f. 10; the second, backdated (fictive) entry for Belloy's play is in BC-F-124-1, f. 86. For analysis, see Brown, "Reconsidering the Censorship," 251–52.

²⁷ Brown, "Reconsidering the Censorship," 252.

²⁸ The police reports are in the BNF-Arsenal: AB 10303, f. 333 (February 5–7, 1765) and BNF-Arsenal: AB 12386 (February 15, 1765). For analysis, see Brown, "Reconsidering the Censorship," 253.

Despite the meddling of military leaders and government officials, de Belloy’s tragedy was not an example of propaganda forced down the throats of reluctant spectators and critics. As Clare Siviter argues in her work on tragic drama under Napoleon, censorship was often “lateral,” meaning, that it was not always top-down and it originated from multiple and competing forces, including auto-censorship, the opinions of actors, or other entities besides the government.²⁹ The case of *Le Siège de Calais*, like many examples of tragedies with strong connections to the political establishment, reveals a murky path from conception to performance. The play’s appearance and reception were not devoid of governmental persuasion and influence, yet the tragedy’s triumph was not totally manufactured. The relationship between top-down pressure and genuine public acceptance is central to the play’s initial *éclat* and subsequent success.

For critics, the arrival of *Le Siège de Calais* required a new lexicon. The play’s premiere and its aftermath had become a state affair, and reviews of *Le Siège de Calais* reflected a change of tone. Owing to what was now a combination of military–governmental and public support, harsh criticism and even level-headed judgment of the play were viewed as risky endeavors. The critic Manson warned other writers that, in February 1765, “*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”³⁰ (*The Siège de Calais* having become, one could say, a State affair, it would be dangerous to dare mention it without praise). And the authors of the *Mémoires secrets* argued that “le fanatisme gagne au point que les connaisseurs n’osent plus dire leur avis. On est réputé mauvais patriote, pour oser élever la voix”³¹ (fanaticism is taking over to the point that learned people do not dare give their opinion. One is deemed a bad patriot for daring to raise one’s voice). Critics at the *Mercure de France* focus more on the atmosphere surrounding the play than on *Le Siège de Calais* itself:

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.³²

²⁹ Clare Siviter, *Tragedy and Nation in the Age of Napoleon* (Liverpool: Oxford Studies in the Enlightenment and Liverpool University Press, 2020), 102–9.

³⁰ Manson, *Examen impartial du Siège de Calais, poème dramatique de M. de Belloy* (Calais: Saintmour, 1765), 11.

³¹ *Les Mémoires secrets*, February, 1765 (Paris: Garnier, 1874), 135.

³² *Mercure de France*, March 1765 (Paris: Duchesne, 1765), 160.

Not only are all the seats that can be booked in advance taken until the theater's closing; the others are filled so early and with such a big crowd that, each day, there are waves of people in the street near the theater, like in the pit of the biggest auditoriums. Mr. de Belloy's new production is giving him so much attention that the Nation seems to have adopted him for its own glory.

Then, after providing a long excerpt from the fifth act (and after apologizing to readers for not including a copy of the *entire* play in their review), the writers at the *Mercur*e assert that "après la neuvième représentation, le succès est égal à celui de la première"³³ (after the ninth performance, the success is equal to that of the first).

The tragedy was a predictable hit among government officials, including members of the royal family. Upon seeing the work, Louis XV ordered *Le Siège de Calais* to be performed at the Comédie-Française on March 12 at the crown's expense. According to the *Mémoires secrets*, this performance was an energetic public showing of patriotism, but with overtones of governmental support.³⁴ Owing to the play's unique public response, writers were quick to focus on the reception – the *bruit* and *éclat* – but slow to comment on plot, character composition, and versification. As soon as the initial burst of energy subsided, however, Parisian critics resurfaced with more sobering opinions of *Le Siège de Calais*. De Belloy's dazzling rise to fame was rapid, but increasingly contested, as the energetic atmosphere at the theater subsided and print copies of the play circulated around Paris and the provinces.

My analysis of the Revolution's military theater in [Chapter 4](#) will reveal a similar hesitation by critics to query, at least initially, the poetic merits and aesthetic features of popular patriotic plays, and particularly works depicting cataclysmic battles and wartime concerns. Military-themed theatrical performances pushed journalists and critics outside of their comfort zones and signaled that there was something off-limits to their discerning gaze. Government support of military themes, when combined with a positive response among spectators, detached this type of theatrical production from a purely aesthetic milieu and projected the dramatic arts onto the national political stage in a way that made many critics uncomfortable and incapable of using traditional techniques and vocabularies.

The critical establishment eventually would reassert its right to judge *Le Siège de Calais*. The *philosophes* Denis Diderot and Grimm saw in *Le Siège de Calais* less of a patriotic tragedy and more of a continuation of simplistic

³³ *Ibid.*, 211. ³⁴ See *Les Mémoires secrets*, March 1765, 138.

antagonism, bad writing, and counter-Enlightenment slandering from the previous decade. De Belloy, they argued, had rehashed themes from anti-*philosophe* works that harped on “enlightened” opinions of anti-clericalism, internationalism, and anglophilia.³⁵ In his critique of *Le Siège de Calais*, Diderot mixes his disdain for de Belloy’s play with broader complaints about contemporary drama, and he attacks the author’s character compositions and dialogues:³⁶ “L’un des principaux défauts de cette pièce” (one of the principal faults of this play), he writes, is that “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”³⁷ (the characters, instead of saying what they ought to say, almost always say that which their speeches and their actions should make me think and feel, and those are two very different things). Diderot, in perhaps the first close analysis of the tragedy’s aesthetic or intellectual merits, criticizes de Belloy for his facile, emotive scenes. According to the *philosophe*, de Belloy’s characters are too obvious, two-dimensional, and transparent; *Le Siège de Calais* speaks for spectators instead of letting them work through the complexities of art and life on their own. For Diderot, de Belloy’s tragedy is a mere example of opportunism – an overzealous representation of French fear pitched at the right time and at the right place.

Whatever one’s opinion of *Le Siège de Calais*, de Belloy’s meteoric rise after 1765 is indisputable. Soon after his February premiere, de Belloy emerged as a star in French political, literary, and artistic milieus. He received invitations to balls and parties in Paris and the provinces, and the ways by which the play resurfaced in diverse forms and references were testimony to its novelty. Despite several fears that the play would lose some of its luster in print form, *Le Siège de Calais* was published in March with praise from several literary journals and personalities.³⁸ It was then

³⁵ 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 Masseau, *Les ennemis des philosophes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000); 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).

³⁶ For example, Diderot argues that de Belloy rehashes anti-*philosophe* themes and tropes from Charles Palissot’s comedy *Les Philosophes* (1760). See “Lettre de M. Diderot,” in Melchior Grimm, Denis Diderot, Jacques-Henri Meister et al., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, vol. VI (1765) (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878), April 1, 1765, 243.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁸ For example, Voltaire wrote to de Belloy on March 6, 1765, congratulating him on his success and encouraging de Belloy to enjoy “votre bonheur, et de votre mérite” (enjoy your happiness, and from

published several more times and, eventually, it appeared in well-circulated anthologies of dramatic literature. The play was a successful blend of current events, popular sentiments, and governmental intervention in the arts. De Belloy's tragedy was a community-building experience that placed military themes into concert with theatrical practices. The author and his efforts set the stage for future productions that sought to establish identificatory bonds between French subjects of increasingly modest origins and the nation's armed endeavors. *Le Siège de Calais* proves that dramatic depiction of conflict in the 1760s included a new theatrical experience grounded just as much in current events and national concerns as in the artistic patrimony supposedly inherited from antiquity through the aesthetic models of *Grand Siècle* tragedy.

National Themes with Military Appeal

Le Siège de Calais is not exactly a war play. It is different in scope from the more explicit theatrical depictions of battles, sieges, and war ravages of the French Revolution. De Belloy's play focuses on the aftermath of military action and details the political and emotional threads of a supposedly medieval French patriotism that was transformed through theatrical performance to engage with a related moment of war and suffering in the 1760s. The author represents or alludes to some of the most grueling scenes from the Hundred Years' War: the English landing on the Cotentin peninsula, the catastrophic French loss at Crécy, the bombardment of Calais, the imprisonment of its municipal leaders, and the eventual fall of the city to English forces in 1347. The version of history that de Belloy communicates is based on Jean de Froissart's *Chroniques*, a source that de Belloy acknowledges by publishing passages from Froissart's text in the "Anecdotes historiques" which accompanied one of the first printed versions of the tragedy. By offering a blend of historical accuracy, contemporary relevance, and poetic invention, de Belloy constructs a dramatic work with a unique interpretation of history reworked for the political goals of his day.

At the heart of de Belloy's dramaturgy is the use of a French setting. By locating the plot in France and by representing the military and political

your achievements). See Voltaire to Pierre-Laurent Buiette de Belloy, 6 March 1786. D12439, *Correspondance de Voltaire*, vol. xxviii, ed. Theodore Besterman (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1972). Reprinted in de Belloy, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 11 (Paris: Moutard, 1779), 319. Voltaire was, however, less enthusiastic about *Le Siège de Calais* in letters to Jean-François Marmontel on March 25 (D12500) and D'Alembert on April 3 (D12521). These letters and others are reprinted and discussed in "Appendix II" of *Le Siège de Calais*, ed. Connors, 163–5.

actors who participated in the actual events, de Belloy's hope was to teach French citizens about their own past through tragic fiction, which was viewed by eighteenth-century dramatists and critics as the noblest form of art. According to de Belloy, this new objective for theater was congruent to the goals of ancient Greek and Roman theater, where issues of local and civic importance were regularly subjects of drama. De Belloy writes that he would like to "imiter les Anciens en nous occupant de nous-mêmes"³⁹ (imitate the Ancients by focusing on ourselves), and his dramaturgy is indeed one of proximity and intimacy with cases of French bravado rather than with representations of antiquity or foreign lands. This goal – the use and, at times, manipulation of historical record for the local, often urgent present – was the dramaturgical model for many eighteenth-century military plays. Engagement with the local and, through the local, the national, continued to characterize eighteenth-century military dramas and "battle event" plays, even during the radically different politics of the Revolution.

In addition to representing French history, de Belloy reinforced his pedagogical message through other textual tactics, deployed shortly after his play's premiere. First, he wrote an extensive preface with an explanation of his "nouveau genre" to accompany the first edition of the tragedy.⁴⁰ Then, and with the hope of publicizing the collective sentiment inspired by *Le Siège de Calais*, de Belloy published another edition of the play in the summer of 1765.⁴¹ This *Nouvelle édition* included ancillary texts such as historical notes on Edward and Eustache Saint-Pierre, extensive battle anecdotes from the Hundred Years' War, and eyewitness testimony from spectators who had attended the boisterous first run of performances at the Comédie-Française. For de Belloy, the public's experience with *Le Siège de Calais* included more than attending or reading the play. Public engagement with the tragedy was a holistic, multi-textual and multi-event⁴² campaign with which he was hoping to *plaire* and *instruire* Parisians and provincials alike. But what was the message that he hoped to distill through these different efforts?

The instances of "Vive le roi" enthusiasm in *Le Siège de Calais* are ubiquitous. De Belloy paints a positive picture of the French monarchy and its historical struggles with other regimes. Favorable to the king, however, does not mean favorable to the nobility. The French political

³⁹ De Belloy, "Préface," *Siège de Calais*, ed. Connors, 64. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64–70.

⁴¹ Pierre Laurent de Belloy, *Le Siège de Calais, tragédie, dédiée au Roi, suivie de notes historiques. Nouvelle édition* (Paris: Duchesne, 1765).

⁴² De Belloy appeared at "patriotic events" throughout France in the wake of his play. He was given the keys to the City of Calais and named the guest of honor at the unveiling of his bust in his hometown of Saint Flour (Cantal) in summer 1765.

system placed the noble order at the top of a social pyramid; however, following several examples of the previous generation's drama, de Belloy presents a more populist patriotic tragedy, showing skepticism toward the nobility's motivations in court politics and international war.⁴³ De Belloy stages national zeal that emanates from a bourgeois, even popular group of characters. In the author's schema of projection and identification, "low" characters such as Amblétuse and noble characters like Harcourt possess the same ability to reason and inspire virtue or disdain. De Belloy portrays Calais' non-noble citizens in a positive light and through the tragic genre, the most "noble" form of drama. De Belloy represents modest classes of Frenchmen and their responses to difficult situations and decisions. The bourgeois heroes are moved less by romantic passion, political ambition, or personal gain than by an innate patriotic love of their friends, king, and country.

For Saint-Pierre and for other characters, Philippe de Valois and his country are one and the same, united in patriotic spirit and grounded in both religious and political legitimacy. At first glance, the tearful support of Valois evinces an unquestioning projection of monarchical values and summarizes the straightforward political ideology that several scholars claim characterizes the tragedy.⁴⁴ But the play also reveals the heterogeneity of *Ancien régime* discourses on class, agency, and political sovereignty, especially in the context of national emergency and imminent threat. As witnessed in Valois' dependence on local leaders (who may or may not have been elected), the monarchy and its "monarchisms" depicted in de Belloy's play "were discourses about essential problems in any political system [. . .] and they illustrate the dynamic character of different monarchisms both in their own terms and concerning their own internal issues, and in interaction with republican ideas."⁴⁵ Valois' monarchy is in crisis, and the king engages traditionally ignored groups for help. Members of the bourgeoisie, such as the mayor of Calais, but also representatives from even lower social

⁴³ Corneille is notable for his depictions of disaccord between noble generals and sovereigns. De Belloy, however, adds a third element to the equation by grounding patriotic sentiment not in the sovereign or the noble generals, but in local subjects of modest origins. For more information on tensions between sovereigns and military leaders in Corneille, see Christy Pichichero, "Pierre Corneille and Military Drama: Power, Potlatch, *mérite*," *MLN* 132, no. 4 (2017): 1090–117; see also Joseph Harris, "Posthumous Glory and the Frustrated Death-Wish in Corneille's *Horace*," *Early Modern French Studies* 40, no. 1 (2018): 36–49.

⁴⁴ Christian Biet argues that *Le Siège de Calais* was an anti-*philosophique* and monarchical production about the history of the Valois dynasty. See Christian Biet, *La Tragédie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 162.

⁴⁵ Hans Blom, John Christian Laursen, and Luisa Simonutti, "Introduction," in *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment: Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good*, ed. Hans Blom, John Christian Laursen, and Luisa Simonutti (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 14.

classes, consistently praise Valois and his dynasty. This devotion, however, is supposedly returned to them through gratitude and other acts of sentimental, financial, and political recognition. National emergencies and wartime sacrifices alter existing political norms and encourage leaders from different walks of life to perform complementary tasks for the sake of *la patrie*. This suspension of normal attitudes and practices characterizes war plays and connects examples of the dramatic subgenre across the different political regimes and cultures of the late eighteenth century.

The play depicts intellectual agency as a crosscutting skill among different social classes. This equalizing thread in *Le Siège de Calais* paralleled the meritocratic ideals of some military policies and discourses at the time. A *democratization* of agency, or what Jay Smith has called a “nationalization of honor” and what Christy Pichichero argues was essential to the rise of a *Military Enlightenment*, drives many of the actions and dialogues in de Belloy’s play.⁴⁶ There are few noblemen in the *Le Siège de Calais*, and those depicted are deplorable, emotionally unstable, or weak. The admirable members of the nobility in the play are women (Aliénor), foreign (Mauni), or absent (Valois and other French generals). Harcourt, one of the only male members of the French nobility represented in the tragedy, is a traitor. Another nobleman is, of course, Edward III, a vindictive and volatile foreign king.

By focusing on issues of family, State, and sacrifice, de Belloy provides his war-fatigued public with a therapeutic yet utilitarian message about personal loss in battle. Foreshadowing themes and strategies of the Revolutionary era, Saint-Pierre widens the idea of “family” to include members of Calais’ society who were unrelated by blood but who were brothers-in-arms in war. He infuses the idea of “country” with familial overtones of benevolence, care, and recognition by the sovereign. In Act three, Saint-Pierre refers to Amblétuse and the other *citoyens* as “ma seule famille” – an opening of familial bonds that shocks Edward (“Quoi? C’est là ta famille?” [What? That’s your family?]) and increases Amblétuse’s patriotic drive (“Oui; quel honneur pour nous!”⁴⁷ [Yes; what an honor for us!]). The blood relationship between Saint-Pierre and Aurèle is thus projected onto compatriots with less social and political capital. Saint-Pierre might lose his son on the battlefield, but his new patriotic family is now larger, more socioeconomically diverse, and more powerful because of that sacrifice.

⁴⁶ Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment*, 171. See also Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 4–20.

⁴⁷ De Belloy, *Le Siège de Calais*, 3, 3, 102.

Saint-Pierre and his son, contrary to Harcourt and his brother, connect emotionally precisely because they are *not* members of the nobility. Relationships among the play's modest citizens are sentimental and virtuous, whereas associations among nobles emerge from international politics, cold calculation, and personal ambition.⁴⁸ Aurèle was valiant on the battlefield, so he has earned his place in society as a patriot and a war hero, and not because of his father's name. Saint-Pierre and his cohort are admirable members of society, capable of great actions, and important to the war effort *because* of, not despite, their modest upbringings. At the end of the play, local leaders and citizens of Calais convince Edward that he will "win" France only by force, and not by persuasion, bribery, or specious historical arguments. The bourgeois citizens, not the noblemen, assert "Frenchness" as an inherent otherness to Edward's own status as an Englishman and monarch, thus asserting a grassroots sentiment, uninfluenced by persuasion from higher classes.

De Belloy thus underscores the local and human contours of war. Familial belonging and tales of brotherhood and father–son relationships were, in fact, increasingly popular themes in theater during the middle of the eighteenth century. The "local effects of war" genre existed prior to *Le Siège de Calais*, but increased in popularity and prominence during the rest of the century.⁴⁹ As in the case of Diderot, Michel-Jean Sedaine, Mercier, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, and other dramatists, de Belloy focuses on the lives of bourgeois families by describing the effect of a difficult situation on a community of friends and social peers. De Belloy's desire to strike an emotional chord with spectators using familial settings reveals the proximity between his patriotic tragedy and the *drame* or *genre sérieux* – a rising genre at the time. The *drame* was a rich aesthetic mode for exploring contemporary social issues through emotionally charged theatrical moments and *tableaux*. As we will see in the [next chapter](#), politically engaged writers such as Mercier deployed the *drame* genre not to boost

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that Harcourt adopts the *patrie*-as-family metaphor only after witnessing both his brother's death and the bourgeois' displays of patriotism. He reengages with this theme in 3.3 when he links the physical pain of his brother's death with national sorrow.

⁴⁹ Authors represented sentimental family scenes with increasing frequency during the eighteenth century. An early example is Houdar de La Motte's *Inès de Castro* (1724), which inaugurated several decades of both sentimental and family-focused drama; this tradition included blockbuster successes such as André Cardinal Destouches' *Le Philosophe marié* (1727) and Nivelle de La Chaussée's *Mélanide* (1741). For more information on the development of the sentimental family scene, see Anne Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France*, trans. Teresa Bridgeman (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1991), esp. Chapter 4, "Tears in the Theatre," 54–70; see also *La Chaussée, Destouches et la comédie nouvelle au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Jean Dagen, Catherine François-Giappiconi, and Sophie Marchand (Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2012).

patriotism but to show the limits and weaknesses of the precise military cultures that de Belloy sought to promote in his tragedy.

Le Siège de Calais maps the closeness of family relationships onto a pedagogical current that sought to render French subjects more intimate (both in the sense of knowledge and in feeling) with the country's political past and present. De Belloy wrote at times that his play was for the "nation," whereas at other times, it was for the "patrie." In fact, the manuscript of the tragedy reveals that the author first titled his play *Le Siège de Calais ou le Patriotisme* (this second part of the title was dropped in subsequent editions). And the dozens of successful performances of his play and the reports of eager crowds outside the theater indicate that his version of patriotism pleased spectators during a sensitive, post-war moment. Continued analysis of the different theoretical strands of patriotism, and particularly military patriotism, in eighteenth-century France, including the theater's engagement with and dissemination of patriotism, will reveal the specificity of the public event that de Belloy hoped to create with *Le Siège de Calais*.

Patriotisms of the Late Old Regime

The word "patriotism" has long been associated with the French Revolution's linguistic and conceptual invention.⁵⁰ De Belloy's multiple deployments of the term, however, were part of a fluid Old-Regime language on national sentiments, traits, and characters. Patriotic discourses from the late Old Regime certainly predated Revolutionary discourses on the *nation*, and they influenced how the country was conceptualized by revolutionaries, but there were few "Revolutionary" discourses in 1765, and none that appeared overtly at a public, State-sponsored venue like the Comédie-Française.⁵¹ Political officials, theorists, and artists at the time used *nation* and *patrie* interchangeably. This was a pre-1789 lexical

⁵⁰ One example is Ferdinand Buisson's take on patriotism at the start of the First World War. Buisson writes that in 1789 "la France cessait d'être un royaume pour devenir une patrie" (France ceased to be a kingdom in order to become a fatherland). See Jacques Ozouf and Mona Ozouf, "Le thème du Patriotisme dans les manuels primaires, 1914: La guerre et la classe ouvrière européenne," *Mouvement social* 49 (1964), 7.

⁵¹ Baker and Edelstein argue that the French Revolution forever changed the idea of "revolution" because participants conceptualized it as an event and a "mode of collective action directed toward the goal of radical transformation." Before 1789, however, revolutions were viewed as more transitory, and as a "dynamic and ongoing process of contestation and conflict." Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, "Introduction," in Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein (eds.), *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 3.

ambiguity that revolutionaries and subsequent politicians during the nineteenth century would elucidate with the advent of nationalist political platforms and legislative programs.

Patriotism (a language, discourse, or sentiment) is not nationalism (a governmental or factional project, or a political platform), despite the conflation of these two terms in a post-Revolutionary context.⁵² As Sarah Maza argues, “[e]ighteenth-century patriotism should not be confused with later forms of nationalism [...] it was described as a feeling that transcended a narrow love of country.”⁵³ Nationalism – the concerted effort to build a new political identity applicable to all citizens in a given cultural zone – was not on the French political radar until 1789 or later; “national sentiment” and “patriotism,” however, were political, aesthetic, and emotional categories for centuries before the Revolution.⁵⁴

De Belloy’s play appeared at the Comédie-Française following French military defeat. The patriotism espoused in *Le Siège de Calais* emerged from the reinterpretation of previous theoretical discourses on *la patrie*, engagement with contemporary political events, and the changing goals of cultural materials, including theater. New definitions of patriotism coincided with new ways that writers sought to deploy those definitions in a rising sphere of public influence, and “love of *patrie* constituted a vast playing field over which a complicated contest of tug-of-war attracted new participants throughout the [eighteenth] century.”⁵⁵ The military played a role in forging and manipulating notions of patriotism and *patrie*, particularly during and after the Seven Years’ War.

Recent scholarly interest in pre-revolutionary notions of *la patrie* has shown that these are complex questions, as various political, social, and cultural events led to disparate authorial postures in which writers would

⁵² For example, see Eric Annandale’s interpretation of *Le Siège de Calais* in Eric Annandale, “Patriotism in de Belloy’s Theatre: The Hidden Message,” *Studies on Voltaire* 304 (1992): 1225–8. Annandale identifies de Belloy’s “patriotism as being of the developing national rather than of the traditional royalist variety” (1225). My goal is to follow a recent line of historiography (David Bell, Peter Campbell), which draws a distinct line between patriotism – a flexible cultural discourse – and nationalism, a clear practice of nation-building.

⁵³ Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 60.

⁵⁴ Bell draws a distinction between national sentiment and nationalism in his study on the rise of nationalism in eighteenth-century France: “[N]ational *sentiment* and *nationalism* are by no means the same thing, even if modern theorists frequently conflate them. More than a sentiment, nationalism is a political program which has as its goal not merely to praise, or defend, or strengthen a nation, but actively to construct one, casting its human raw material into a fundamentally new form.” David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 11.

use patriotic terms for specific reasons and causes.⁵⁶ In an essay on the language of patriotism, Peter Campbell argues that

The legacy of the War of the Austrian Succession, the emergence of the Pompadour faction which included the reforming *contrôleur général* Machault, the renewed struggles with the church and the *parlements* over Jansenism and over fiscal immunities, the war with England from 1756, all generated discussions [about *la patrie*] made possible by the relaxation of the censorship regime.⁵⁷

Patriotism manifested itself in different modes and intensities. Discussions about *la patrie* were sometimes theoretical, rational, and neutral; at other times, they were visceral, sentimental, and persuasive. With de Belloy's use of theatrical performance, however, discourses on patriotism surpassed the pen of philosophers and the hallowed halls of France's academies to become increasingly *public*.

There were numerous reflections on French national sentiment in circulation when *Le Siège de Calais* was premiered. The many references to *patriotes* and *la patrie*, however, did not lead to a unification of those references into a distinct ideology or social plan.⁵⁸ My understanding of patriotism is indebted to studies such as Campbell's "The Language of Patriotism," Jay Smith's *Nobility Reimagined*, Pichichero's *The Military Enlightenment*, and Bell's *The Cult of the Nation* – works in which the authors show that *la patrie* was never conceived *en bloc*, but rather was seen as "an ambiguous discourse that was exploited rhetorically and strategically from 1750 onwards."⁵⁹ This discourse on patriotism, I argue, was also a lead

⁵⁶ The bibliography on patriotism before 1789 is extensive. See Peter R. Campbell, "The Language of Patriotism in France, 1750–1770," *E-France* 1 (2007): 1–43 for the most detailed synthesis of both eighteenth-century writing on *la patrie* as well as subsequent interpretations by historians. See also Peter R. Campbell, "The Politics of Patriotism in France (1770–1788)," *French History* 24, no. 4 (2010): 550–75. Besides Campbell's essays, see Alfonse Aulard, *Le patriotisme française de la Renaissance à la Révolution* (Paris: E. Chiron, 1921); Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1933); Robert R. Palmer, "The National Idea in France before the Revolution," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 1 (1940): 95–111; Jacques Godechot, "Nation, patrie, nationalisme, et patriotisme en France au XVIII^e siècle," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 206 (1971): 481–501; Norman Hampson, "La patrie," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* 2, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford: Oxford University, 1988), 125–37; *Du patriotisme aux nationalismes (1700–1848)*, ed. Bernard Cottret (Paris: Créaphis, 2002); David A. Bell and Pauline Baggio, "Le caractère national et l'imaginaire républicain au XVIII^e siècle," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 57, no. 4 (2002): 867–88; Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie*, esp. [Chapter 2](#); and Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*.

⁵⁷ Campbell, "The Language of Patriotism," 3.

⁵⁸ For a statistical analysis of references to patriotism and national sentiment in pre-Revolutionary France, see Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 520–1. Greenfeld notes a marked rise in references to *patrie*, *patriote*, and *nation* during the 1750s and 1760s.

⁵⁹ Campbell, "The Language of Patriotism," 2.

characteristic of military drama, a subgenre of theater that gained both popularity and coherence during the final decades of the Old Regime.

Patriotism, especially in war plays and in other media describing conflict, is often linked to exclusion and differentiation among competing identities and regimes. Montesquieu, for example, wrote on the differences in “caractères” among various nations, as well as on the link between *vertu* and *patrie*.⁶⁰ In Book V of *De l'esprit des lois*, the *philosophe* writes that “amour de la patrie” (love of the fatherland) and “amour de la vertu” (love of virtue) are synonymous, thus providing a sentimental and moral basis for subsequent ideas of patriotism. Using models from both classical republicanism and recent English political theory, Montesquieu attached *la patrie* to civic, often military duty. His conception of the term in *De l'esprit des lois* brought *la patrie* into the moral register, thus raising its status in the society at the time and providing philosophical fodder to justify centuries of military involvement by France's leading noble families. Montesquieu was joined in theorizing on the moral aspects of *la patrie* by other *philosophes*, such as Rousseau and Helvétius, each of whom in the 1750s presented different and sometimes contradictory opinions on *la patrie*'s relationship to virtue.⁶¹

Voltaire demonstrated perhaps the most blatant ambivalence toward patriotism. On one hand, he penned patriotic texts such as *La Henriade*, expounded the values of English patriotism in the *Lettres philosophiques*, and critiqued the English from a patriotically French standpoint in his comedies during the Seven Years' War.⁶² On the other hand, Voltaire questioned the existence of the *patrie* in, for example, a 1764 article, which would later appear in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*:

Une patrie est un composé de plusieurs familles; et comme on soutient communément sa famille par amour-propre, lorsqu'on n'a pas un intérêt contraire, on soutient par le même amour-propre sa ville ou son village qu'on appelle sa patrie. Plus cette patrie devient grande, moins on l'aime; car l'amour partagé s'affaiblit. Il est impossible d'aimer tendrement une famille trop nombreuse qu'on connaît à peine.⁶³

⁶⁰ See Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 167–98.

⁶¹ See Rousseau's *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique* (1762) and *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* (1772). Helvétius specifically wrote against Montesquieu's link between *patrie* and *vertu* in *De l'esprit*. For more information, see Madeleine Ferland, “Entre la vertu et le bonheur. Sur le principe d'utilité sociale chez Helvétius,” *Corpus: Revue de philosophie* 23 (1993): 201–14.

⁶² For example, in Act one, scene one of his comedy *Le Café ou l'Écossaise* (1760), Voltaire presents an argument between two English café patrons, during which one of the men argues that maintaining a steady supply of rum is reason enough to go to war.

⁶³ Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, vol. 11. *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. xxxvi (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), 411.

A fatherland is composed of multiple families; and because we commonly support our family for reasons of pride, when there are no conflicting interests, we support with the same pride our city or our village, which we call our fatherland. The larger our fatherland gets, the less we love it, because a love that is shared is weakened. It is impossible to love a large family about which we know little.

Voltaire's negative take on *patrie*, of course, is questionable, given his own patriotic literary output as well as his praise of de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais*. Nonetheless, Voltaire's article reveals that not everybody agreed on the merits of patriotism at the moment of de Belloy's patriotic coup at the theater.

One reason for skepticism was that patriotism could also be asserted to support despots. Mercier, who was often anti-monarchical and anti-war in his writings, went so far as to argue in 1772 that patriotism was a pernicious program, foisted upon the masses from above. He explained that "excepté deux ou trois républiques, il n'y a pas de patrie proprement dite [...] le patriotisme est un fanatisme inventé par les rois et funeste à l'univers"⁶⁴ (Aside from two or three republics, there are no fatherlands, strictly speaking [...] patriotism is a fanaticism, invented by kings and fatal to the universe). But, as Norman Hampson points out, Mercier must have changed his mind by 1787, when "he maintained that one's 'amour de la patrie' was more important than any more abstract love of humanity."⁶⁵

Virtuous, necessary, and sentimental, but also inexistent or despotic: a general history of patriotism from before the Revolution indicates that writers theorized the term with little accord. Even a more synchronic approach on the uses of *la patrie* during the few years before the appearance of *Le Siège de Calais* reveals conflicting interpretations and strategies. The 1762 *Dictionnaire* of the Académie française, for example, defines *la patrie* as "le pays, l'État où l'on est né. *La France est notre patrie. L'amour de la patrie. Pour le bien de sa patrie. Pour le service de sa patrie. Servir sa patrie. Défendre sa patrie. Mourir pour sa patrie. Le devoir envers la patrie est un des premiers devoirs*"⁶⁶ (the country, the State where one is born. *France is our fatherland. Love of fatherland. For the good of the fatherland. For the service of the fatherland. Serve one's fatherland. Defend one's fatherland. To die for one's fatherland. Duty to the fatherland is one of our primary duties*). The Académie's definition, appearing at the height of war and three years

⁶⁴ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'An 2440* (London [Paris?]: n.p., 1772), 267, n. b.

⁶⁵ Norman Hampson, "La patrie," 126. Hampson quotes from Mercier's 1787 *Notions claires sur les Gouvernements*, vol. 1.

⁶⁶ "Patrie," in *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, vol. 11 (Paris: Brunet, 1762).

before de Belloy's play, shows that uses of the term *patrie* coincided with broader notions of duty, military obligation, and wartime sacrifice. When combined with sentimental overtones and captivating love intrigues, war plays of the 1760s emerged as vehicles to spread this "military sacrificial" thread of patriotism.

Diderot and D'Alembert's partisan *Encyclopédie* also defined *la patrie*, albeit from a pro-*philosophe* stance. The article "Patrie," written by Louis (the chevalier) de Jaucourt, constitutes a break from earlier conceptions of the term. No longer could writers like de Belloy claim that *la patrie* simply represented someone's homeland or a duty to protect that geographical space. Now, *la patrie* was charged with the partisan rhetoric of the ongoing debate between France's *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes*. Jaucourt begins his article by analyzing the intellectual and affective underpinnings of a *patrie*:

Le rhéteur peu logicien, le géographe qui ne s'occupe que de la position des lieux, & le lexicographe vulgaire, prennent la *patrie* pour le lieu de la naissance, quel qu'il soit; mais le philosophe sait que ce mot vient du latin *pater*, qui représente un père & des enfants, & conséquemment qu'il exprime le sens que nous attachons à celui de *famille*, de *société*, d'*état libre*, dont nous sommes membres, & dont les lois assurent nos libertés & notre bonheur. Il n'est point de *patrie* sous le joug du despotisme.⁶⁷

The rhetorician who is no logician, the geographer who only looks at the location of places, and the vernacular lexicographer use *fatherland* for the place of birth, no matter what. But the philosopher knows that this word comes from the latin *pater*, which connotes a father and offspring, and thus it can express the sense that we attach to the *family*, *society*, *free society* to which we belong and whose laws insure our liberty and our happiness. There is no *fatherland* under the yoke of despotism.

Jaucourt's definition of *la patrie* is familial and political. However, the *patrie* in this *philosophique* sense of the term transcends one's blood by extending into the realm of a legal construct based on a contractual agreement among citizens. Jaucourt allows space for the king, but not the despot, who would violate any freedom in the *patrie*.

The *Encyclopédistes* were engaged intellectuals, and their definition of *la patrie* was also a stance against a rising tide of Counter-Enlightenment discourses in the late 1750s and early 1760s (see Diderot's critique of *Le*

⁶⁷ "Patrie," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, ed. Robert Morrissey, <https://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu>. Accessed March 9, 2023.

Siège de Calais, mentioned above).⁶⁸ But *philosophe* patriotic discourse, despite the continued attention paid to Enlightenment thinkers today, did not necessarily dominate other conceptions of the *patrie* at the time.⁶⁹ The Revolution and subsequent Republican scholarship would eventually put *philosophes* such as Rousseau and Voltaire on an intellectual pedestal. But, in the 1760s, they were embroiled in a battle to assert partisan meanings and push their agenda. In their attempt to distance *la patrie* from the political leaders of France, *philosophes* hoped to persuade readers that a homeland was dependent on both free will and cosmopolitanism. For some *philosophes*, the *patrie* was deeply inclusive; France, if it is indeed a genuine *patrie*, should be a place “où les étrangers cherchent un asyle”⁷⁰ (where foreigners seek asylum). According to some *philosophes*, they are patriots precisely because they focus on cross-cultural issues such as world peace and engage with universals like humanity – the true *patrie philosophique*. The *philosophes* attempted to sap patriotism of its associations with absolutism and military force, and to bolster an internationalist and pacifist notion of tolerance and cosmopolitanism.

This patriotism, grounded in the application of rational principles to a variety of cultures, jarred with the patriotic ideals of the political, religious, military, and cultural establishment in France. Cosmopolitanism, as conceived by *Encyclopédistes*, also provided the fodder for de Belloy’s most explicit reflection on patriotism in *Le Siège de Calais*:

MAUNI:

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.⁷¹

MAUNI:

I hate those hearts that are dead and cold towards their country,
 Who, seeing one’s troubles in a deep peace,

⁶⁸ See Masseau, *Les ennemis des philosophes*.

⁶⁹ The struggle to control the deployment of terms and ideas in eighteenth-century France would change by the 1780s, as the *philosophes* effectively won a series of intellectual battles against their adversaries. For more information on how *philosophes* came to dominate France’s various cultural institutions, including the Comédie-Française and the Académie française, see the groundbreaking study, Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past and Present* 51 (1971): 81–115.

⁷⁰ Jaucourt, “Patrie,” in *L’Encyclopédie*. ⁷¹ De Belloy, *Le Siège de Calais*, 3, 3, 115.

Honor themselves with the great title of Citizens of the World.
 Feigning, in any place, to love humanity.
 To never serving it in their own city,
 Ungrateful sons, vile burdens of the breast from which they were born,
 And worthy of nothingness by the loss their being.

Mauni, the compassionate English general, laments the internationalism of several “fils ingrats” in France – “citizens of the world,” who only view the idea of humanity in abstraction and not as applicable to real places and people. Although de Belloy borrowed emotional and dramaturgical strategies from *philosophe* writers, the patriotism that he presents in *Le Siège de Calais* is decidedly militaristic and pro-French. This would not be the last time that a dramatic author alters a *philosophe* intellectual framework to bolster France’s military establishment, for as we will see in the [next chapter](#), Joseph Patrat made use of Mercier’s themes and characters in *Le Déserteur* (1770) to construct a very different ideological version of the *philosophe*’s play. Theater and, particularly, plays about the military were weapons in a battle to represent and evaluate France’s societal goals and values.

De Belloy’s critique of *philosophe* cosmopolitanism (and, by association, pacifism) reflects a line of Counter-Enlightenment thought that was popularized in the 1760s. Enemies of Voltaire, Diderot, and other *philosophes* conceptualized patriotism not as a rational contract or an equalizing moral code among freethinking individuals, but as unquestioning loyalty to the crown. And anti-*philosophe* writers were as adept at disseminating their ideas in French society as their enemies.⁷² For example, in Palissot’s *Les Philosophes*, the author takes his enemies to task for their putative irreverence towards national issues. Palissot claims that *philosophes* were both atheists and political radicals, and he rebukes them for having cosmopolitan views. Damis, the patriotic hero of Palissot’s satire, laments what he views as the *philosophes*’ dangerous internationalism and lackluster love of country: “Louant, admirant tout dans les autres pays,/ Et se faisant honneur d’avilir leur patrie:/ Sont-ce là les succès sur lesquels on s’écrite?”⁷³ (Praising, admiring everything in other countries,/ And taking pleasure in lambasting their fatherland:/ Are those the successes about which one boasts?) Not stopping his critique there, Palissot evinces the *philosophes*’ anti-patriotism by having

⁷² Olivier Ferret tracks the genesis and strategies of debates between these two rival groups in *La Fureur de nuire*.

⁷³ Charles Palissot, *Les Philosophes* (1760), ed. Olivier Ferret (Saint-Étienne: Presses universitaires de Saint-Étienne, 2007), 2.5, 54–55.

the main *philosophe* antagonist, Valère, attempt to seduce Damis' love interest, Rosalie, while the young hero is away at war.

Paris was rife with anti-*philosophe* writings against cosmopolitanism, pacifism, and anglophilia in the 1750s and 1760s.⁷⁴ The anti-*philosophe* patriotic critique resonated with many people at the time, given that France had just lost a brutal and costly war against England – a land supposedly full of cosmopolitan, “enlightened” thinkers, scientific progress, and rational philosophy. War, perhaps more than Enlightenment thinkers, religious conservatives, or vituperative journalists, skewed patriotism and its artistic reverberations toward themes of French exceptionality, local customs, and military values. As Jay Smith argues, “France’s demoralizing loss to the English and the Prussians in the Seven Years’ War led to a collective soul-searching the likes of which the French had never experienced.”⁷⁵ French reflections on what it meant to be patriotic were the result of wartime experience so that, in the post-war period, France had an antagonistic relationship with a linguistic and social Other and a way to conceptualize the *patrie* using difference rather than universalism. Smith elaborates on this shift in *some* forms of patriotism: “the insistence on the French capacity for patriotism during and after the Seven Years’ War reflected the intensification of a broad and ongoing effort to define a distinctively French, and distinctively postclassical, patriotic morality capable of thriving in modern conditions.”⁷⁶

Reflections on patriotic *difference* and cultural particularism were numerous following the war.⁷⁷ Edmond Dziembowski stresses the importance of battles in general, and the Hundred Years’ War and the Seven Years’ War in particular, in catalyzing patriotic sentiment throughout France. Of medieval struggles with England, for example, Dziembowski writes, “la guerre de Cent Ans déclenche dans l’inconscient collectif une mutation capitale. La prise de conscience d’appartenir à un même pays se manifeste tant par un vif sentiment anglophobe que par des actes marquant un net attachement à la patrie”⁷⁸ (the Hundred Years’ War launched a

⁷⁴ Cosmopolitanism was a major theme in the *Cacouacs* pamphlet attacks, launched by Fougeret de Monbron and Nicholas Moreau. In addition, Monbron penned a satirical “philosophe” treatise, *Le Cosmopolite* in 1751. This work criticized *philosophe* proclivities toward travel and international networks and spawned a series of pamphlets and tracts in the 1750s. For more information, see Masseau, *Les ennemis des philosophes*, 130–40.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 143. ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷⁷ The most telling example of historical and comparative analysis is Basset de La Marelle, *La Différence du Patriotisme National chez les François et chez les Anglois* (1765), 2nd edition (Paris: Rozet, 1766).

⁷⁸ Edmond Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750–1770: La France face à la puissance anglaise à l’époque de la guerre de Sept Ans* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998), 325.

major change in the collective unconscious. The realization of belonging to the same country manifested itself just as much by a strong Anglophobic sentiment as by actions that indicated a strong attachment to the fatherland). French patriotism emerged only as *French* because of the gradual differentiation between the conceptions of “France” and “England” during the early modern period. This insistence by the playwright on a specific patriotic time and place – a charge that was deliberate and repetitive in de Belloy’s tragedy – influenced many works in the corpus of war drama and performances presented in this book.

The competition to define patriotism, although interdisciplinary, was no battle among equals: not all definitions of patriotism could earn a place on France’s state-sponsored main stage. Definitions of patriotism that were in line with the political and military policies enacted in Versailles found a natural venue in the theater – an influencing medium that was directly financed, administered, and surveilled by the crown. This institutional “support,” when combined with theater’s inherent ability to affect spectators through an audiovisual experience, enabled de Belloy to experiment with (state-sanctioned) theories of patriotism in an emotional and socially important space.

After de Belloy, and this is the sticking point, writers conceptualized patriotic plays as affective experiences and effective tools to promote military and political goals such as recruitment, social cohesion, and antagonism toward the enemy. Theater became another *public* front in France’s war to define itself domestically and internationally. De Belloy was not, perhaps, the author of “la première tragédie où l’on ait procuré à la nation le plaisir de s’intéresser pour elle-même” (the first tragedy where the nation was given the pleasure of taking an interest in itself); and yet, his normalization and popularization of patriotic theater is irrefutable.⁷⁹ His brand of inward-focused, sentimental patriotism and his depiction of affective bonds among military personnel influenced military plays for years after the original 1765 *éclat*.

“On est tous égaux quand on a des sentiments”: Free Performances, Parodies, and Military Responses

In the socially stratified culture of eighteenth-century France, the physical space of a public theater was possibly “le seul lieu où la Nation pourra prendre conscience d’elle-même” (the only place where the Nation will come to understand itself).⁸⁰ Theater performances, and particularly state-

⁷⁹ De Belloy, “Préface,” *Le Siège de Calais*, 63.

⁸⁰ Jean-Jacques Roubine, *Introduction aux grandes théories du théâtre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 56.

sponsored *gratis* performances at the Comédie-Française and performances at smaller, more popular venues throughout the country, were rare moments when relatively disparate members of society found themselves in the same room and in front of the same audio-visual event. Theatrical and governmental operatives at the time subscribed to the notion that theater could create an *affective* bond between spectators and the lessons depicted on stage, as well as among spectators who were present for a common experience.

Le Siège de Calais was a cultural artifact with different goals for different participants at its performances. Patriotism emerged as a theme in texts about financial policy, European history, and jurisprudence. Notions of what it meant to be “French” run through correspondences, poems, and philosophical tracts. But what happened to patriotic discourse as it was hoisted up onto the stage and presented to a group of French spectators? How efficient is a government’s attempt to persuade its subjects if it is exposed to the ambiguities and multiplicity of spectators’ perceptions and interpretations?

Writing on French theater of the late eighteenth century, Jean-Claude Bonnet argues that changes in representations of *la patrie* and its illustrious leaders accompanied changes to France’s neoclassical theatrical tradition. Bonnet contends that “la principale question qui se posa, au théâtre, du point de vue du culte des grands hommes, fut de savoir quels héros paraîtraient désormais sur les scènes. Les personnages marquants du Panthéon national ne pouvaient y être évoqués sans un renouvellement profond des genres dramatiques”⁸¹ (the primary question that the theater asked, from the standpoint of the cult of great men, was to know what heroes would thus appear on the stage. The most important characters of the national Pantheon could not be evoked without a profound renovation of dramatic genres). The changes in heroism depicted in *Le Siège de Calais* coincided with changes to existing dramatic genres. As Renaud Bret-Vitoz argues, de Belloy’s notion of the hero was a turning point in the history of French theater because the author had produced “une conception originale de l’héroïsme. Selon lui, un héros français présente une évidente proximité et familiarité avec le public”⁸² (an original conception of heroism. According to him, a *French hero* shows a clear proximity to and familiarity with the public). With its enthusiastic support of the French

⁸¹ Jean-Claude Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 123.

⁸² Renaud Bret-Vitoz, *L’Éveil du héros plébéien, 1760–1794* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2018), 242.

crown and its claims of legitimacy, de Belloy's tragedy was politically unpalatable to revolutionary authors and audiences after 1791; however, *Le Siège de Calais* previewed the *héroïsme plébéien* that would come to dominate French stages even during the Revolution's most Jacobin years.⁸³

The next chapter will explore the continued tension between "cosmopolitan" and "nativist" strands of patriotism and military culture through an analysis of Mercier's *drame*, *Le Déserteur*, and of a variant of the play, which was performed at the Théâtre de la Marine in Brest. But, first, I detail here the direct aftermath of de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais* and, most notably, the military's response to the play as well as a parody of the tragedy that integrates military recruitment objectives and associated tensions into theatrical performance. This, in short, is a brief description of a play's transformation from a popular tragedy of national concern to a militarized cultural phenomenon.

When he died in 1775, De Belloy was working on his *Œuvres complètes*, including what he viewed as the definitive version of *Le Siège de Calais*. The works were published in 1778 and 1779 and included a series of letters written by municipal leaders, literary luminaries, and soldiers who had read copies or witnessed performances of the tragedy. De Belloy's mission in reprinting the letters is clear: to prove to his doubters and enemies that *Le Siège de Calais* and several of his other works were hits among a diverse swath of French society at the time. Several letters from members of France's military machine – officers and enlisted men of all ranks – were included in de Belloy's 1779 tome. For example, in an undated letter (probably from May or June 1765) to the author, "Caporal Primtemps" describes a group reading of *Le Siège de Calais* that took place at a barracks in the northern territory of Hainaut:

MONSIEUR,

Les huit Escouades de la Compagnie, assemblées par ordre du Capitaine, pour assister à la lecture qui leur a été faite de votre incomparable tragédie, *Le Siège de Calais*, m'ont chargé de vous écrire, comme Chef de la première, combien elles partagent avec toute la nation les sentiments de reconnaissance qu'elle vous doit. Les annales du Parnasse ne nous offriraient que des faits étrangers, ou fabuleux: l'habitude du courage, parmi nous, semblait dispenser nos auteurs du devoir d'en parler; et les Français gémissaient en silence, de l'oubli des vertus de leurs ancêtres. Que ne vous leur consacrez vos talents, vous chantez leur amour pour leur Roi, vous réveillez le patriotisme, et vous développez le germe de l'héroïsme dans tous les cœurs [. . .].⁸⁴

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸⁴ "Lettre du Caporal Primtemps de la Compagnie de Destourt, au Régiment de Haynaut à M. de Belloy," in *Œuvres complètes de M. de Belloy*, vol. 11 (Paris: Moutard, 1779), 342–3. Reprinted in *Le Siège de Calais*, ed. Connors, 166.

SIR,

The eight squadrons of the Company, assembled by the Captain's orders to attend the reading, which was presented to them of your incomparable tragedy, *Le Siège de Calais*, charged me to write to you, as the leader of the first [squadron], how they share with the entire nation these feelings of recognition that it owes you. Parnassus' annals offer us only foreign or fabulous tales: the norms of courage, among us, seem to prevent our authors from speaking about duty; and the French quiver in silence from forgetting about the virtues of their ancestors. Because you dedicate your talents to them, you sing their love for their King, you thus awaken patriotism, and you lay the seed of heroism in all hearts.

According to the corporal, the group reading was both obligatory (“par ordre du Capitaine”) and appreciated by all (“les sentiments de reconnaissance”). Primitemps alludes to the successful completion of the goals that de Belloy articulates in the preface to his tragedy and elsewhere. The play has developed “the seed of heroism” through an “awakening” of patriotism grounded in French military actions. The soldiers were supposedly more eager to combat the enemy and perform heroic acts now that they had experienced de Belloy's *Le Siège de Calais* through readings and discussions. Of course, it is impossible to know whether soldiers fought with more *feu* because they had read de Belloy's play. What is essential here is the loop that de Belloy creates in this version of *Le Siège* with his preface, the themes of his play, and this embedded testimony of the play's mission success in his *Œuvres*.

Colonel Mehegan of the elite *Grenadiers Royaux* in Versailles echoes the sentiments of his provincial colleague. In a May 5, 1765 letter to de Belloy, Mehegan writes that “nos vétérans et nos jeunes soldats admirent les sentiments élevés de votre âme, et les productions de votre génie. Ce tribut est dû à la vertu et à l'héroïsme qui règnent dans votre pièce”⁸⁵ (our seasoned and young soldiers admire the elevated feelings of your soul and the creations of your genius. This tribute is owed to the virtue and to the heroism that reign in your play). De Belloy's tragedy, at least as it is presented in de Belloy's own anthology of works, was a hit among all ranks and age groups of the French fighting forces. It is unsurprising that *Le Siège de Calais* was the first French play ever to be published in Saint-Domingue, given that the colony was governed by an administrator with both military and civilian functions. Governor-General Charles Henri Hector d'Estaing, who was also a celebrated war hero and admiral in the navy, had a direct hand in printing and disseminating de Belloy's tragedy in spring 1765 with the help of the island's first printing press, which had been brought to the colony several months

⁸⁵ “Lettre de Colonel Mehegan, d'un Régiment de Grenadiers Royaux à M. de Belloy,” in de Belloy, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 11, 341, in *Le Siège de Calais*, ed. Connors, 165.

prior. D'Estaing not only gave his accord to print *Le Siège de Calais* but, "faisant cette nouvelle occasion de témoigner sa bienfaisance" (taking this rare occasion to display his generosity), he decided to print it "à ses frais pour être distribuée *gratis*"⁸⁶ (at his expense to be given out *gratis*).

De Belloy's attempt to bond theatrical moments to military institutions was a success. Whether in Paris or in the kingdom's plantation-based colonies, *Le Siège de Calais* was gaining traction in the military ranks. This must have pleased Choiseul and the other commanders who had pushed the Comédie-Française into staging it. Proud to receive the military's stamp of approval, de Belloy published pro-military para-texts to illustrate the tragedy's resonance among soldiers and underscore the pervasiveness of his theatrical achievement. It is difficult to know more about these staged readings at military halls and barracks throughout France – a practice that would become more popular at the end of the century. But a parody of *Le Siège de Calais*, performed at the Saint-Germain fairgrounds in spring 1765, provides a theatrical take on the bonds between de Belloy's tragedy, theatrical spectatorship, and the goals of the French military at the time.

Le Retour et les effets du Siège de Calais by "Monsieur M." was published in March 1765, "à l'occasion de la tragédie donnée gratis" – a reference to the performance of de Belloy's play that was sponsored by the king on March 12.⁸⁷ The short one-act comedy, "mêlée de vaudevilles," was most likely staged at the fairgrounds before it was published. What is interesting about *Le Retour et les effets* is not that it was a parody of *Le Siège de Calais* (parodies of tragedies were typical of fairground theater; there are hundreds of examples), but rather that it parodied the performance environment and aftermath of the March *gratis* show. The parody was thus a response both to the drama and to the popular reception of a government-sponsored performance event.⁸⁸

The main characters include M. Vaillant, a former "Bas-Officier" who lost his arm in the War of Austrian Succession; Mme Hareng, a fishmonger; François, a young father and market worker; François' brother, "le Cadet"; Verloppe, a cabaret owner; and a "Sergent" from the Picardie regiment. There

⁸⁶ "Lettre du Cap-Français" (most likely from the Saint-Domingue broadsheet, the *Affiches américaines*), in de Belloy, *Œuvres*, vol. 11, 352, in *Le Siège de Calais*, ed. Connors, 166. The version of the play printed in Saint-Domingue was *Le Siège de Calais, tragédie par M. de Belloy, représentée au Cap-Français pour la première fois le 7 juillet 1765* (Cap-Français: chez Marie, 1765).

⁸⁷ Monsieur M., *Le Retour et les effets du Siège de Calais, comédie en 1 acte, en prose, mêlée de vaudevilles, à l'occasion de la tragédie donnée gratis. Par M**** (Paris: Vaugirard, 1765). Reprinted in *Le Siège de Calais*, ed. Connors, 201–23.

⁸⁸ *Le Retour et les effets* is creative in its staging of theatrical reception, but it is not without precedent. For a typology of parodies, including parodies about theatrical performance and reception, see Jeanne-Marie Hostiou, *Les Miroirs de Thalie: Le théâtre sur le théâtre et la Comédie-Française (1680–1762)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019).

are also several minor characters. The comedy takes place at Verloppe’s cabaret and opens with a discussion about the event which has just occurred at the “Comédie”: a rapturous, free performance of de Belloy’s tragedy.

M. VAILLANT:

S’il vient quelqu’un, tu le feras monter. J’attends trois ou quatre personnes qui sont allées voir la Comédie, que le Roi fait donner GRATIS; je crois qu’elles ne tarderont pas.

LE GARÇON:

Est-ce qu’il y a quelque chose de nouveau? Je n’ai pas entendu le canon de chez vous tirer, j’ai crû qu’on ne la donna GRATIS, que quand il y a des réjouissances.

M. VAILLANT:

C’est vrai, on ne l’a donné que quand il y en a; mais le Roi qui aime à donner des preuves de sa bonté à son peuple, a ordonné qu’on la fasse voir, parce que c’est une belle pièce qui inspire, à ce qu’on m’a dit, de l’amour pour son Roi et pour sa patrie.⁸⁹

M. VAILLANT:

If somebody arrives, send them up. I’m waiting for three or four people who went to see the play which the King gave GRATIS; and I think they won’t be too long.

LE GARÇON:

Is it something new? I didn’t hear the cannon fire from your place and I thought that GRATIS performances were given only in times of celebration.

M. VAILLANT:

It’s true that they are given only at those times, but the King, who loves proving his generosity to his people, ordered all to see it because it’s a beautiful play that inspires, so I’m told, love for one’s King and fatherland.

The play in question, *Le Siège de Calais*, “inspires [...] love for king and country,” so it has altered the theater’s programming norms and earned a special status among government officials and French subjects.

The crux of the parody surrounds the disappearance of François, whom the other characters have not seen for several days. Also essential to the plot is the Sergeant, described by Mme. Hareng in scene 4 as searching the neighborhood for “un homme qu’il a engagé y a quinze jours, et qu’il n’peut pas r’trouver”⁹⁰ (a man whom he had signed up two weeks ago and now can’t be found). It is obvious to all (except the characters on stage) that François is the young man in question; what is less clear, however, is

⁸⁹ *Le Retour et les effets*, scene 1, 202. ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, scene 4, 207.

whether the play will turn into a burlesque comedy of trickery and escape from the clasp of a greedy recruiter or into something more in line with the goals of de Belloy's tragedy, which sought to inspire feelings of national belonging and devotion to the French military.

Le Retour et les effets is packed with military facts and reflections on even the most violent effects of war. For example, in scene eight, M. Vaillant sings about France's victory at Fontenoy, a major battle in 1745 and a turning point in the Austrian conflict. Vaillant recounts his mixed emotions that day, when he had helped his king but witnessed the death of his compatriots, losing an arm in the process. He adds that his slight taste of bitterness is not due to pity, doubt in the value of war, or his own physical harm. Vaillant is moved by "le regret [. . .] de ne plus pouvoir servir mon Roi"⁹¹ (the regret [. . .] of no longer being able to serve my King).

Vaillant realizes that François is the lost recruit in question; the veteran asks François to explain himself. The boy sings an *air* about the day he had agreed to enlist:

FRANÇOIS, *AIR*: *Le Tambour à la portière*:

J'entendis battre la Caisse
Un matin qu'j'avions du cœur;
J'l'y demandis une adresse,
P'y je m'en fus chez l'engageur;
Il me donni t'une somme
Pour servir le Roi LOUIS.
Est-c'là comme z'on est un homme?
Not'femme m'r'tient par ses cris.⁹²

FRANÇOIS, *AIR*: *Le Tambour à la portière*:

I heard the drumbeat
One morning when I had strength;
I asked him for an address,
Then I was at the recruiting officer's;
He gave me an advance
To serve King Louis.
Is this how we become a man?
My wife is keeping me back with her cries.

Rather than escape Paris, François has returned to the café, where he knows the Sergeant will find him, to honor his commitment. François explains that witnessing de Belloy's play has reignited the patriotic drive that had inspired him to enlist in the first place. He now regrets skipping out on his service: "si vous aviez vû c'que j'ons vû à cette pièce; comme c'était beau de servir son Roi,

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, scene 8, 211. ⁹² *Ibid.*, scene 9, 213.

que j’ferions tout pour lui”⁹³ (if you had seen what I saw at that play; it was so beautiful to serve one’s King that I would do anything for him).

However, there is still the matter of François’ wife and children. In this lighthearted genre, even one with serious and patriotic overtones, one goal is to mitigate the complexity and anguish of such an important life decision and propose, by the end of the play, a happy resolution for all. In scene thirteen, François’ younger brother, the Cadet, arrives to declare that he will replace François in the ranks. The Cadet thus fulfills the family’s contract, releasing his older brother from duty so that François can continue working and providing for his family (the Cadet is not yet married and has no children). Mademoiselle Javot, the Cadet’s fiancée, is heartbroken, yet she has also learned from de Belloy’s play that patriotic duty and sacrifice to one’s country are broad social requirements which are not solely defined by a *man’s* service:

Mlle JAVOTTE:

Si vous me quittez pour une autre maîtresse, je ne vous le pardonnerais pas; mais pour servir le Roi, je n’ose m’en plaindre: je viens d’apprendre au *Siège de Calais*, qu’un homme sans honneur est indigne de l’amour; ce que vous faites pour votre frère, vous rend plus digne de moi; au moment que vous méritez toute ma tendresse, il faut nous séparer! Malgré la raison, mon cœur en murmure.⁹⁴

Mlle JAVOTTE:

If you were leaving me for another mistress, I wouldn’t forgive you; but to serve the King, I wouldn’t dare complain: I’ve just learned from the *Siège de Calais* that a man without honor is unworthy of love; what you are doing for your brother makes you more worthy of me; just when you deserve all of my tenderness, we must leave each other! Despite the reasoning, my heart still whispers.

Javotte has just seen on stage how the character Aliénor’s love for Harcourt dwindles and disappears when the noble French officer fails to fight for his native France, choosing instead to raise his flag for the English. Although her “heart” continues to “murmur,” Javotte knows that her lover’s sacrifice is the only worthy path forward: “il faut nous séparer!,” she exclaims.

Vaillant, the army veteran, and the Sergeant, a seasoned soldier, have now witnessed the young characters come to patriotic conclusions, not through first-hand combat training, military coercion, or parental control, but by witnessing a performance of *Le Siège de Calais*. In this short comedy about patriotism, obligations, and military engagement, theater changes people. The character attributes and mutations – François’ transformation from a coward to a willing recruit, the Cadet’s brotherly sacrifice, Javot’s eagerness to support wartime duties on the home front – have generational

⁹³ *Ibid.*, scene 10, 214. ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, scene 13, 221.

importance as well as class value. Their actions display sacrifice, honor, and noble virtues. These ideas and behaviors have now been transferred from traditionally noble spheres to more modest social classes, thanks, at least in part, to the specific codes of the military (and to the theatricalization of those codes in de Belloy's play):

M. VAILLANT, *en prenant la main de Cadet*:

Allons mon ami, le plaisir que tu fais à ton frère n'est pas commun, soutiens toujours le même caractère de générosité et comporte toi en joli garçon avec tes Camarades; sois ardent à ton service, respectueux envers tes Officiers, si tu veux que l'on estime.

LE SERGENT:

Oui mon ami, le Soldat est égal aux Officiers quand il a de l'honneur, on est tous égaux quand on a des sentiments.

VERLOPPE:

Nous allons vous reconduire jusqu'à l'auberge, Monsieur le Sergent, nous boirons un coup avant que de nous quitter.⁹⁵

M. VAILLANT, *taking the Cadet's hand*:

My friend, the gift you give your brother is rare, always keep that same spirit of generosity and behave as a nice boy with your fellow recruits, be dedicated to your service and respectful toward your officers if you want their esteem.

THE SERGEANT:

Yes, my friend, a soldier is equal to the officer when he has honor and we are all equal when we have feelings.

VERLOPPE:

Let's go back to the inn, Sergeant, sir. We shall raise a glass together before you leave.

The military, with the service it demands and the horizontal, intimate bonds it supposedly achieves, will be now a source of honor, so the story goes, for previously ignored or unremarkable French subjects.

The Sergeant voices several meritocratic and democratic strands in military discourses and reforms at the time. *Le Retour et les effets*, like in *Le Siège de Calais*, gestures toward a mission to create unit cohesiveness and solidarity in the military ranks. As Pichichero remarks, "while rigid social divisions persisted during the *ancien régime*, military officers and administrators of the eighteenth century were not blind to the notion that collective identity and group solidarity were important forces in military success."⁹⁶ Military service,

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, scene 13, 222. ⁹⁶ Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment*, 66.

according to the conclusion of *Le Retour et les effets*, includes sacrifice and danger, as well as an affective bond to brother soldiers and to the nation.

Ultimately, both the parody and de Belloy’s tragedy reimagine French society as a place where service and utility reign, and not (or not just) birth and wealth. If the message in *Le Retour et les effets* was not already clear, the short play ends with the Sergeant – the king’s representative – sharing a drink with Vaillant, the Cadet, and others. Here, the audience witnesses the continuation of a generational cycle of military service, from veteran, to soldier, to recruit. This “previewing” of future service – a military which will flourish because it will always bring out the service and sacrifice of eager young Frenchmen – is perhaps the most common current in late-eighteenth-century military dramas, and especially those that were penned and performed during the Revolution’s most bellicose years.

The depiction of martial sociability and of a process whereby socioeconomic, geographical, and other differences scale down into a unique military identity was the subject of many military treatises and theatrical works during the late eighteenth century. Essential to this type of art and to its accompanying lexicon was an evolving notion of the term “patriotism.” As I hope to have described in this chapter, patriotism was a polyvalent, ambiguous concept before the Revolution. But real war experiences and an increasingly tangible relationship between the military and French theater institutions brought a “military sacrificial” strand of patriotism into prime position. Theater, and especially theatrical performance, helped simplify, organize, and bolster pro-military (and, to a certain extent, anti-cosmopolitan) patriotism, much to the dismay of Diderot, his fellow *encyclopédistes* and, as we shall see in the [next chapter](#), the anti-war dramatist and polemicist Louis-Sébastien Mercier.

De Belloy’s *Le Siège de Calais* constituted a new kind of military drama and encouraged new types of performance practices that sought to bond French subjects to the country’s military objectives and experiences. The next two chapters tease out late Old-Regime military cultures on stage and detail how military groups and administrative influencers in France and its colonies engaged with theatrical performance and drama. [Chapter 2](#) may strike readers as strange in that it focuses on Mercier, who was highly critical of de Belloy’s *Le Siège de Calais*, of absolutist political regimes, and of France’s military engagements. Nevertheless, Mercier penned one of the most controversial and complex *dramas* about desertion and soldiering in the history of French theater. The [next chapter](#) details Mercier’s dramaturgical engagement with the military as well as the military’s startling theatrical response to his pacifist discourses and institutional critiques.