

A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF VOLTAIRE'S *LA FÊTE DE BÉLESBAT*
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On 15 May 1760 Voltaire wrote to the historian and *parlementaire* Charles-Jean-François Hénault: 'Songez vous bien, mon illustre confrère, que de tous ceux qui assistèrent à l'extrême onction que je donnai au curé et à cette fête que vous embellîtes, il n'y a que vous et moi qui soyons en vie?'¹ The nostalgic recollection of *La Fête de Bélesbat*, performed by and for madame de Prie's circle in the autumn of 1725, establishes a solidarity between the two survivors, and the term 'confrères', often used between fellow *académiciens*,² (disingenuously) insists upon their similar literary status. The recent appearance of *La Fête de Bélesbat* in the ongoing edition of Voltaire's *Complete Works* prompts a re-examination of the play's authorship.³ Voltaire's precise role in the composition of the work is contested, notably by the editors of the Kehl edition (1785): 'Tous les vers, à beaucoup près, ne sont pas de M. de Voltaire, et ceux qui lui appartiennent sont faciles à distinguer.'⁴ Among twentieth-century scholars, the author of an essay on madame de Prie's cultural patronage challenges the unsubstantiated ease of this evaluation;⁵ René Pomeau argues that it is indeed a collaborative work; Louis Moland states that Voltaire wrote the piece in its entirety;⁶ and admitting the impossibility of ascertaining whether or not the *Fête* is a collaborative work, Russell Goulbourne assumes in his recent study of Voltaire's comic theatre that it is 'solely Voltaire's work'.⁷ A return to the archives clarifies the authorship of some of the play's 507 lines.

Authorship represents a particular problem in private theatre where the *commanditaire* enjoys a greater status than that of the author. Here the play is a pretext to a social act, a festivity linked to a particular place, time or host: 'Le théâtre de société naît, se compose, s'élabore pour un commanditaire, pour un lieu, à une date et à une occasion qu'il a choisis lui-même ou que sa société lui offre en hommage.'⁸ The adaptable and ephemeral text is marked by this notion of collectivity; appearing to have no primacy in the group performance, it is often the work of several collaborators and as a result of such collaboration one author's works rarely includes the other's contributions, as is the case with Collé and Laujon's creations for the duc d'Orléans or the comte de Clermont.⁹ In none of the collected editions with which Voltaire participated closely does the *Fête* appear in its entirety; instead four fragments were published separately, the two most common being the 'Exhortation faite au curé de Courdimanche en son agonie' (lines 151-217) and that concerning the poet Alain Chartier (lines 415-22), both of which appear in the 'encadrée' edition of 1775, prepared in collaboration with Voltaire himself.¹⁰ But what of the rest of the play? Manuel Couvreur identifies the comic playwright René de Bonneval and the président Hénault as possible collaborators, on the basis that the two men are thanked in lines 437-45 and 446-58 respectively.¹¹ Couvreur does not justify his claim, and no concrete evidence of Bonneval's direct contribution has yet been found. Documentary evidence does, however, exist for Hénault's specific contribution to the *Fête*, and the proof is more convincing than the unsubstantiated claim made by one of his later editors that 'plusieurs couplets de cette fête étaient de lui.'¹²

Our evidence is not to be found in the two principal editions of Hénault's work, for no fragments of the *Fête* appear in either his *Pièces de théâtre en vers et en prose* (1770) or his posthumous *Œuvres inédites* (1806); nor is the play mentioned in his *Mémoires* (first published in 1855). The Archives départementales de l'Orne in Alençon contain many manuscripts relevant to the président's historical works, but nowhere is the *Fête* mentioned, not even in the 110 letters addressed to his niece, the comtesse de Tillières. His plays are not completely occulted, for a letter dating from early July 1753 refers to his innovative historical drama *François II* (1747), and a letter dated 8 June 1758 refers to a collaborative piece with the duc de Nivernais (most probably *Le Temple des chimères*, published that same year).¹³

Yet compelling evidence does indeed exist that Hénault wrote part of the *Fête*. The bibliothèque de l' Arsenal holds a volume of manuscripts, probably transcribed by Hénault's secretary, for this is not the président's own handwriting judging by the letters to his niece. Amidst the various *chansons*, *prières* and *noëls*, there is a 'Fragment d'un divertissement fait à Belebat, sur l'air, Je gage boire autant qu'un Suisse'.¹⁴ This reproduces exactly the drinking song 'Salut au curé de Courdimanche' (lines 119-37 in the play) that concludes the opening episode which sees the *curé* crowned. It is telling that Hénault was well known in this period for his songs, as Collé was to recollect in late 1770: 'Le président était connu il y a quarante ans par quelques petites chansons galantes et fades, que je ne me soucierais pas d'avoir faites, quoiqu'elles aient eu quelque vogue.'¹⁵ The song's appearance amongst

these manuscripts provides strong evidence that it is the président's own composition. This attribution is made more plausible given that there is no mention here of Voltaire's name, whereas authorship is clarified with the three other manuscript pieces connected to Voltaire; namely 'L'homme inutile, Lettre écrite a M. de V... de Plombières le 14 Août 1744', the 'Réponse de M. de Voltaire', and 'Lettre de M. de Voltaire à M. le P.H.'¹⁶

The président himself acknowledges in his essay *Sur la tragédie et la comédie* that works such as *La Fête de Bélesbat* are impermanent and often forgotten: 'Nous savons ce que c'est que des plaisanteries de société, des pièces faites à de certaines occasions: les sociétés détruites, les occasions oubliées, on voit bientôt les plaisanteries s'effacer avec ce qui leur a fait naître, quelque bonnes qu'elles pussent être alors.'¹⁷ The manuscript discussed here preserves an instance of literary history which by its nature is usually consigned to the ephemeral, and it is persuasive evidence that Hénault did indeed contribute directly to the text of *La Fête de Bélesbat*.

¹ Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents*, ed. by T. Besterman (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1971), vol. CVII, p.304, letter D8909.

² The Académie's own dictionary notes of the term: 'Il se dit aussi De ceux qui sont d'une même Compagnie, d'un même Corps. Ils sont tous deux Conseillers au Parlement, tous deux de l'Académie, ils sont Confrères' (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* [Paris, s.n., 1798], p. 288).

³ Voltaire, *La Fête de Bélesbat*, ed. by Roger J. V. Cotte and Paul Gibbard, in *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. 3A (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2004), pp. 141-86. The name of the château is spelt variously as Bélesbat, Belebat, Belesbat, Bélébat and Bellebat; the spelling as given in this edition is used here.

⁴ Cited in *La Fête de Bélesbat*, p. 186.

⁵ Henri Thirion, *Voltaire chez madame de Prie: Les fêtes de Bellébat* (Versailles, L. Bernard, 1903), p. 17.

⁶ See *La Fête de Bélesbat*, p. 146.

⁷ Russell Goulbourne, *Voltaire Comic Dramatist*, *SVEC* 2006:03, p. 37.

⁸ Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, *Le Théâtre de société: un autre théâtre?* (Paris, H. Champion, 2003), pp. 18-19.

⁹ Plagnol-Diéval, *Le Théâtre de société*, p. 150.

¹⁰ See *La Fête de Bélesbat*, pp. 147-53.

¹¹ Manuel Couvreur, 'La Fête de Belesbat', in *Dictionnaire général de Voltaire*, ed. by Raymond Trousson and Jeroom Vercruysse (Paris, H. Champion 2003), p. 517.

¹² Charles-Jean-François Hénault, *Nouveau dialogue des morts*, in S. G. Longchamp and J.-L. Wagnière, *Mémoires sur Voltaire, et sur ses ouvrages*, 2 vols (Paris, A. André 1826), I, p. 451.

¹³ These letters are found in dossier 34J5 in the Fonds du chartrier de Carrouges, Archives départementales de l'Orne.

¹⁴ *Manuscrits du président Hénault*; Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms 3192, pp. 244-45.

¹⁵ Charles Collé, *Journal et mémoires de Charles Collé sur les hommes de lettres, les ouvrages dramatiques et les événements les plus mémorables du règne de Louis XV (1748-1772)*, ed. by Honoré Bonhomme, 3 vols (Paris, Firmin Didot, 1868), III, p. 279. The *Nouvelles littéraires* similarly remarked in 1747 that Hénault 'a débuté dans le monde par des chansons charmantes, talent qui, chez une nation aussi frivole que la nôtre, conduit quelquefois à la grande réputation'; see *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister etc.*, ed. by Maurice Tourneux, 16 vols (Paris, Garnier, 1877-82), I, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Manuscrits du président Hénault*, pp. 258-66. The second text appears as D3170 and is dated 6 July 1745 (see *Correspondence*, XCIII, p. 292); the third appears as an 'Épître à monsieur le président Hénault' dated 1 September 1744, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. by Louis Moland (Paris, Garnier, 1877), vol. X, pp. 326-28.

¹⁷ *Manuscrits du président Hénault*, pp. 48-49. This short essay is undated, although it may have been written after the duc de Nivernais wrote to Hénault in 1751, asking whether tragedy or comedy was the more difficult genre; see Henri Lion, *Un Magistrat homme de lettres au dix-huitième siècle. Le président Hénault 1685-1770. Sa vie, ses œuvres d'après des documents* (Paris, Plon, 1903), p. 362.