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# Death is the Beginning of Infamy: Robespierre and a Legacy of Misconceptions

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Death is the Beginning of Infamy:  
Robespierre and a Legacy of Misconceptions

Maximilien Robespierre is one of history's most misrepresented figures. Though considerable efforts have been made to improve his legacy since his execution in 1794, the stereotypical portrait of Robespierre as an unfeeling dictator has maintained popularity for over two hundred years. Historians hostile to Robespierre have routinely relied upon dubious sources and political bias in order to justify their depictions of Robespierre as everything from a bloodthirsty murderer to an unfeeling ideologue. Of additional detriment to Robespierre's legacy is the gendered light in which he is often cast. Largely ignored by even his greatest supporters, the portrayal of Robespierre as abnormally effeminate has allowed historians to reimagine his revolutionary worth in ahistoric ways. In order to fully understand the effect these harmful depictions have had on Robespierre's legacy, it is necessary to reexamine the most prominent representations of Robespierre produced over the last three hundred years. Loaded with gendered stereotypes, faulty methodology, and ideological motivations these representations become increasingly problematic the further and further they are dissected for the truth.

Robespierre's personal and political vilification began with the Thermidorian Reaction of 1794.<sup>1</sup> On 8 Thermidor, an exhausted and politically out-of-tune Robespierre arrived at the National Convention to deliver his first speech after a month of absence.<sup>2</sup> At the conclusion of the long and rambling tirade in which he defended himself against accusations of dictatorship, Robespierre declared he possessed a list of counterrevolutionaries he sought to condemn in the

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<sup>1</sup> David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

coming weeks.<sup>3</sup> Whether such a list truly existed is a matter of debate, but announcing its existence was a fatal error.<sup>4</sup> When Robespierre refused to provide the names on the list, paranoia overcame the Convention.<sup>5</sup> Afraid that Robespierre would persecute them for the wartime atrocities and extremist policies they supported against his protests, Robespierre's colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety decided to exploit this atmosphere of paranoia for their gain.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the evening of 8 Thermidor, Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, Joseph Fouché, Jacques Billaud-Varenne, and other extremists visited several leading moderates and convinced them Robespierre sought their destruction.<sup>7</sup> Together, the two opposing factions formed a dubious alliance which culminated in Robespierre's arrest and execution on 10 Thermidor.<sup>8</sup>

In the aftermath of Robespierre's death, the revolutionary government embarked on a purposeful destruction of his legacy.<sup>9</sup> For Collot, Fouché, and others on the far left, this destruction provided an escape from personal culpability for the worst excesses of the Terror.<sup>10</sup> For the moderates, it provided a chance to dismantle a government they despised by blaming its failings on a man who'd constantly opposed them.<sup>11</sup> Robespierre's personal belongings were ransacked, his political allies guillotined, and his family and friends arrested.<sup>12</sup> From these friends and political allies, the Thermidorians extracted tainted testimonies and used them as evidence for Robespierre's alleged crimes. Among the most damaging of these testimonies was

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<sup>3</sup> Robespierre, "Speech of 8 Thermidor," 169-172.

<sup>4</sup> Richard T. Bienvenu, ed., "Minutes of the National Convention: 8 Thermidor, Year II," in *The Ninth of Thermidor: The Fall of Robespierre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 175-181.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-177.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Mathiez, *The Fall of Robespierre & Other Essays* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1927), 138-147.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-150.

<sup>9</sup> David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 14-17.

<sup>10</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 281.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-282.

<sup>12</sup> Richard T. Bienvenu, ed., *The Ninth of Thermidor: The Fall of Robespierre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 260-261.

the one provided by Robespierre's friend, the revolutionary painter Jacques-Louis David.

Although David has sworn to "drink the hemlock" with Robespierre on the night of 8 Thermidor, he quickly retracted his support to avoid the guillotine.<sup>13</sup> "I did not embrace Robespierre [that night], I did not even touch him, for he repelled everyone," David testified, "I am not the only one who was deceived about him; many citizens thought him virtuous as well as I."<sup>14</sup> David's charge that Robespierre had tricked his colleagues into believing his revolutionary merit became common during this period, and contributed to a widespread distrust of Robespierre amongst the Parisian communities which had once supported him.<sup>15</sup>

On the streets, journalists disseminated pamphlets overemphasizing the relationship between Robespierre and the large crowds of women who once flocked to see his speeches. A month after Robespierre's death, his political enemy M  h  e de la Touche published a series of satirical pieces on Robespierre's "will," which included vulgar references to a phallic "tail" of Robespierre's which la Touche claimed he used to "pierce virgins" in the Convention's stalls.<sup>16</sup> Other works imagined orgies Robespierre and his confidant Antoine Saint-Just indulged in in the antechambers of the Tuileries Palace.<sup>17</sup> These legends were given credence in the Convention when the Thermidorian Paul Barras confirmed their existence in a speech on 27 Thermidor.<sup>18</sup> "[Robespierre and Saint-Just] abandoned themselves to all kinds of excesses," he charged, adding that anyone who interrupted their "debaucheries" was arrested for treason.<sup>19</sup> "Robespierre

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<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Richard T. Bienvendu, ed., "Minutes of the National Convention, 13 Thermidor," in *The Ninth of Thermidor: The Fall of Robespierre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 261.

<sup>14</sup> Qtd in *Ibid.*, 261-263.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Curtis, *Saint-Just: Colleague of Robespierre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 324.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 324-325.

<sup>19</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 325.

had numerous concubines.”<sup>20</sup> This hyper-sexualization of Robespierre was at first seen as the best way to undermine his Spartan image and associate him with all the rumored depravity of the aristocracy he so despised.<sup>21</sup>

This view changed in 1795 when the revolutionary government appointed E.B. Courtois to sift through Robespierre’s personal affects and publish a report.<sup>22</sup> Released in 1795, Courtois’ *Rapport* was a hasty conglomeration of hearsay and biased findings which reviewed only a fraction of Robespierre’s personal documents.<sup>23</sup> Courtois relied most heavily upon the memoirs of Louis Fréron, an old school mate of Robespierre’s who had become his embittered enemy during the revolution.<sup>24</sup> Fréron’s, and by extension Courtois’, Robespierre was a villainous caricature devoid of personal amicability. He resided in a shrine to himself, dined lavishly upon luxury fruits while France starved, and frightened his enemies into consenting to his ideological dictatorship with threats of the guillotine.<sup>25</sup> “He was sad, bilious, morose, [and] jealous of the success of his comrades,” Fréron told Courtois. “He was never known to have laughed. He never forgot a slight; he was vindictive and treacherous.”<sup>26</sup>

More significantly, Courtois’ Robespierre was no longer the rampant sexual deviant of la Touche or Barras’ imagination. Instead, he was sexless and effeminate, a man who possessed none of the masculine spirit of the revolution, but instead epitomized the “treacherous” femininity of the aristocracy.<sup>27</sup> Fréron emphasized this point when he told Courtois Robespierre was guilty of “dissimulating his resentments,” a gendered charge which Lynn Hunt has argued

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<sup>20</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>21</sup> Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career*, 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career*, 14-16.

was typically reserved for devious noble women.<sup>28</sup> A friend of Danton's, it is likely that Courtois ascribed to the same gendered perception of Robespierre as Danton did, viewing him as an emasculated "eunuch" who "had no balls."<sup>29</sup> By drawing a connection between Robespierre's non-heteronormative behavior and his failures as a revolutionary, Courtois succeeded in popularizing Danton's opinion of Robespierre, a dangerous accomplishment which significantly shifted the Thermidorian narrative.

Compounded by years' worth of propaganda and hearsay, the malicious versions of Robespierre created by Courtois, David, and Barras laid the foundation for Robespierre's characterization in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Long gone was the image of Robespierre as the heroic defender of the commoner; "the Incorruptible" who was heralded as the revolution's protector by the sans-culottes and the Paris Commune was no more.<sup>30</sup> In his place was installed Fréron's "bilious and morose" automaton whose inhuman coldness and feminine inability to relate to the "common man" made him the worst of revolutionaries.<sup>31</sup> As Robespierre's biographer David P. Jordan put it, all the personal myths about Robespierre "were fitted into a mosaic of a demonic and fanatical revolutionary whose depravities led him to pervert the Revolution."<sup>32</sup> It was easy for the Thermidorians to sell the idea of Robespierre as the mastermind of the Terror once they convinced the people of Paris that he was vain, cold-blooded, and womanly—three traits which undermined the austere public persona he'd spent over five years cultivating.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in David Lawday, *The Giant of the French Revolution: Danton, A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 270, 282.

<sup>30</sup> Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career*, 16-17.

<sup>31</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

By the time Napoleon became First Consul in 1799, Robespierre was nationally reviled. His most vocal supporters were silenced by the guillotine, and the last hope for his revolutionary ideology was vanquished with the death of Gracchus Babeuf in 1797.<sup>34</sup> The Thermidorian alliance which overthrew Robespierre had fractured following the dismantlement of the Terror, resulting in the deportation of Collot, Barère, and Billaud-Varenne to French Guiana in 1795.<sup>35</sup> While in exile, Barère and Billaud as well as other Thermidorians facing persecution in France and Europe, exalted Robespierre's revolutionary worth and admitted they had plotted against him to save themselves.<sup>36</sup> In 1832, Barère penned an emphatic defense of Robespierre, writing, "would to heaven there were [in the government] today someone to point to those who conspire against our freedom! We were then in the middle of a war, and we did not understand the man...his was the temperament of many great men, and posterity will not refuse him this title."<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, posterity was little interested in Barère's retraction.

Nor was posterity interested in consulting with those who knew Robespierre best. In the mid-1800s, Robespierre's sister Charlotte, and the daughter of his landlord Elisabeth Duplay, released separate recollections of life with the Incorruptible.<sup>38</sup> "Since Maximilien perished, a victim of counterrevolutionaries, his enemies' rage has emerged in calumnies, lies, and diatribes against him," Charlotte wrote, addressing the Thermidorian propaganda created to vilify her brother, "I always knew him to be a virtuous man."<sup>39</sup> Charlotte's Robespierre was the complete opposite of the Robespierre found in Courtois' and Proyard's works. Kind, sensitive, and committed to his work, the Robespierre of Charlotte's memoirs possessed none of the cool

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<sup>34</sup> McPhee, *Revolutionary Life*, 232-233

<sup>35</sup> George Rudé, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 61-64.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>37</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

<sup>39</sup> Charlotte Robespierre, *Memoirs*, New ed. (London: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 5-6.

indifference of his exaggerated counterpart.<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Duplay, no friend of Charlotte's, confirmed this description in her own memoirs. Duplay described Robespierre as a gentle friend whom both she and her family loved "tenderly."<sup>41</sup> "When I had some unhappiness, I told him everything," she remembered. "He was not a severe judge: he was a friend, a good brother indeed; he was so virtuous!"<sup>42</sup> For Duplay and Charlotte, Robespierre's gentility of spirit was inseparable from his masculinity. Making lace and caring for animals were not habits they considered feminine or abnormal, but instead the purest display of virtue, the much beloved Jacobin ideal.<sup>43</sup>

Charlotte and Duplay also understood the division between Robespierre's public and private personas. To those who only knew him as a politician, Robespierre could be brusque, distant and even "melancholy."<sup>44</sup> He was often ill and given to periods of anxiety and depression brought on by the severity of his work.<sup>45</sup> Disagreements between himself and his colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety only irritated these conditions, and Robespierre was remembered by Billaud-Varenne and Barère as having little patience for opinions which conflicted with his own.<sup>46</sup> Fréron and Collot d'Herbois bore the brunt of this quiet rage when they were severely reprimanded by Robespierre for the atrocities they oversaw as deputies on mission in Lyons and the Vendée.<sup>47</sup> In these instances, Robespierre had little reason to behave with compassion. Nothing was more serious to him than the revolution, and its desecration warranted an icy

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6-29.

<sup>41</sup> Qtd in Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London: Owl Books, 2006), 194.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd in Ibid., 194.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 194-195.

<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Ibid., 37.

<sup>45</sup> McPhee, *Revolutionary Life*,

<sup>46</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 36-37.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 56-59.



reaction.<sup>48</sup> Around the few he trusted in his inner circle, Robespierre revealed himself to be an empathetic man deeply troubled by the exhausting nature of the revolution.<sup>49</sup> He was not without emotion or compassion, and was instead an intensely private person who preferred to confide his true feelings in those he was closest to.<sup>50</sup> The Thermidorians who wrote his history were not among this group, and thus felt justified in exaggerating the Robespierre they knew until it no longer benefited them to do so.

Despite these distinctions and the retractions of his enemies, the personal and political attacks on Robespierre did not cease. The vast majority of the historians who wrote about Robespierre and the revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century cemented the Thermidorian propaganda of Courtois and Proyart as factual. Edmund Burke, Jules Michelet, Thomas Carlyle, and others did little to investigate the veracity of their sources and instead relied upon the slander supplied by Robespierre's enemies to craft their opinions.<sup>51</sup> Michelet's massively influential work on the French Revolution described Robespierre as a "boring" and "monotonous" "reptile."<sup>52</sup> Like Courtois, Michelet heaped praise upon Danton at the expense of Robespierre, painting the former as "the voice of the republic," while the latter was decried as a cold ideologue "lacking in the knowledge of men and affairs."<sup>53</sup> An anti-clerical republican who admired the early stages of the French Revolution, Michelet saw a sharp divide between the "glorious" period of 1789 to 1792 and the "somber" period of 1793 to 1794.<sup>54</sup> To Michelet, Danton was a product of the glorious

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<sup>48</sup> Jordan, *Revolutionary Career*, 60-61.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 36-39.

<sup>51</sup> Rudé, *Revolutionary Democrat*, 63-66

<sup>52</sup> Qtd. in Jordan, *Revolutionary Career*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Qtd. in Rudé, *Revolutionary Democrat*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 67.

revolution, while Robespierre was the catalyst of the somber revolution, a distant frigid figure “blackened by the shadow” of the sexually ambiguous Jesuits who Michelet so despised.<sup>55</sup>

In researching Robespierre and the revolution, Michelet incidentally lent an additional shoddy piece of scholarship legitimacy: Pierre Villier’s memoirs published in 1802.<sup>56</sup> Villiers was a “penurious journalist and playwright” who claimed to have worked for Robespierre in 1790.<sup>57</sup> Villiers wrote that Robespierre “abused [him]” and would have “killed [him] if he had remembered [him]” during the Terror.<sup>58</sup> Villiers reinforced the Thermidorian concept of Robespierre as stern and uninterested in women, and claimed he kept a mistress who “he treated quite badly,” before inexplicably barring her entry from his home.<sup>59</sup> An example of the poor methodology exercised on Robespierre’s behalf, Villier’s memoirs were not officially discredited until the 1970s.<sup>60</sup> Even still, they continue to be utilized by historians today as proof of Robespierre’s sexual abnormality.<sup>61</sup>

Thomas Carlyle’s work *The French Revolution: A History* went a step further in advancing the image of Robespierre as a stony and perverted despot. Carlyle, a popular Scottish historian who sought to interpret the revolution through a Tory lens, relied upon yet another dubious source to craft his Robespierre: the memoirs of Jacques Necker’s daughter Madame de Staël.<sup>62</sup> De Staël briefly met Robespierre once in 1789, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had made a considerable name for herself in European literary circles as an aristocratic opponent of

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<sup>55</sup> Qtd in *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Jordan, *Revolutionary Career*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Qtd in *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>59</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>60</sup> Scurr, 112.

<sup>61</sup> Jordan, *Revolutionary Career*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Napoleon.<sup>63</sup> “[Robespierre’s] appearance was common,” de Staël recalled, “his complexion was pale, his veins a greenish colour. He supported the most insane theories with a coldness that had the air of conviction.”<sup>64</sup> From this biased and unsubstantiated memory, Carlyle’s “sea-green Incorruptible” was born.<sup>65</sup> Icy and heartless in the same way as Courtois and Proyart’s Robespierre, Carlyle’s Robespierre was described as “thin and acrid” and “a mean meagre mortal...made of vinegar and gall” who aspired to the same legendary dictatorship of Thermidorian invention.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly to Michelet, Carlyle juxtaposed Robespierre against Danton based on erroneous personal perceptions, as well as the idea that Danton represented a more liberal phase of the revolution.<sup>67</sup> Carlyle lauded Danton as a man with “no weaknesses” and dedicated an entire chapter of his book to “the great heart of Danton.”<sup>68</sup> Echoing Courtois, Carlyle even went so far as to elevate Danton above Robespierre in gendered terms:

One conceives easily the deep mutual incompatibility that divided these two: with what terror of **feminine hatred** the poor sea-green formula [Robespierre] looked at the monstrous colossal reality [Danton], and grew greener to behold him...[Robespierre] was little other than a chief wind-bag blown large by popular air; **not a man with the heart of a man**, but a poor spasmodic incorruptible pedant, with a logic-formula instead of a heart...full of sincere cant, incorruptibility, of virulence, poltroonery, barren as the east-wind!<sup>69</sup>

Carlyle’s attack on Robespierre’s masculinity here is purposeful. Like Courtois, Carlyle paints Robespierre in a feminine light, implying that because Robespierre was “not a man” in the overtly heteronormative ways that Danton was, he was also incapable of matching Danton’s

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>64</sup> Qtd. in Otto Scott, *Robespierre: The Fool As Revolutionary* (London: Transactions Publishers, 2011), 84.

<sup>65</sup> Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 323, 342, 454.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 562-570.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 562.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 563; emphasis added.

revolutionary worth.<sup>70</sup> Many of Carlyle's descriptors in this passage are gendered insults typically leveled against women, namely the jealous and spiteful disposition Carlyle claims Robespierre possessed in relation to Danton. Additionally, Carlyle's charge that Robespierre was "barren as the east-wind" is obviously gendered, and meant to draw a line between Robespierre's arid personality and a woman's inability to conceive.<sup>71</sup> Once again, Lynn Hunt's analysis of women during the revolution is particularly applicable here. Just as Marie Antoinette was depicted as resentful and untrustworthy because of her gender, so too is Robespierre.<sup>72</sup> He is not awarded consideration as a man, and is instead, judged against the same misogynist stereotypes as aristocratic women were during the most violent points of the revolution.<sup>73</sup>

In the wake of such unflattering depictions of his masculinity, Robespierre's reputation continued to take a beating. Alexis de Tocqueville, William Smyth, Alphonse Aulard, and other historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century followed the trend set by Michelet and Carlyle. Committed to portraying "the dreadful Robespierre" as the Thermidorian nightmare for political or theatrical reasons, these historians refrained from investigating any sources which deviated from their narrative.<sup>74</sup> Though positive accounts of Robespierre were published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were mostly the work of political radicals who had little effect on the popular perception of Robespierre.<sup>75</sup> Vastly more influential was the fictional consolidation of Robespierre's Thermidorian image in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Released at the turn of the century, Emma Orczy's highly successful play featured a Robespierre straight from the pages of Courtois or

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 563.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 563.

<sup>72</sup> Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette," ed. Gary Kates, in *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 205-218.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 210-218.

<sup>74</sup> Rudé, *Revolutionary Democrat*, 69.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 69-72.

Carlyle.<sup>76</sup> A “merciless wielder of the guillotine,” Robespierre was the play’s villain who took great pleasure in murdering innocent aristocrats.<sup>77</sup> In later stage and film adaptations, a lavishly dressed and heavily powdered Robespierre was shown entertaining himself by placing dolls in a toy guillotine.<sup>78</sup> *The Scarlet Pimpernel* had a colossal impact on literature, and is still considered by many to be one of the greatest English plays ever written.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the popularity of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and similar works of fiction, Robespierre’s legacy showed signs of improvement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1920, the popular English historian Hilaire Belloc published his biography of the Incorruptible, *Robespierre: A Study*.<sup>80</sup> Though Belloc’s work was considered sympathetic, it remained reliant upon gendered readings of Robespierre’s personality, illustrating that even as Robespierre’s political legacy improved, he remained personally mired by heterosexism.<sup>81</sup> “[Robespierre] was a man of insufficient capacity,” Belloc wrote, “his frame was of a delicate mold. He had not the vitality of action which proceeds from well-furnished lungs; neither the voice nor the gesture, the good-humor, nor the sudden powers that belong to men whose fires have draught to them.”<sup>82</sup> Still, Belloc was hesitant to condemn Robespierre completely, arguing that most of the political myths created about Robespierre were put forth “when he was no longer alive to correct the error[s]” they perpetrated.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Emma Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (New York: Signet Classics, 2000), 1-24.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, dir. Clive Donner (London: London Films, 1982), DVD.

<sup>79</sup> “The Legacy of the Scarlet Pimpernel,” Penguin Books, accessed December 7, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Hilaire Belloc, *Robespierre: A Study* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1920).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Belloc's reexamination of Robespierre was furthered by the work of several prominent Marxist historians, most notably Albert Mathiez.<sup>84</sup> A student of the Dantonist historian Alphonse Aulard, Mathiez departed from his mentor to defend Robespierre's name from a century of unjustified slander.<sup>85</sup> Mathiez was the first historian to wholly dismantle the Thermidorian myth of Robespierre by undercutting its biased sources and self-preserving origins in his books *After Robespierre* and *The Fall of Robespierre*.<sup>86</sup> To Mathiez, Robespierre was the "most noble, most generous, and more sincere" figure of the French Revolution compared to Danton who Mathiez brushed aside as corrupt and disingenuous.<sup>87</sup> Unlike the previous defenders of Robespierre, Mathiez achieved considerable success as a Marxist historian at the height of the paradigm, and was rewarded with the Sorbonne chair of French Revolutionary Studies for several years.<sup>88</sup> Following in his footsteps were other acclaimed Marxist historians Ralph Korngold, Jean-Paul Matrat, George Lefebvre, George Rudé, and R.R. Palmer whose interpretations of Robespierre were equally as sympathetic.<sup>89</sup>

Yet for everything Mathiez, Rudé, Matrat and others did to vindicate Robespierre from charges of dictatorship and personal repugnance, they did little to address the gendered depictions of Robespierre which had existed for over a century. Though Rudé referenced Carlyle's description of Robespierre's "feminine hatred" in his biography of the Incorruptible, he failed to critique it as either sexist or homophobic.<sup>90</sup> Instead, he included it as one of the many negative personal myths created about Robespierre in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>91</sup> Even Mathiez,

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<sup>84</sup> Rudé, *Revolutionary Democrat*, 72.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>87</sup> Mathiez, *The Fall of Robespierre*, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Rudé, *Revolutionary Democrat*, 75.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>90</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

who dedicated his life to systematically disproving every legend surrounding Robespierre, failed to address the issue of gender in relation to Robespierre or Danton. These lapses in judgement were of course, not entirely the fault of Rudé or Mathiez, and instead reflected the time period in which they were writing. Studies of gender and sexuality did not emerge until the mid-1970s, long after Mathiez, Rudé, and other leading Marxists were deceased or growing irrelevant. As a result, there remained a considerable hole in the defense of Robespierre which allowed heterosexist interpretations of his personality to slip by without critique.

These interpretations became highly fashionable with the rise of the Revisionist paradigm in the 1980s. Heavily influenced by Michelet's writings and the collapse of communism, the Revisionist movement sought to recast the French Revolution as a period spoiled by factional extremism.<sup>92</sup> Erroneously placed at the head of that extremism was Robespierre, no longer an exaggerated dictator, but instead a preeminent communist whose unrealistic commitment to the ideology of Rousseau kept the revolution from succeeding.<sup>93</sup> In his work *Revolutionary France*, the leading Revisionist François Furet returned to the same disproven characterizations of Robespierre as cold and unnaturally effeminate in order to prove his larger point that Robespierre was a fatal idealist. "Without deep feeling, holding only the ideas of his era, protected by the women of his family," Furet's Robespierre "put no energy into private intercourse with his fellow men."<sup>94</sup> Furet made the bizarre claim that Robespierre had no life before or outside the revolution, and that he filled "the emptiness of his private life" with plans to impose his ideological fantasies upon France.<sup>95</sup> "Robespierre was trying to terminate the revolution in his

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 226-233.

<sup>93</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Vintage, 1989), xiii-xix.

<sup>94</sup> François Furet, *Revolutionary France* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 144.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

own way and to his own advantage,” Furet wrote, “in the Utopia of a social harmony in tune with nature.”<sup>96</sup>

Furet’s belief that there were no great men of the revolution tempered his overall criticism of Robespierre, and kept him from making claims as outrageous as Carlyle’s or Proyard’s.<sup>97</sup> Other Revisionists were not as tempered, and instead sought to cast Robespierre in the shadow of the ideological fascists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>98</sup> Though this was a new interpretation of Robespierre, it still relied upon the same disproved Thermidorian legends of centuries past. In his 1989 work *Citizens*, the British Revisionist Simon Schama reinforced this connection when he cited Fréron and Pierre Villiers’ memoirs as evidence for Robespierre’s frosty and inhuman personality.<sup>99</sup> Schama weaved in the Revisionist interpretation of Robespierre as well, referring to Robespierre as a “missionary of virtue” who wanted to force his personal standard of morality upon all of France.<sup>100</sup> Schama’s purposeful misrepresentation of Robespierre’s concept of *vertu* as a desire for public morality instead of the desire for civic awareness that it actually was, became another consistent theme in Revisionist histories.<sup>101</sup>

From the Revisionist recast of the revolution, numerous pieces of popular history were created: most importantly, the 1982 film *Danton* and the 1989 film *La Révolution Française*. Both films featured Robespierre as a main character in different, yet similarly unflattering ways. Andrzej Wajda’s *Danton* is a film adaptation of Stanisława Przybyszewska’s 1929 play *The Danton Case*.<sup>102</sup> Though the original production featured Robespierre as the sympathetic lead

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>98</sup> *Terror! Robespierre and the French Revolution*, dir. Carl Hindmarch (London: BBC, 2009), DVD.

<sup>99</sup> Schama, *Citizens*, 578-581.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 578.

<sup>101</sup> *Terror!*, DVD.

<sup>102</sup> *Danton*, dir. Andrzej Wajda (France: Gaumont, 1983), DVD.



forced to choose between his principles and his friends, Wajda's film recasts Danton as the hero in a carefully constructed allusion to communist Poland.<sup>103</sup> *Danton*'s Robespierre is described as an "icy Jacobin extremist" who saw "the earthy" Danton as a direct threat to his power.<sup>104</sup> Aloof, prickly, and hopelessly committed to the failing ideology of the Terror, Robespierre is representative of the moralizing communists still clinging to the dreams of the crumbling Soviet Union.<sup>105</sup>

*Danton*'s largest unaddressed problem is its gendered juxtaposition between Danton and Robespierre. Robespierre is purposefully portrayed as a vindictive gay man obsessed with his appearance and garbed in the costume of the Old Regime.<sup>106</sup> Robespierre allows Saint-Just to bring him flowers and touch him intimately, but shrinks away when Eleonore Duplay attempts to offer him a comforting embrace.<sup>107</sup> Danton is the complete opposite. Shown drinking, swearing, and consorting with prostitutes, he first appears in the film beside his beautiful second wife while a sickly Robespierre looks on in a jealous rage.<sup>108</sup> Danton is hyper-masculinized and played by the youthful French sex symbol Gerard Depardieu, while Robespierre is dehumanized by the stony performance of the older Polish actor Wojciech Pszoniak.<sup>109</sup> *Danton* succeeds in othering Robespierre and lionizing Danton by persuading the audience to sympathize with the character who feels more human, even if that effect is achieved in a remarkably heterosexist and homophobic way.

*La Révolution Française*'s Robespierre is far more human than *Danton*'s, yet is ultimately tainted by the film's Revisionist dichotomy. In the first half of the film, titled *The*

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

*Years of Light*, Robespierre is an optimistic young lawyer with close ties to political moderates. He possesses all the quiet gentility of his sister's memories, and is shown caring for animals, opposing the death penalty, and playing with his infant godson.<sup>110</sup> It is not until the second half of the film, the aptly titled *Dark Years*, when Robespierre takes a turn towards his Thermidorian archetype. He begins an intimate friendship with Saint-Just, and allows the younger man's harsh notions of republicanism and Terror to dangerously influence him.<sup>111</sup> He becomes obsessed with his appearance, constantly tending to his powdered wigs and residing in Freron's invented shrine to himself.<sup>112</sup> By the end of the film, Robespierre is a warped version of his past self, entirely corrupted by violent ideology and power. His reign is successfully toppled by the heroic Thermidorians who restore balance to France in the wake of Robespierre's dictatorship.<sup>113</sup> Both *La Révolution Française* and *Danton* were critical and commercial successes with wide reaching effects on public perceptions of Robespierre during the bicentennial of the revolution.<sup>114</sup>

In the post-revisionist aftermath of the 2000s, opinions on Robespierre remained scattered. Though neutral and sympathetic biographies existed and received considerable praise, many well-respected historians continued to rely on Thermidorian stereotypes when describing Robespierre's personality. David Bell, a historian of the Revisionist school and a constant critic of Robespierre, wrote in his 2003 book *Total War* that Robespierre practiced "humorless radicalism" throughout his career.<sup>115</sup> Bell went on to describe Robespierre as a "fussily dressed, round-faced man with a stiff charmless manner" who "never let [himself] be seen as a figure

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> "Danton," "La Revolution Française," IMBD, accessed December 13, 2015.

<sup>115</sup> David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 95.

with whom the ordinary French person might feel comfortable, let alone intimate.”<sup>116</sup> Echoing Bell, David Andress described Robespierre as a “monkish” man with “a priggish sense of his own purity” in his 2005 work *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France*.<sup>117</sup> While neither of these works vilified Robespierre to the extent that Carlyle or Schama did, and in fact emphasized that Robespierre was never a dictator, they still indulged in the personal dehumanization of Robespierre based on muddled understandings of his public and private personas.<sup>118</sup>

The most troubling post-revisionist portrayal of Robespierre appeared in David Lawday’s 2009 biography of Danton, *The Giant of the French Revolution*. Lawday’s Robespierre was a “utopian zealot” whose “icy personage” was utterly unmoved by revolutionary carnage, the marriage of his best friend, or the birth of his godson.<sup>119</sup> Robespierre was further described by Lawday as a suspicious and lifeless “thin lipped creature” who “envisioned laws to govern people’s pleasure.”<sup>120</sup> In way of citation for these Carlyle-esque descriptions, Lawday made a direct reference to the memoirs of Fréron utilized by Courtois, referring to Fréron as a “lively, conscientious character” whose opinions of Robespierre could be taken as legitimate.<sup>121</sup>

Lawday’s characterization of Robespierre additionally emphasized the gendered differences between Danton and Robespierre in a way which far surpassed Carlyle. Lawday repeatedly mocked Robespierre’s effeminacy and claimed the only women he ever came in

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>117</sup> David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 56-57.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>119</sup> Lawday, *Danton*, 5, 74, 121.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 98.

contact with were the “unbecoming daughters” of his landlord.<sup>122</sup> “Danton was a man, the other something less than a man,” Lawday continued. “Whatever political heights the chaste inquisitor from Arras scaled, he remained in Danton’s eyes the pasty faced eunuch he had taken him for from the start.”<sup>123</sup> Such “critiques” of Robespierre weren’t only rooted in disproved characterizations of Robespierre, but were also overwhelmingly homophobic. Like Carlyle and Wajda, Lawday attempted to tie Robespierre’s worth as a revolutionary to heteronormative conceptions of masculinity, arguing that because Robespierre lacked “manliness” he was also incapable of love, kindness, and basic human empathy.<sup>124</sup>

Media produced in the 2000s reinforced a similar narrative. Released in 2009, the BBC’s *Terror! Robespierre and the French Revolution* is a tribute to the two hundred years of slander leveled against Robespierre’s personal and political identities.<sup>125</sup> In attempting to create a docu-drama about the corruption of Robespierre’s character, the film falls into the same trap as *La Révolution Française*. The Robespierre originally introduced as “a simple provincial lawyer” soon devolves into the predecessor to 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism.<sup>126</sup> “Have we learned nothing from the Gulag?” Simon Schama asks the audience as the camera flashes between images of Robespierre, Stalin, and Hitler. “Have we learned nothing from the Third Reich?”<sup>127</sup>

Unconcerned with truth or neutrality, *Terror!* features offensively gendered depictions of Robespierre and Saint-Just as homosexual fanatics.<sup>128</sup> The two constantly touch one another at wildly inappropriate times, Robespierre at one point rising from his seat during a Committee

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>125</sup> *Terror!*, DVD.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

meeting to stand behind Saint-Just and rub his shoulders.<sup>129</sup> At another point, they are shown quarreling like lovers in Robespierre's bedroom, and at yet another point still, Saint-Just helps Robespierre dress before presenting him with flowers.<sup>130</sup> While interpretations of Robespierre's sexuality certainly should not be confined by heteronormativity, the way in which these hostile histories use homosexuality as a negative character trait is purposeful and offensive. There is no reason for *Terror!* to showcase such intimate relations between its two antagonists other than to vilify homosexuality and include it in the long list of other unflattering characteristics ascribed to Robespierre and Saint-Just throughout the documentary.

Currently, Robespierre's academic perception remains troubled. Though Peter McPhee's 2012 biography of Robespierre was sympathetic and successful, the old myths about Robespierre continue to find their way into academic discourse. Jonathan Israel's book *Revolutionary Ideas*, for example, draws comparisons between Robespierre and 20<sup>th</sup> century fascists, while Donald Sutherland's recent piece for H-France pins the excesses of the Terror on Robespierre's Thermidorian caricature.<sup>131</sup> Outside of these uninspired political charges, the issue of Robespierre's gendered interpretations remains. Though briefly touched upon by McPhee in his book and in a piece for H-France, it is Robespierre's sexuality, rather than the way in which historians have gendered him, that continuously takes center stage.<sup>132</sup> While Robespierre's sexuality is certainly worth discussing, harping on it alone without addressing the offensively gendered ways in which he's been portrayed leaves a major piece of Robespierre's legacy unexplained and free from necessary criticism. It's not enough to speculate whether he was gay, straight, or something in-between; the argument must also be made that he was just as much a

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Marisa Linton, "Response Essay, Forum 9," H-France Forum, Fall 2014, accessed December 13, 2015.

<sup>132</sup> Imanol Corcostegui, "Pourquoi La Reconstitution Du Visage De Robespierre énerve Les Historiens," Rue 89, December 24, 2013, accessed December 12, 2015.

man as Danton regardless of whatever gendered behaviors he indulged in. The sexist language utilized when describing Robespierre deserves equal scrutiny as it not only harms Robespierre, but also contributes to a misogynist reading of historical women.

Popularly, two major controversies have embroiled Robespierre's legacy in recent years. The first was the release of a three dimensional model of Robespierre's head produced by a Spanish software firm in 2013. Incredibly unflattering with pox-marked skin, unnaturally spaced eyes, and lifeless grey skin, the 3D model was based on the discredited death mask of Madame Toussand in yet another example of flawed sources used to vilify Robespierre.<sup>133</sup> The 3D model was heavily reported on by the French media, and was consequently criticized by the French socialist Jean-Luc Mélenchon. "Another old trick," he wrote in a blog post, "the ugliness of [Robespierre's] face is supposed to reveal the ugliness of his soul."<sup>134</sup> In spite of the legitimate criticism leveled against the authenticity of the mask, it remained a hot topic in France, and has since been granted legitimacy by several popular news sites including Yahoo! and the BBC.<sup>135</sup>

The second controversy came in 2015 with the release of the historical video game *Assassin's Creed Unity*. Prior to its release, the company responsible for producing the *Assassin's Creed* series, Ubisoft, claimed it had consulted with the Sorbonne's French Revolutionary historians in order to get everything right "down to the last brick."<sup>136</sup> Despite this promise, the game featured exceptionally negative portrayals of Robespierre and Saint-Just. The main antagonist of the game, Robespierre is portrayed as a sociopathic dictator. "I detest this filthy world which is nothing but a carcass on which mankind feeds like worms," he says at one

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Jean-Luc Mélenchon, "Du Masque De Robespierre à Celui De Jean-Marc Ayrault," Le Blog De Jean-Luc Mélenchon, December 16, 2013, accessed December 12, 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Corcostegui, "Visage de Robespierre."

<sup>136</sup> John Lichfield, "France Loses Its Head Over Robespierre Game," The Independent, November 24, 2014, accessed December 12, 2015.

point. “I want to kill as many people as possible...my genocidal crusade begins here and now.”<sup>137</sup> Saint-Just is depicted as Robespierre’s lackey who operates a human skin tannery.<sup>138</sup>

These disturbing and unwarranted portrayals of Robespierre and Saint-Just were again called to attention by Mélenchon who referred to them as “a rewriting of history.”<sup>139</sup> Yet his critiques were recast as nothing more than the “apoplectic fury of the French left.”<sup>140</sup> After all, as one commenter wrote, “it’s just a video game.”<sup>141</sup>

In reality, these negative depictions of Robespierre have had an incredibly dangerous impact on the way he is understood both popularly and academically. Because of games like *Assassin’s Creed* and histories like Carlyle’s, there are no monuments to Robespierre in France.<sup>142</sup> Plaques bearing his name are routinely vandalized, and groups dedicated to stabilizing his memory must fight in vain to preserve the homes he lived in as nationally recognized historical sites.<sup>143</sup> This is entirely due to the continuum of vilification Robespierre has unfairly endured for the past three centuries. While Robespierre’s politics are gradually becoming more understood in academia, his personality, his gender, and his public perception remain tainted by poor methodology and restrictive conceptions of heteronormativity. Until all of these facets are addressed and critiqued, Robespierre will remain the victim of a false legacy created by his enemies and left unchallenged by over three centuries worth of media and academia.

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<sup>137</sup> Qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> "Pétition Pour Le Musée," Amis De Robespierre, accessed December 9, 2015.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

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