

The Historiographical Afterlives of Maximilien Robespierre

When this business is over, and Camille is dead, I shall not want to hear your epitaph for him. No one is ever to speak of him again, I absolutely forbid it. When he is dead, I shall want to think about him myself, alone.<sup>1</sup>

— Robespierre as imagined in Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety*.

Imagine growing from childhood to adulthood, through the pain of maternal loss and paternal abandonment and the solitude of a distant boarding school, with a handful of people that know and understand you like no one else ever could. Then, under the pressure of a drastic political crisis those same people go from being your surrogate family to your darkest enemies. This was the tragic life of Maximilien Robespierre, which has fascinated historians and popular audiences alike for centuries now. The quote above from Hilary Mantel's fantastic novel imagines Robespierre's sense of lonely despair after ordering the death of Camille Desmoulins, one of his oldest friends. By analyzing how historians interpreted such a controversial figure from a pivotal point in human history, this analysis attempts to tease out the connections between scholarly interpretation and its respective historical and historiographical contexts. Spanning his idealistic early campaign against the death penalty through his ruthless defense of political Terror, this paper will not only chart the evolution of scholarly interpretations of Robespierre, but also shed light on how non-academic commentators have made sense of the divisive leader known as 'the Incorruptible'. In the end there will be a clear understanding that the mystery around Robespierre has created three distinct groups within the discipline: those who approach Robespierre as a litmus test for contemporary politics and are thus openly sympathetic or unsympathetic to his rationale for revolutionary terror, or those who insist on engaging with Robespierre on his own strictly historical terms and remain studiously neutral.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (London: Forth Estate, 1993), 862. This quote immediately raises the question of whether Robespierre felt any regret or loneliness. Mantel does a good job at forcing the reader to question whether or not he was a victim himself.

Depending on each commentator's personal understanding of the French Revolution they will fall within one of these three groups.

Some of the variance in how Robespierre is understood in scholarship and popular culture reflects the relative dearth of evidence on Robespierre's pre-revolutionary life, as well as his failure — an understandable one, given his gruelling workload and untimely death — to leave behind a detailed account of his internal thought processes during the Revolution itself. Since not much is known of Robespierre's personal backstory or interior life, many interpretations rely on his formal public speeches — inspired by the Rousseauian theory of civic virtue from *The Social Contract* which in the most basic sense was to place collective interests ahead of individual interests — and the powers of historical imagination to make sense of the man who came to epitomize the radical Revolution.<sup>2</sup> When historians attempt to understand Robespierre in their own political contexts, and methodological training, personal biases are especially pronounced in their arguments. Just as his contemporaries did, historians of Robespierre ranging from Robsperrist to Anti-Robsperrist struggled to draw out a line between necessary and unnecessary violence in a revolutionary context. This leaves a grey area that has created two Robespierre's: a figure who on the one hand resorted to unfortunate but essential means to secure the admirable end of 'saving' the Republic, or on the other was an emotionless ideologue inebriated with power.

The former group tend to allow Robespierre to have some kind of back story. By allowing him to have a private life outside of the Terror, these sources come up with a more gentle verdict. Those who fall in the latter category are less likely to indulge on Robespierre's personal life based on the little known evidence historians have to work on, their interpretation of him is far more scathing.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Translated by Maurice Cranston, London: Penguin Books, 1968.

The historians who are more sympathetic tend to be more socialist in their description of the political climate in 18th century France. Early twentieth century historians Albert Mathiez, and George Lefebvre fall behind the sympathetic line and view Robespierre's politics as necessary. Polish director Andrzej Wajda, playwright Georg Büchner, historians Marisa Linton and Patrice Higonnet, on the other hand, cannot conceal their disdain for Robespierre and his political agenda, no matter what pressures he may have been under. Those who tend to come off as neutral or at least less invested in the politics of their particular historical moments are commentators Norman Hampson, Ruth Scurr, and Hilary Mantel as their interpretations either have a creative approach or they admit to not coming to any solid conclusion. These three groups differ based on their attitudes towards Robespierre's life outside of the Terror. For the Robespierrists, Robespierre was a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders who managed to hold himself together despite personal betrayals and questioning of his morality. For the anti-Robespierrists they do not feel the need to allow any consideration of Robespierre's sacrifices or trauma that could justify his need to execute people. Those who fall in the middle tend to not make a solid decision on either Robespierre as villain or victim but rather set up their argument so the reader can form their own opinion.

The mystery of who Robespierre was and his position on the right or wrong side of history has piqued the interest of people inside and out of academia. Influential film and literary portrayals such as novelist Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety* and historian Norman Hampson's *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* have attempted to imaginatively bridge the gaps where evidence is lacking to form an explanation of Robespierre and his choices. Influential adaptations are Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death* and Andrzej Wajda's film *Danton*.<sup>3</sup> Both provides a completely different Robespierre but uses the same story line.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Danton*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda, Janus Films (The Criterion Collection), 1974 and Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, Translated by Jane Fry, London: Methuen 1982, play.

Maximilian Robespierre was originally a lawyer from Arras who was elected to represent the Third Estate and serve as a member of the National Assembly during the moderate phase of the Revolution, and who rose to become the effective leader of the Committee of Public Safety during the Revolution's radical stage or Terror. Known as the Incorruptible, "he scarcely touched wine; he was unmarried, chaste, and a trifle puritanical".<sup>4</sup> Another member of the Committee of Public Safety was Robespierre's one-time ideological ally but temperamental foil, the boisterous and hedonistic orator, Georges Danton.<sup>5</sup> Danton's relationship with the Terror and Robespierre comes up time and again as historians try to place the relevance of his influence on the Incorruptible. Robespierre is an incredibly controversial figure in history because of how he viewed Danton as 'indulging' the enemies of the republic by wanting to conclude the Terror and ultimately turning on Danton with attempts to accelerate rather than rein in the Terror from early 1794 onward. He is seen by historians as the creator of the Terror — his death known as '9 Thermidor' on July 27th was regarded as the conclusion — but many debate whether or not he was in the wrong for this or if he was well meaning with challenging responsibilities.

When a tax showdown spiralled into a political crisis in 1789, early revolutionaries like Robespierre set out to create a constitutional monarchy influenced by the reformist ideals of the Enlightenment. But this moderate aim was thwarted when the royal family betrayed the people's trust by attempting an escape to Austria in the dead of night in the fall of 1792. This episode was deemed 'The Flight to Varennes' and ignited civil war between Royalists and revolutionaries of various stripes, including the republican faction known as the Jacobins, which claimed Robespierre among their most committed members. After the royal family's attempted escape and ensuing overthrow, France's new republican constitution was suspended and a State of

---

<sup>4</sup> R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: A Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 25.

Emergency declared. It became the responsibility of twelve men who looked to guide the Revolution through turbulent times.

The dizzyingly varied political climates of the last century have inspired very divergent analyses of Robespierre. The Russian Revolution in particular would bring the question of Robespierre and the political uses of Terror into the 20th century. What is more, historian Albert Mathiez founded the Society of Robespierist Studies during the First World War which trained another historian Georges Lefebvre, who wrote during the Second World War. These interpretations will draw upon the Russian relationship with Robespierre. Generated by the World Wars, the Cold War would leave a lasting effect of how historians viewed the relationship between the Terror and Robespierre and communism due to the repressive reality under Stalin and the Iron Curtain. This time period brings more cooks into the kitchen and allows for alternative interpretations to give a stab at interpreting Robespierre. This will eventually lead to the more recent sources by historians such as Peter McPhee and Marisa Linton which attempt to analyze Robespierre with this historiographical hindsight in mind.

Those who are more open to Robespierre's politics usually refer to Mathiez at some point in their analysis. Writing in the early 20th century, Mathiez was the founder of his a renowned Robespierist school of French Revolutionary studied in France.<sup>6</sup> In the wake of the 1917 collapse of the Russian Old Regime, Mathiez's work on the French Revolution demonstrates Robespierre and his politics as necessary to the Republic. Much of his writings on contemporary events defended Lenin and his supporters embrace of 'terror' and civil war to save the Russian Revolution from its myriad of enemies. In the following extract, Mathiez justifies Lenin's case with a quote by Robespierre:

---

<sup>6</sup> James Friguglietti, "Rehabilitating Robespierre: Albert Mathiez and George Lefebvre as Defenders of the Incorruptible," *Robespierre*, ed. Colin Haydon and William Doyle Cambridge, 1999, page 215.

In short, the ends justify the means and absolve all contradictions. In both cases the end is the happiness of the masses. Said Robespierre, 'We desire an order of things where all low and cruel passions are enchained and where all beneficent and generous passions are awakened by the laws... where the fatherland ensures the welfare of every individual... where commerce is the source of public wealth and not just the monstrous opulence of a few houses' (18 Pluviôse).<sup>7</sup>

Lenin, of course, was himself very motivated by the Jacobin example, and was committed to avoiding the sort of Thermidorian Reaction that in his mind reversed the Revolution's radical potential.<sup>8</sup> In a list of theses given to the Second Congress of Communist International, Lenin provides a Robespierrest version of the Russian revolution when he writes, "...closer union of the proletarians and the working masses of all nations and countries for a joint revolutionary struggle to overthrow the landowners and the bourgeoisie. This union alone will guarantee victory over capitalism, without which the abolition of national oppression and inequality is impossible."<sup>9</sup> Although Lenin's theories follow the economic ideology of Marx, Robespierre's influence can be seen with Lenin's argument to allow for equality for the labouring class and the wealthy. It is with his disdain for those who profited from other's that Mathiez links Robespierre to Lenin because Robespierre executed Danton for profiting off of war contracts.<sup>10</sup> Based on the political climate of the First World War, Mathiez argues that the goals that both Lenin and Robespierre fought for were noble even if their tactics were anything but. When discussing how Lenin and Robespierre both justify terror in similar ways, there is little attempt to avoid the bias

---

<sup>7</sup> Mathiez, Albert. "Bolshevism and Jacobinism." *Le Bolchevisme et le Jacobinisme*. Translated by Mitchel Abidor. Paris: Library of the Socialist Party and the Humanities, 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Mayer, "Lenin and the Jacobin Identity in Russia." *Studies in East European Thought* 51, no. 2 (1999): 127-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20099700>.

<sup>9</sup> Lenin, V. I. "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Communist International." *Translated by Julius Katzer. Lenin's Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965.

<sup>10</sup> R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: A Year of the Terror in the French Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

used by Mathiez as he discusses Robespierre. It is clear that by reading Robespierre through Lenin, Mathiez believed the Terror was necessary and Robespierre the ill-fated commander.

Historian George Lefebvre agrees with Mathiez a decade later and uses him in his own analysis.<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre is sympathetic to Robespierre because he can see a great deal of himself in the Incorruptible with what little is known about Robespierre's upbringing.<sup>12</sup> Lefebvre was a socialist during the Second World War — a war against fascist Germany — and could clearly see the importance of fighting against a repressive regime, even if it meant embracing an ugly means to a glorious end. When Lefebvre is writing, the beginning of the Second World War was imminent. Nazi Germany began to take hold of European focus and perhaps it was the beheading of Lefebvre's brother by the fascist soldiers which influenced his support for Robespierre.<sup>13</sup> Although it would seem like Robespierre and the Jacobins would be far more similar to the Nazi's, Lefebvre truly believed that Robespierre was not a totalitarian dictator.<sup>14</sup> In James Friguglietti's analysis of Lefebvre, he states that Lefebvre believed Robespierre to be a "defender of democracy, determined opponent of foreign war" and a figure to stand up for the innocent against the hubristic.<sup>15</sup>

The effects of national unrest links Robespierre, Mathiez, and Lefebvre together through the ultimate betrayal of government institutions. For Robespierre, the Flight to Varennes by the King amalgamated the frustration of Parisians and the deteriorating economic situation into a plan for reform. Mathiez saw similarities in the Russian Revolution with Lenin's justification for

---

<sup>11</sup> James Friguglietti, "Rehabilitating Robespierre: Albert Mathiez and George Lefebvre as Defenders of the Incorruptible." *Robespierre*, ed. Colin Haydon and William Doyle (Cambridge, 1999)

<sup>12</sup> Friguglietti, "Rehabilitating Robespierre: Albert Mathiez and George Lefebvre as Defenders of the Incorruptible." pg. 4

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., page 217.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

rallying up the proletariat.<sup>16</sup> Lefebvre also related to Robespierre's struggle of civil unrest during the German occupation of France as his people were put down by a foreign enemy. These historians that have been looked at thus far are not wrong in their analysis by focusing on the fundamental reasons for why Robespierre came into power in the first place. Where their interpretation breaks with other historians is that many modern historians have a more negative view on communism due to the Cold War, and are skeptical of the similarities between Lenin and Robespierre to prove whether or not the Terror can be historically justified.

Although, to generalize and say that all post-Cold War era commentators agree on the vilification of Robespierre is inaccurate. Post-Cold War artistic representations of Robespierre tend to be more sympathetic to Robespierre by allowing him to have more of a personal life outside of his role in the Committee of Public Safety, but do not agree with his politics. Creative licenses have the ability to give a possible insight to the mind of Robespierre where evidence is absent. Polish director Andrzej Wajda's film *Danton* characterizes Robespierre as a man burdened with protecting the Revolution from its enemies. This film was made in the 1980s and depicts Robespierre as being physically sickened by the seemingly inevitable exigency of executing his former ally, Danton. It not only gives a visual representation of the interpersonal dynamics of the Committee of Public Safety, but also the personalities of Danton and Robespierre. Wajda's creative licenses allows him to imagine unknowable moments when Robespierre is alone with himself, navigating intense political pressures and personal loyalties. In these scenes, Robespierre is depicted as a man burdened with protecting the Revolution from its enemies, but also as ultimately corrupted by this responsibility. Wajda depicts him as being physically and psychologically destroyed by the necessity of executing Danton. The clearest depiction within the film of a broken Robespierre is in one of the last scenes. After Danton is executed, Robespierre is shown laying in bed, grey, sweating, looking directly at the

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., page 215.

camera with wide frightened eyes as he exclaims, “The Revolution has taken a wrong turn”.<sup>17</sup> There is no historical record of Robespierre admitting this after the beheading of his political rival, then again the close relationship of Danton and Robespierre creates the question artists like Wajda have attempted to answer. How could Robespierre go from someone who seem to truly understand the needs of the public to executing all those who gave the people their voice? Simply by formulating a storyline with his creative license Wajda interpreted the Terror to have been taken too far, cancelling out Mathiez and Lefebvre’s arguments.

In the second half of the twentieth century, there is a growth in the discipline and more acceptance to diverse interpretations from diverse scholars. As a result, a wider arrange of historians tackle the subject of Robespierre. Here, one sees the unsympathetic responses to Robespierre and his Terror come out just as vibrantly as Mathiez or Lefebvre’s sympathetic responses. British historian Peter McPhee summarizes the stark shift toward those who are anti-Robespierre; “It has been claimed that he was a repressed homosexual with a castration complex, a misogynist, and a pathological narcissist constantly searching for a good father and an all-powerful mother”.<sup>18</sup> For many historians living after the Cold War there is little patience in addressing the socio-economic means of The Terror; instead, their attention is mainly on the socio-political. In regards to their attention to Robespierre many historian regard Robespierre as an “anti-liberal, anti-intellectual, and xenophobic authoritarian”.<sup>19</sup> With the amount of deaths during the Terror, it is understandable why most historians could look back at the dehumanization in the First and Second World War and think of Robespierre as a crypto-fascist, as McPhee mentions in his article.<sup>20</sup> McPhee states that his own analysis of the Incorruptible is

---

<sup>17</sup> *Danton*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda, Janus Films (The Criterion Collection), 1974, 2:10:44.

<sup>18</sup> Peter McPhee, “The Robespierre Problem: An Introduction,” *H-France Salon*, Vol 7 no, 14, 2015, page 2.

<sup>19</sup> McPhee, “The Robespierre Problem: An Introduction,” page 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

based on his belief that Robespierre's possible physical illnesses — like exhaustion or nervous collapse — was a cause of the Terror.<sup>21</sup> He does admit that this was an unpopular opinion with his contemporary historians. For example, McPhee mentions how Colin Jones was unconvinced by this argument and accused “some historians [of] unwarranted pity for him”.<sup>22</sup>

When discussing Jones, McPhee mentions why many historians are skeptical of those who present Robespierre as some kind of anti-hero. McPhee states, “For Jones, Robespierre's speech of 9 Thermidor” — July 27th, when he was ousted from power and the day before his execution by guillotine — “was a deliberate political stratagem, but this time his life-long manipulation of his image as the ‘virtuous victim’ failed”.<sup>23</sup> Many of Robespierre's speeches reference civic virtue, briefly mentioned previously. The ‘Incorruptible’ was heavily influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's arguments in *The Social Contract*, a work of political theory published a generation before the French Revolution.<sup>24</sup> Rousseau's arguments were rooted in the theory of Classical Republicanism, which hinged on the concept of civic virtue. Essentially civic virtue consisted of prioritizing the common good over one's individual interests; a self-governing republic could only flourish if its citizenry embodied such virtue.<sup>25</sup> As such, republican citizenship entailed not only rights but duties, especially in time of crisis, including military self-sacrifice and patriotic vigilance.<sup>26</sup> This is a fundamental theme in Rousseauian republicanism and therefore in French revolutionary scholarship as well. Whereas Robespierist academics have taken virtue as the reward for enduring the Terror, much like Robespierre does, those who

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., page 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Trans. Maurice Cranston, London: Penguin Books, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, page 12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

are anti-Robespierre, like Jones, see virtue as a veil. In his speech “On the Principles of Political Morality” in February of 1794, Robespierre marries the Terror with virtue when he states,

If virtue be the spring of a popular government in times of peace, the spring of that government during a revolution is virtue combined with terror: virtue, without which terror is destructive; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible; it is then an emanation of virtue; it is less a distinct principle than a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing wants of the country.<sup>27</sup>

It is with examples such as the above quote where postwar historians remain unconvinced by

Robespierre, and instead criticize his politics. In contrast, for historians like Mathiez and

Lefebvre, this is what connected the Terror to the Russian Revolution and the fight against

fascism respectively. This concept of ‘the ends justifying the means’, and ‘sacrificing for the

greater good’ is something that has been debated exhaustingly for quite sometime. This debate

shows itself in the case of Robespierre as anti-hero or villain.

Marisa Linton contributes to this debate within a debate by focusing on the Jacobins,

who knew Robespierre well from the Jacobin Club.<sup>28</sup> She is one of the more recent scholars to

have found grounds for the use of virtue as a necessary complement to terror. Linton argued

that the Jacobins tried to justify their use of violence because they believed that even their own

deaths would be honourable if it advanced the fight for a free Republic.<sup>29</sup> Linton writes, “Even in

these bleak circumstances they [Revolutionary Leaders] used the path to death as a political act

fashioned to give the ultimate proof of the authenticity of their identities as men and women of

virtue”.<sup>30</sup> For Linton, this act of using virtue to justify the Terror was a cynical political strategy to

---

<sup>27</sup> "Modern History Sourcebook: Maximilien Robespierre: On the Principles of Political Morality, February 1794," *Internet History Sourcebooks*, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: A Year of the Terror in the French Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005., page 25-26. The Jacobin Club held meetings which most of the revolutionaries including Danton and Camille attended. It was seen as quite an aggressive group fuelling paranoia though out the population.

<sup>29</sup> Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution*, Oxford, U.K.: OUP Oxford, 2013, page 273

<sup>30</sup> Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution*.

gain support for the people, nothing more. It is clear that she is unsympathetic to Robespierre's politics due to his manipulation of the people's unwavering loyalty to the Republic.

Just like there are supportive attempts to better understand Robespierre through creative means, there are negative attempts as well. The nineteenth-century playwright, Georg Büchner, wrote a play called *Danton's Death* that explored the same sequence of events surrounding Danton's fall from Robespierre's favour and subsequent execution as Wajda's film would in the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> The Robespierre depicted in Wajda's film, however, differs sharply from the Robespierre in Büchner's play. *Danton* was originally written in 1835 but not performed until 1902 in Berlin.<sup>32</sup> It features an incredibly stoic, emotionless and almost robotic version of the Incorruptible that many anti-Robespierrist historian relate to. Even when Robespierre is addressing the Tribunal he does not speak with the same animation as the other speakers. The only time Büchner allows Robespierre to depict any kind of real emotion is when another CPS member named Saint-Just includes Camille — the man mentioned in the epitaph — as one of the "anti-Revolutionaries" who needed to be executed. Robespierre is shocked that his old friend Camille might be counted among other true enemies of the state like Danton, but goes through with his execution nonetheless.<sup>33</sup> This portrayal of Robespierre paints him as a straight-out villain rather than the anti-hero of Wajda's film because he is not shown to be weakened or doubtful of his decisions. A similar relationship between Danton and Robespierre is shown between the two adaptations — Robespierre the defender of the Terror and Danton the critic — but Büchner used a similar approach to the Incorruptible as Jones and Linton in their analyses. Jones and Linton argue that the concept of virtue was used by Robespierre to manipulate support for the Terror. Büchner depicts Robespierre as a man willing to do what was needed —

---

<sup>31</sup> Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, Trans. Jane Fry, London: Methuen 1982, play and *Danton*, Directed by Andrzej Wajda, Janus Films (The Criterion Collection), 1974.

<sup>32</sup> Büchner, *Danton's Death*, page 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, page 22-23.

including using virtue as a crutch — to advance the Terror. This play does not allow Robespierre to have much of an emotional range, even when it is just him and the audience, but his reaction to Camille being one of the anti-Revolutionaries is telling. After Saint-Just exits the stage, Robespierre is left alone with his thoughts. Here, before the act finishes, the last lines he speaks are “They all go from me. The night is bleak and empty. I am alone”.<sup>34</sup> This specific example displays Büchner’s sublimity of any redeeming qualities of Robespierre, this sublimity is unique to this play over other more creative portrayals.

After sampling the Robespierrist and the anti-Robespierrist, one can now turn to those who are neutral in their analysis of Robespierre. The first scholar who is acclaimed for her discipline when it comes to analyzing the inscrutable Robespierre is historian Ruth Scurr.<sup>35</sup> In her book, Scurr waffles between the two Robespierres: one the victim of unfortunate circumstance; the other, the first modern tyrant. In the beginning she acknowledges the difficulties historians have had with regards as to which box to put the Incorruptible in.

Vilification and belittlement were inevitable in the aftermath of the Terror, but 'bloodthirsty charlatan' is hardly a satisfactory description of the fastidious lawyer who opposed the death penalty before the Revolution and afterward became France's most articulate pacifist when war loomed with the rest of Europe.<sup>36</sup>

These are the grounds upon which other historians have staked their case. Scurr pulls on interesting moments in Robespierre’s life that built up to his dramatic ouster on 9 Thermidor (July 27th, 1794). One of these moments is when Robespierre was accused of being a tyrant.<sup>37</sup> Scurr places her emphasis on the lack of confidence Robespierre had, so much so that Danton — this was well before Robespierre was in the position to execute his political enemies —

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., page 24.

<sup>35</sup> Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*, page 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., page 238.

allowed him one week to write up a response.<sup>38</sup> Authenticity was one major theme in which Scurr analyzes Robespierre. She commends him for not pretending to be a great orator like Danton, or as having a steel stomach for bloodshed like Saint-Just.<sup>39</sup> Scurr scrutinizes Robespierre's relationships, speeches, and the how eventually he seemed to have been forced back to reality on the day of his execution. For the majority of her book Scurr is able to give a rounded picture of Robespierre until the end. When one thinks she has decided that Robespierre is a hysterical madman, she nuances herself. When one thinks she has decided that Robespierre is on a strategic and narrow path to a vision he has had from the beginning, she reminds the reader of some sort of contradiction. All is not lost, however, Scurr does create an argument which she provides towards the end of her book. With her argument she includes the assumed emotions of Robespierre during the last moments of his life.<sup>40</sup> Scurr's argument can be seen as leaning towards the sympathetic side because she believed that he was authentic right up until the end, the only change was in what the people wanted.<sup>41</sup> She does argue that his death set the Revolution back on track, from before the Robespierre's abuse of the Terror, to the ultimate goal of a Republic.<sup>42</sup>

There are two creative and admirable even-handed approaches that fall between Georg Büchner's play and Wajda's film depictions of Robespierre. The first is Norman Hampson's attempt at creating a dialogue with three characters and the narrator in hopes of understanding the Incorruptible better. *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, published in 1988, conceded from its opening pages that it is impossible for a historian to analyze Robespierre

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., page 236.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., page 344-358.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 358.

without including one's own cultural perspective.<sup>43</sup> Hampson's tactic of using multiple different characters — with multiple different backstories of their own — to analyze Robespierre is ingenious because it allowed Hampson to analyze controversial arguments around his subject and dodge his own bias by speaking through the characters he created. Hampson admits that there were others who were far more ruthless than Robespierre and that his eventual goal for the Revolution was a "return of humane constitutional government".<sup>44</sup> However, Hampson also argues that there was the fear that his enemies would take over once the Committee of Public Safety relaxed.<sup>45</sup> This paranoia, according to Hampson, was what pushed Robespierre over the edge toward terror: "So the necessary prelude to an amnesty was to eliminate those who were too heavily compromised".<sup>46</sup> In the end, Hampson's three characters and narrator do not come up with a final verdict but leave the reader with a balance of contrasting evidence which can only be sifted through with the use of one's own cultural environment, much like Mathiez and Lefebvre did.

The second creative approach that maintains objective distance from its subject is Mantel's book *A Place of Greater Safety*, first published in 1992. This fictional book by historical novelist who went on to twice win the Booker Prize is acclaimed by many historians as one of the most accurate fictional portrayals of the French Revolution and of Robespierre in particular.<sup>47</sup> Along with many Robespierrists, Mantel has given Robespierre a backstory to base the character around, although not a story that is unimaginable given what little evidence there

---

<sup>43</sup> Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, London: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

<sup>44</sup> Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, page 233.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., page 234.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Colin Jones, "A Place of Greater Safety," Review of *A Place of Greater Safety* by Hilary Mantel, H-France: Fiction and Film for Scholars of France.

is. Mantel is able to interlace Robespierre's relationship with Danton and Camille and create the sort of complex portraits that historians have struggled to wrap their heads around. In the book Saint-Just and Robespierre are discussing a possible anti-revolutionary conspiracy with Camille's wife. While Saint-Just is eager to label this woman an adulterer with a notorious reputation, Robespierre defends her dignity and calls it 'ill-founded gossip'.<sup>48</sup> The next page has Robespierre sentencing Danton, Camille, and his wife to death. Mantel writes, "'Listen to me,' Robespierre says. 'Now that we have begun on this there is no turning back, because if we hesitate they will turn on us, seize the advantage and put us where they are now. Yes — in your elegant phrase, we must finish them off. I will let you do this, but I don't have to love you for it'".<sup>49</sup> The ending does not show Mantel's personal views on Robespierre but leaves the reader to create their own opinions. Depending on how the reader interprets the portrayal of the characters, Robespierre is seen either as a victim of his own paranoia or as a unvarying cold-hearted ideologue.

Colin Jones' glowing review of Mantel's book notes that the book "obliges us to question some of the fundamental ways that we have approached the Revolution, and in particular the Terror, and manages to do this in imaginative ways not available to historians".<sup>50</sup> Due to the creative liberties Mantel is able to take with Robespierre and other Revolutionary leaders, she is able to make Robespierre seem far more humanized than the historical record would strictly allow: "Refreshingly, Mantel even allows Robespierre a sex life — and why not? Danton's macho death-cell posturing, vaunting his own abundant sexual drive as against Robespierre's alleged virginity have been followed far too uncritically by generations of historians."<sup>51</sup> For some reason,

---

<sup>48</sup> Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, London: Fourth Estate, 1993, page 861

<sup>49</sup> Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, page 862.

<sup>50</sup> Colin Jones, "A Place of Greater Safety," Review of *A Place of Greater Safety* by Hilary Mantel, H-France: Fiction and Film for Scholars of France.

<sup>51</sup> Jones, "A Place of Greater Safety," Review of *A Place of Greater Safety* by Hilary Mantel.

the way in which historians have tried to understand Robespierre has ultimately dehumanized him to a point where it is difficult to come to any reasonable conclusion of him. With Hampton and Mantel — even in Georg Büchner's play and Wajda's film — one is reminded that Robespierre was once a real person with dreams, relationships, and fears. Mantel manages to channel what remains so intriguing about Robespierre. His was a complex character and his reasoning for accelerating the Terror send historians into a frenzy.

There is no historiographical consensus on Robespierre; no sense of closure in putting him on posthumous trial. The mystery of the Incorruptible has created three distinct groupings in which historians find themselves. The first is the most sympathetic to Robespierre's methods, many of which are writing before the Cold War have a different view of 'the greater good'. The second group is the anti-Robespierre arguments which are created by those who refuse to allow Robespierre to have much of a personality outside of the Terror and argue that Robespierre's use of virtue to drag out the Terror was not justifiable. A private life or any kind of justification for his actions would mean he was not completely consumed by power, the idea of which these academics can agree. The third and final group in which some Robespierrists have found themselves is the neutral or middle ground. From the research that has been conducted for this historiographic analysis, one can confirm that there still has not been an agreed upon depiction of Robespierre. What can be agreed upon is that the Terror and Robespierre cannot be analyzed without one another, and that commentators bring in their own political beliefs in order to make sense of The Incorruptible.

## Bibliography

- Büchner, Georg. *Danton's Death*. Translated by Jane Fry. London: Methuen 1982, play.
- Censer, Jack R. "The French Revolution is Not Over: An Introduction." *Journal of Social History*. Volume 52, Issue 3. 1 January 2019. Pages 543–544, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy081>.
- Danton*. Directed by Andrzej Wajda. Janus Films (The Criterion Collection), 1974.
- Doyal, William and Colin Haydon. "Robespierre: After Two Hundred Years." *Robespierre*, Edited by Colin Haydon and William Doyle. Cambridge, 1999.
- Friguglietti, James. "Rehabilitating Robespierre: Albert Mathiez and George Lefebvre as Defenders of the Incorruptible." *Robespierre*. Edited by Colin Haydon and William Doyle Cambridge, 1999.
- Hampson, Norman. *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- Hanson, Paul R. "Political History of the French Revolution since 1989." *Journal of Social History*. Volume 52, Issue 3. 1 January 2019. Pages 584–592, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy075>.
- Higonnet, Patrice. "The Meaning of the Terror in the French Revolution." Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations. *Commentaire*. No 35, 1986.
- Jordan, David P. "The Robespierre Problem." *Robespierre*. Edited by Colin Haydon and William Doyle Cambridge, 1999.
- Jones, Colin. "A Place of Greater Safety." Review of *A Place of Greater Safety* by Hilary Mantel. H-France: Fiction and Film for Scholars of France. <https://h-france.net/fffh/classics/hilary-mantel-a-place-of-greater-safety/>.
- Lenin, V. I. "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Communist International." *Translated by Julius Katzer. Lenin's Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm#bk02>.
- Linton, Marisa. *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution*. Oxford, U.K.: OUP Oxford, 2013. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=612902&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Mantel, Hilary. *A Place of Greater Safety*. London: Fourth Estate, 1993.
- Mathiez, Albert. "Bolshevism and Jacobinism." *Le Bolchevisme et le Jacobinisme*. Translated by Mitchel Abidor. Paris: Library of the Socialist Party and the Humanities, 1920. <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/mathiez/1920/bolshevism-jacobinism.htm#n1>.

Mayer, Robert. "Lenin and the Jacobin Identity in Russia." *Studies in East European Thought* 51, no. 2 (1999): 127-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20099700>.

McPhee, Peter. "The Robespierre Problem: An Introduction." *H-France Salon*. Vol 7 no. 14. 2015.

"Modern History Sourcebook: Maximilien Robespierre: On the Principles of Political Morality, February 1794." *Internet History Sourcebooks*. 1997. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1794robespierre.asp>.

Palmer, R. R. *Twelve Who Ruled: A Year of the Terror in the French Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Translated by Maurice Cranston. London: Penguin Books, 1968.

Scurr, Ruth. *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.

Wahnich, Sophie. *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*. Translated by David Fernbach. New York: Verso Books, 2012.