

Integrating Private and Public in the Life of Maximilien Robespierre

Peter McPhee

Like other French provincial centres, Arras today is a sprawl of new suburbs and retail shopping complexes beyond its quiet old neighbourhoods. Its distinctiveness comes from its importance in food-processing industries and its special attraction as a tourist centre, especially for those interested in the protracted battles and ingenious defences of World War I. In contrast, in the eighteenth century the town of 20,000 people could be walked across in ten or fifteen minutes. The elegant Flemish-style houses which line its famous squares today may be faithful copies of the eighteenth-century houses almost all destroyed during World War I, but the prefecture of the Department of Pas-de-Calais is as quiet today as it was a swirl of activity as the capital of Artois in the 1750s. Despite its compactness, it was then a tapestry of small neighbourhoods with a distinctive social and occupational character.

Several hundred children were born in Arras in 1758. One of them was Maximilien de Robespierre, born and baptised on 6 May, the son of François de Robespierre, a lawyer, and Jacqueline Carraut, daughter of a brewer.¹ A family drama had played out in the months beforehand, for Jacqueline had been five months pregnant at the time of her marriage, and François' parents had refused to attend the ceremony in the well-to-do parish church of Saint-Jean-en-Ronville. This may have been from the shame or embarrassment of such a marriage in a town dominated by its ecclesiastical establishment, or from vexation at the results of François' improper behaviour. The parish priest of St-Jean had obliged the families by dispensing with

Peter McPhee was appointed to a Personal Chair in History at the University of Melbourne in 1993. He has published widely on the history of modern France. His current projects include a biography of Robespierre and studies of the role of collective memory in contemporary Basque and Catalan nationalism. He was the University's first Provost in 2007-09 and is now a Professorial Fellow. The author thanks Elizabeth Macknight of the University of Aberdeen for her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ Archives départementales du Pas-de-Calais (hereafter AD P-D-C), 5M1 41, R17; Amis de Robespierre pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution (hereafter ARBR) *Bulletin*, no. 2. There is no foundation to the judgement that Robespierre himself added 'de' to make his name 'sound noble': cf William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), 26; Norman Hampson, *Danton* (Oxford, 1978), 23.

two of the three announcements of marriage banns and published the single bann just two days before the wedding. But everyone in the Robespierre's social circles knew of the scandal.²

It seems that the Robespierre family became reconciled to their son's behaviour, since his father agreed to be Maximilien's godfather a few months later. Despite the inauspicious beginnings of their married life and the long delay before their marriage once Jacqueline found she was pregnant, she and François then had a fecund relationship. After Maximilien, Jacqueline gave birth in quick succession to Charlotte, Henriette and Augustin.³

In the year after Augustin's birth, 1764, tragedy struck hard at the young family. A fifth child died during childbirth on 7 July; Jacqueline, aged 29, died of complications nine days later.⁴ Her death was protracted and devastated the young family. For whatever reason, it seems that François did not attend his wife's funeral, nor does it seem that he was in a position to provide for his children or indeed that he saw them again during several brief periods in Arras before his death in 1777.⁵ The children were dispersed. The paternal aunts looked after the girls, while Maximilien and Augustin, aged six and one, went to live with their elderly grandparents and maternal aunts at the Carrauts. So, while born into a long line of lawyers and officials, Maximilien was now to be brought up in a milieu of manual work, amidst labourers unloading sacks of grain for the brewery and the sounds of carts and workers shouting in the local Picard dialect in the Rue Ronville.⁶

It is tempting to see in the circumstances of Robespierre's childhood the clues to the character of the man he became, and many biographers have warmed to such a temptation. After all, he was the offspring of a couple who may only have married from social necessity. Then a loved mother had died in childbirth when he was just six, leaving him as the oldest of four children who were split up between the families of relatives. His father seems never to have seen his children again. Did such a childhood therefore produce a boy who was starved of parental affection and whose position as the eldest of four "orphans" made him into a prematurely serious, anxious and hardworking child suspicious of intimacy and resentful of those in happier circumstances? When did he realise that a family heritage of professional success and eminence had also been snatched away by personal tragedy?

Might his childhood give us the clues to the Robespierre enigma: the young man who articulated the highest ideals of individual rights, tolerance and democracy in 1789 but who was a prominent member of a government in 1794 which abused civil liberties, incarcerated many thousands of "suspects" and oversaw thousands of executions which can only be described as political?

Most famously, the best-selling biography by the historian, journalist and politician Max Gallo has seen in the collapse of Maximilien's immediate family in 1764 the clue to the "pathological sensitivity" of his whole life: a person who was, paradoxically, both mistrustful of others and with a "terrible need for acceptance":

² AD P-D-C 5M1 41, R8. A brilliant attempt at writing about François is by Claude Manceron, *The Men of Liberty: Europe on the Eve of the French Revolution 1774-1778*, trans. Patricia Wolf (London, 1977), 520-27.

³ AD P-D-C 5M1 41, R16 (28 December 1761, 22 January 1763); 5M1 41 R17 (6 May 1758); Gérard Walter, *Robespierre*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1961), vol. 1, 14-15.

⁴ Hector Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women He Loved*, trans. Angelo S. Rappoport (London, 1913), 18.

⁵ This was the recollection of his daughter Charlotte: *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre sur ses deux frères, précédés d'une Introduction de Laponneraye* (Paris, 1987).

⁶ ARBR *Bulletin*, no. 10. The house is still standing, much altered, at 12 Rue de Ronville.

this feeling of his father's guilt, his own guilt towards his father, and a deep distress born of this guilt and his mother's death, which also represented the end of his own childhood. More than others, his own character and his manner of being were to be determined by these early circumstances.⁷

A recent psychological reading of Robespierre's childhood by a French biographer, Laurent Dingli, has asserted that, "aged six, Maximilien suffers terribly from this loss. How could anyone doubt that?" For Dingli, this explains why Robespierre would always be particularly susceptible to what he saw as treachery or corruption, and why he would always be obsessed by a dream of a classical world peopled by virtuous heroes. The sadness of his childhood trauma sowed the seeds of an incapacity to develop intimate relationships, even of phobias about appearance, cleanliness and physical intimacy. Robespierre reminds Dingli of Hitler.⁸

Assertions about Robespierre's intimate life have varied wildly. He has been accused of both having no capacity for sexual intimacy and of having at least one mistress, of being both physically repellent and yet very attractive to women, of being both emotionally cold and of writing mawkish love poems. Indeed, one psychoanalytical reading has cast him as a narcissistic ascetic, whose self-identification with the Revolution was a classic case of Freudian "displaced libido."⁹ The psychoanalyst Jean Artarit is at an extreme, offering the insight that Robespierre's misspelling in an electoral pamphlet of a shoemaker's name Lantillette as Languillette ("baby eel") shows a longing to cut off the penis. For Robespierre was apparently a repressed homosexual with a castration complex, a misogynist and pathological narcissist constantly searching for a good father and an all-powerful mother.¹⁰

This is not just historians and psychoanalysts speculating on how Robespierre's personality may have been informed by childhood loss. For a central moment of the Revolution – beloved of novelists and playwrights ever since – was Robespierre's alleged abandonment of his friends Danton and Desmoulins as they faced the guillotine in April 1794, accused of treachery and corruption at a time of

⁷ Max Gallo, *Robespierre the Incorruptible: A Psycho-Biography*, trans. Raymond Rudorff (New York, 1971), 25, 66. For other examples, see Michèle Ansart-Dourlen, *L'Action politique des personnalités et l'idéologie jacobine. Rationalisme et passions révolutionnaires* (Paris, 1998), 96; Jean-Philippe Domecq, *Robespierre, derniers temps: biographie. Suivi de la fête de l'Être suprême et son interprétation* (Paris, 2002), 21; Pierre-Alexandre Bourson, *Robespierre, ou le délire décapité* (Paris, 1993), ch. 7. As a rejoinder to such speculation, see the intriguing discussion in Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, 1974), ch. 1.

⁸ Laurent Dingli, *Robespierre* (Paris, 2004), 11-19, 23, 35, 435. A similar view is Graeme Fife, *The Terror - The Shadow of the Guillotine: France 1792-1794* (New York, 2004), 129. For a discussion of possible readings of Robespierre's childhood, see Joseph I. Shulim, "The Youthful Robespierre and His Ambivalence toward the Ancien Régime," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 5 (1972): 398-420; "Robespierre and the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 82 (1977): 20-38.

⁹ Bruce Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic: Evolution of a Political Type* (New York, 1976); Jacques André, *La Révolution fratricide: Essai de psychanalyse du lien social* (Paris, 1993); John Laurence Carr, *Robespierre: The Force of Circumstance* (London, 1972); Saint-Paulien, *Robespierre, ou les dangers de la vertu, 1789-1799* (Paris, 1984), 49, 259. Saint-Paulien is the pseudonym of Maurice Yvan-Picard, a collaborator and anti-semitic activist under Vichy, who then lived in Spain until amnestied in 1957; his biography of Robespierre is the most tendentious of the genre.

¹⁰ Jean Artarit, *Maximilien Robespierre ou l'impossible filiation* (Paris, 2003), for example, 55, 66, 68, 79, 81, 106-7, 112-14, 170, 366-67. Lantillette was the name used by Delmotte, an illiterate cobbler who became close to Robespierre during the drawing up of his corporation's *cahier de doléance* in 1789.

war. When Danton's wife had died in February 1793, Robespierre had written a beautiful letter to his friend:

If in the only misfortunes that can crush such a soul as yours the certainty of having a loving and devoted friend may offer you some consolation, I offer it to you. I love you more than ever and until death. At this moment, I am you. Do not close your heart against the words of a friendship which feels all your pain.¹¹

In April 1794, in contrast, Robespierre's allegations against his former friend and ally went beyond charges of financial corruption to moral impropriety, accusing him of quipping over dinner that virtue was what "he practised every night with his wife."¹² Similarly, on 29 December 1790, Robespierre was a witness to the marriage of Camille and Lucile Desmoulins. He sang of "the beautiful eyes" and "beautiful virtues of the charming Lucile."¹³ But in April 1794, not even Lucile's appeal to Robespierre to remember the pleasure he had felt in holding his godson Horace on his knee could save Camille, or Lucile herself.¹⁴ Whatever the dangerous political choices Danton and Desmoulins had made against Robespierre's constant pleadings, it is alleged that only a psychologically warped person could have detached himself from two friends with such apparent coldness.

There is no clear evidence to provide the basis for such analyses, which in any case are predicated on the assumption that Maximilien had a fundamentally disturbed character resulting in monstrous actions in 1792-94. Equally compelling could be an analysis which assumes that he was brought up by loving relatives who ensured that the children saw each other regularly and that young Maximilien was given every opportunity to develop his intellect. That is certainly the implication of the one account which we have of his childhood, by his younger sister Charlotte, pieced together before her death in 1834.¹⁵

She recalled that the death of their mother was deeply distressing for him and made him a rather serious, obedient child. From a typically "noisy, boisterous and light-hearted" little boy he became "serious, grown-up (*raisonnable*), hardworking." He was now more interested in reading and building model chapels than in noisy games: that would accord with the pious surroundings in which his aunts were raising him. But these were loved and loving children. Every Sunday the girls were sent to the Rue Ronville to spend time with their brothers, "days of happiness and joy" when they would look at Maximilien's collections of pictures.¹⁶

¹¹ *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 11 vols (Paris, 1912-2007), vol. III, 160. See Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London, 2006), 180, 184, 234; J.M. Thompson, *Leaders of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1929), 104-5. Marisa Linton is exploring expertly the personal as well as political dynamics of Jacobin friendships: see in particular "Fatal Friendships: The Politics of Jacobin Friendship," *French Historical Studies* 31 (2008): 51-76.

¹² Marisa Linton, "'The Tartuffes of Patriotism': Fears of Conspiracy in the Political Language of Revolutionary Government, France 1793-94," in *Conspiracy in Early Modern Europe*, Barry Coward and Julian Swann, eds. (Aldershot, Hants., 2004), 248-49.

¹³ *Œuvres*, vol. III, p. 100; Jules Claretie, *Camille Desmoulins and His Wife: Passages from the History of the Dantonists Founded upon New and Hitherto Unpublished Documents*, trans. Cashel Hoey (London, 1876), 137-40.

¹⁴ *Œuvres*, vol. III, 274.

¹⁵ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires*; Gabriel Pioro and Pierre Labracherie, "Charlotte Robespierre et ses Mémoires," *Pensées*, 86, 88 (1959): 3-21, 99-108.

¹⁶ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires*. The republican politician and fervent Robespierrieste Ernest Hamel claimed to have met a school friend of Maximilien, aged 96, who corroborated Charlotte's account:

While Robespierre did not refer to his childhood in any of the many thousands of pages of speeches and journalism he later wrote, there is little doubt that it informed his self-definition. In 1781 Maximilien returned to Arras after twelve years of study at the Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris to begin a career in the law, living with his sister Charlotte: he was 23, she was 21. Arras was undergoing a burst of creative energy to match its commercial and architectural achievements. The Royal Academy was the cultural heart of Artois, and Robespierre was received as one of the thirty members of the Academy in 1783, aged 25. In April 1784 the three new members-elect each spoke on a particular subject: one spoke against the abuse of talent, another held forth on atmospheric air, while Robespierre “undertook to prove the origin, the injustice and the disadvantages of the prejudice which causes the infamy of criminals to spill over onto their relatives.”¹⁷

Two aspects of the speech would have had his respectable audience on the edge of their seats. First, he went well beyond the topic to call into question the very code of “honour” on which aristocratic society was based. Second, he singled out a particular example of the prejudice that came from loss of rights to all members of the family of a person guilty of particular crimes:

I wish the law would impose no stain of any kind on bastards: I wish that it did not appear to punish the sins of their fathers through them by forbidding them civil positions and even church ministry; ... I wish that we could abolish all customs which lead citizens to accept the idea that a man may be answerable for a misdemeanour which he has not committed.

We can only speculate as to whether the barb in Robespierre’s reference to noble scorn for commoners – indeed, his very choice of topic for his inaugural speech to the Academy – was an expression of enduring discomfort over the circumstances of his birth. Robespierre had not been born out of wedlock, but must have wondered why his parents had married late in his mother’s pregnancy. Did he feel that common knowledge of his father’s shame would forever stain him in the eyes of those who monopolized power and status in his small provincial town?

Despite Robespierre’s increasing outspokenness in court as well, his ambitions were not begrudged by his fellow Academy members, and in February 1786 he was elected the Director for one year. He was now at the pinnacle of intellectual life in Arras. Traditionally, the new Director made a speech, and Robespierre could have recited a series of platitudes about the importance of knowledge and morality. What he resolved to do instead was astonishing, and recalled his inaugural speech two years earlier. Robespierre now spoke for almost two hours on “Legislation governing the rights and conditions of bastards.” Everyone present knew of his family scandal. He decided to confront the core question of the rights of children conceived outside marriage, with a calm passion, not once referring to himself.¹⁸ The speech is significant not only for an abrupt statement of Robespierre’s core belief in the need to address inequality of condition – “poverty corrupts the People’s behaviour and

Histoire de Robespierre, d'après des papiers de famille, les sources originales et des documents entièrement inédits, 3 vols, (Paris, 1865-67), vol. 1, 13.

¹⁷ Eugène Déprez, “Introduction,” *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 5-19.

¹⁸ *Œuvres*, vol. XI, 137-83. Note, too, Robespierre’s advocacy of the right of women to join learned academies: see Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, “Robespierre, Old Regime Feminist? Gender, the Late Eighteenth Century, and the French Revolution Revisited,” *Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010): 1–29.

degrades its soul; it predisposes it to crime” – but also because he defined his attitude to marriage and the family as the basis of society:

Marriage is a fertile source of virtues: it ties the heart to thousands of worthy objects, it accustoms it to the gentle passions, to honest sentiments. It is a rule derived from Nature herself; when one becomes a father, one generally becomes a more honest man. ...

Maximilien had reached a pinnacle in 1787: six years after his celebrated but awkward return to his home town, he was a key figure in the local Academy and had won a series of major court-cases. Despite his legal and civic successes, and his closeness to Charlotte, with whom he moved into this house in 1787, Robespierre was seeking intimacy. He was now 29, and most of the professional men with whom he associated were married with families. He was longing for love.

He used the interest a “kind and famous lady” had taken in a case to write an affectionate if reserved letter to her:¹⁹

When one has defended the cause of the unfortunate with the deep and painful feelings the injustice one is compelled to overcome inspires, at the time when one is still uncertain of being able to win it, one needs both consolation and a reward. The sweetest, most wonderful of all is to be able to communicate these feelings to a kind and famous lady whose noble spirit is made to share them.

We do not know whether this was the same woman whose hurtful letter Maximilien responded to six months later in June 1787, but he was obviously pained and bewildered. It was a declaration of love.²⁰

As for the spiteful things in your letter, I shall respond by a faithful statement of my feelings. The interest I take in people is unlimited, where people like you are concerned. The interest you have inspired in all who appreciate you will die in me only when I am no longer interested in anything, because I know of no-one worthier than you of arousing it.

Three weeks later he wrote again, sending her a copy of a piece of writing, perhaps one of his pleas to the court.²¹ It was a brief and sad letter, a confession from Maximilien of his own unhappiness and a longing to be the source of happiness for someone else:

The position you are in is absolutely unimportant provided that you are happy. But are you happy? I rather doubt it and the doubt distresses me, because if one is not happy oneself, one would like to take consolation from the happiness of others; one would at least like to see those who most deserve happiness attain it.

In the week after Robespierre had argued his first court-case in 1781 he and Charlotte received a gift of canaries from a friend of hers, a Mademoiselle Duhay, to

¹⁹ *Œuvres*, vol. III, 30-31.

²⁰ *Œuvres*, vol. III, 33.

²¹ *Œuvres*, vol. III, 33-34.

which he responded with some copies of a legal “dissertation” and a charming letter.²² How could they not be “interesting” canaries, coming from her? “They are very pretty; having been raised by you, we expected them also to be the gentlest and most sociable of all canaries.” Maximilien seems to have fallen for the generous young friend. Her gift had rekindled the love for small birds he had had as a child.

It is likely that she was the recipient of another letter, again with attached legal memoranda, in June 1788.²³

It is rare to be able to present a pretty woman with a piece of writing such as the one I am sending you.... I send you my legal speeches and you read them; I owe this advantage, Madam, as much to the strength of your mind as to the indulgence with which you are pleased to receive my output.... I beg you to let me know immediately as soon as you find my memoranda boring, so that I can stop writing them as soon as you stop reading them.

Is the puppy you are raising for my sister as pretty as the one you showed me when I came to Béthune? Whatever it is like, it will be received with discrimination and with pleasure. We may even say that however ugly it may be, it will always be pretty.

At this point, in his late twenties, he composed several poems of love. The only one known to have been published was a “Madrigal” dedicated to Ophélie Mondlen, whom Maximilien had met in Paris, and was published in 1787.

Believe me, young and lovely Ophélie
 Whatever the world says and despite your mirror
 Happy in ignorance and beauty,
 Keep your modesty always.
 Be ever frightened of the power of your charms.
 You will be all the more beloved
 If you fear not being so.²⁴

Perhaps there were many other love poems and letters: recipients of declarations of love do not always keep them or pass them on if they are unrequited, even if expressed as delicately as were Maximilien’s. In 1794, there were other good reasons to dispose of them. We cannot know why his expressions of affection when in his twenties did not result in marriage. Certainly, he was unprepossessing physically and, even if an attractive match as a successful, intelligent lawyer, he may have seemed intimidating. His habit of offering copies of his speeches in court as gifts rather than flowers may not have been endearing. According to one unfriendly local, he “affected a certain austerity in his morals,” and this “distanced him from all dealings with women.”²⁵ Certainly, however, he had tried repeatedly and tenderly to communicate feelings of affection. According to Charlotte, he was courting Anaïs

²² *Œuvres*, vol. III, 23-24.

²³ *Œuvres*, vol. III, 34-35. This is according to Charles Vellay’s note with the letter reprinted in *Annales révolutionnaires*, 1 (1908), 107-9.

²⁴ *Œuvres*, vol. I, 222.

²⁵ Abbé Proyard, *La vie et les crimes de Robespierre, surnommé le Tyran, depuis sa naissance jusqu’à sa mort: ouvrage dédié à ceux qui commandent, et à ceux qui obéissent* (Augsbourg, 1795), 62-63.

Deshorties, his aunt Eulalie's stepdaughter, in the years after 1787, and it was widely assumed that they would marry.²⁶

That would not happen, for in 1789 he was elected a Third Estate representative for Artois to the Estates-General convoked by Louis XVI. As Louis' attempt at fiscal reform escalated into revolution, Robespierre found himself at the heart of what he described as the greatest events in history. We know little of his private life at this point.²⁷

Within a year the relative unknown from the provinces became a household name because of his uncompromising stand on what he saw as key revolutionary principles, such as universal manhood suffrage. He was outspoken also in support of reforms to family law, such as that enforcing equal inheritance between children (8-13 April 1791), and again extolled the virtues of the ideal family. Robespierre attacked patriarchal power over property as inimical to good relations between fathers and children which should be based on "the nature, care, tenderness, and virtue of fathers."²⁸

Following Louis XVI's abortive attempt to flee France in June 1791 and the polarisation of political opinions, violent confrontation in Paris threatened Robespierre in person. A fellow member of the Jacobin Club, Maurice Duplay, urged him to move for his own safety into his residence in the Rue Saint-Honoré, closer to both the Assembly and the Jacobin Club.²⁹ The Duplays were more than twenty years older than Robespierre, and their family included three daughters. The eldest daughter was called Eléonore; she was 20, and they became close friends. The Duplays may have given him the family life he had never had. It also seems to have created unbearable tensions for Maximilien's sister Charlotte. In 1792 she came from Arras to Paris, living at first with her brother at the Duplays, where – she admitted forty years later – she found the women intolerable in their suffocating devotion to Maximilien, especially the mother.³⁰

Certainly, he does seem to have been attractive to those women drawn to men who seem both passionate and vulnerable, and in need of happiness. He was a small and frail man, but steadfast about the revolutionary virtues in the face of mockery. His secretary in 1790, Pierre Villiers, recalled the impressive volume of mail the deputy received each day, especially from women.

When the National Assembly was dissolved in September 1791, groups of Parisians were waiting outside to applaud Robespierre and others, shouting "Long live Robespierre! Long live the Incorruptible!," a reference to the nickname Robespierre had enjoyed since May.³¹ Then they were stopped by women, one of whom presented her child. "At least," she said, "You will allow this child to kiss you."³² One of the women then made a speech to Robespierre:

²⁶ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires*, 39.

²⁷ See Artarit, *Robespierre*, 66. Villiers was wounded defending the Tuileries in August 1792. He published his memoirs in 1802 after he had been deported after the coup of 18 Fructidor Year V. See Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women He Loved*, 84-85; René Garmy, "Aux origines de la légende anti-robesspierriste: Pierre Villiers et Robespierre," in *Actes du Colloque Robespierre. XIIIe Congrès international des Sciences historiques* (Paris, 1967): 19-33.

²⁸ Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 2004), 61, 147.

²⁹ Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women He Loved*, 96.

³⁰ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires*, 52-56; Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women He Loved*, 108-9.

³¹ *Œuvres*, vol. VII, 754-55.

³² *Œuvres*, vol. VII, 756-57.

In the midst of corruption, you have remained the unshakeable support of truth; always steadfast, always incorruptible...

This People, I say, speaks your name only with high regard; you are its guardian angel, its hope, its consolation. O, Robespierre, its love, its veneration will forever avenge the black and ugly plots of your cowardly detractors.³³

This particular attraction Robespierre had for women – political as well as emotional – was to become a major point of division when France became a republic in 1792. On 29 October 1792 the new National Convention heard charges against Robespierre from prominent opponents among the Girondins, holding him responsible for the massacres after the overthrow of the monarchy in August and claiming that he was aiming at dictatorship with Marat. Louvet called for the Assembly to pass a law whereby Robespierre could be banished.³⁴ On 5 November, when Robespierre delivered his response, the galleries were packed, with many having spent the night camped outside; entry tickets were fought over.³⁵ The *Patriote français* reckoned that there were up to eight hundred women packing the galleries, as well as two hundred men, and that Robespierre was besieged by women there and at the Jacobin Club. Despite his own support for the rights of women, the *philosophe* and now Girondin Condorcet fell back for an explanation on women's vulnerability to a messiah. In the *Chronique de Paris* he explained that Robespierre

has all the characteristics, not of a religious leader, but of the leader of a sect; he has built up for himself a reputation for austerity which borders on sainthood, he mounts his soapbox, he speaks of God and Providence, he says he is the friend of the poor and the weak and he attracts a following of women and the easily led [*faibles d'esprit*].... Robespierre is a priest and will never be anything else.³⁶

The Scottish doctor John Moore agreed: his speeches are “barren in argument, sometimes fertile in the flowers of fancy ... Robespierre's eloquence is said to be peculiarly admired by the [female] sex.”³⁷

Whatever the value of Condorcet's opinion, when it came to attitudes to children and gender roles, Robespierre was more likely to turn to the tales of ancient Sparta he had learnt at secondary school than to Christianity. In July 1793 Robespierre outlined a draft education policy. With the Constitution and the law code, he argued that this was one of the “monuments which the Convention owes to History.” The proposal was remarkably bold and wideranging, and with an emphasis on the “Spartan” virtues he had absorbed as a schoolboy from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*.³⁸ The system was all-encompassing, ranging from civic study, physical exercise and manual work to clothing and food. Robespierre emphasized that it was

³³ *Œuvres*, vol. VII, 759.

³⁴ *Œuvres*, vol. IX, 62-65; Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray, *Accusation contre M. Robespierre* (Paris, 1792).

³⁵ *Œuvres*, vol. IX, 77-78.

³⁶ Louis Jacob, *Robespierre vu par ses contemporains* (Paris, 1938), 126; Marc Bouloiseau, “Robespierre d'après les journaux girondins,” in *Actes du Colloque Robespierre*, 12-13.

³⁷ J.M. Thompson, ed., *English Witnesses of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1938), 206.

³⁸ *Œuvres*, vol. X, 35-42.

suitable for all social conditions, and not just to create Spartan soldiers. Like Lycurgus' academy (*agoge*), the French Republic would also remove children from their parents from the age of five for six to seven years (although he no doubt balked at Plutarch's commendation of twelve-year-old boys having male lovers).³⁹

Robespierre argued against concerns that it would remove the useful labour of young children from families:

It is not true that the child will be separated from its parents, it stays with them for the first five years; it stays near them during the seven years of education when it passes into hands of the fatherland. ... If you adopt this plan, the birth of a child, this event so happy for Nature, will no longer be a calamity for an indigent family.⁴⁰

He was in fact the only deputy who advocated the adoption of the report in its entirety: others balked at the pivotal measure of compulsory boarding. The next day, the Convention suspended further consideration of the decree, preferring the more pragmatic approach of Bouquier at the end of the year.⁴¹

What is fascinating about Robespierre's conception of the family is the way he accommodated a state education regime designed to make small children strong and independent with an idealized notion of the place of happy marriage at the heart of a healthy polity. From his youth Robespierre had articulated a vision of marriage and the family which was idealized and heartfelt, perhaps in reaction to the family life which he had not known. This did not mean that women should be active political participants, as his opposition to women's political clubs made clear.⁴²

In 1793-94 Robespierre and the eleven others on the Committee of Public Safety were charged by the National Convention with winning the war against the European counter-revolutionary coalition. This they did. But Robespierre had also embarked on an extraordinary project to provide the cultural frameworks necessary to build a republic of virtue. Among these frameworks, in addition to those on education and family law, was a new religion designed to heal the rifts between Catholics and those disposed to seek guidance from the laws of reason or nature. Here his ideal family values became part of the supernatural order. In his speech outlining the decree establishing the Cult of the Supreme Being on 7 May 1794, he listed among the festivals to be celebrated on the days of the thirty-six *décadi* at the end of the ten-day weeks of the revolutionary calendar:

To Modesty

³⁹ See Maxime Rosso, "Les réminiscences spartiates dans les discours et la politique de Robespierre de 1789 à Thermidor," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 349 (2007): 69-76.

⁴⁰ *Œuvres*, vol. X, 69-70.

⁴¹ *Moniteur Universel*, no. 91, 21 December 1793, vol. 19, 6; Dominique Julia, *Les trois couleurs du tableau noir. La Révolution* (Paris, 1981), 122-23. On education policy, see R. R. Palmer, *The Improvement of Humanity: Education and the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1985), chs 4-5.

⁴² Scott H. Lytle, "The Second Sex (September, 1793)," *Journal of Modern History* 27 (1955): 14-26; Dominique Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses: les femmes du peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française* (Aix-en-Provence, 1988), 129-77; Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), ch. 11; Suzanne Desan, "Jacobin Women's Clubs," in *Re-creating Authority in Revolutionary France*, Bryant T. Ragan and Elizabeth A. Williams eds. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992), ch. 1; Marie Cerati, *Le club des citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires* (Paris, 1966); R. B. Rose, *The Enragés: Socialists of the French Revolution?* (Melbourne, 1965), chs 5-6.

To Friendship
 To Love
 To Conjugal Fidelity
 To Paternal Love
 To Maternal Tenderness
 To Filial Piety⁴³

Robespierre's ideal values of the family and its relationships almost certainly reflected distant childhood memories of an idealised, then shattered, family life and the personal intimacy he had sought unsuccessfully as a young man. They may also have reflected his pleasure at life with the Duplays, whose home continued to be the place where he prepared speeches for the Convention and Jacobin Club, received visitors, and relaxed. In later life Elisabeth Duplay – Eléonore's younger sister – would recall of Maximilien that “we loved him like a good brother! He was so nice! ... He was so virtuous! He revered my father and mother. All of us felt tender towards him.”⁴⁴ Earlier in the Revolution, perhaps in 1791, Robespierre was reported to have shouted at his erstwhile friend Pétion, who had teased him that he needed a wife to make him more sociable at dinner parties, that “I will never marry!”⁴⁵ But whatever the temptation Robespierre might have felt to experience closer feelings through marriage to Eléonore, he resisted. Robespierre's doctor was later recorded as insisting:

as the family physician and constant guest of that house I am in a position to deny this on oath. They were devoted to each other, and their marriage was arranged; but nothing of the kind alleged ever sullied their love. Without being affected or prudish, Robespierre disliked loose conversation. His morals were pure.⁴⁶

The family life he knew at the Duplays provided a daily stability in his increasingly exhausted, ill and threatened existence, but he was the focus of other female attentions ranging from adulation to rage. Some were as obsessive as they were adulatory. One letter was written on 13 Prairial Year II (1 June 1794) from a young woman of Nantes, Louise Jaquin, who claimed to have lost her husband fighting rebels in the Vendée, and offered marriage and a life of ease: “You are my god, and I know no other on earth. I look upon you as my guardian angel, and I wish to live only under your laws; they are so gentle.”⁴⁷

There is a final irony. As the factional politics of 1794 spiralled into deadly division, the attentions of another woman, the elderly Catherine Théot, was to play

⁴³ *Œuvres*, vol. X, 442-65. Cf Lynn Hunt, ‘Male Virtue and Republican Motherhood’, in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, Keith Michael Baker, ed., vol. 4, *The Terror* (Oxford, 1994), ch.11, who sees this as contradicting his earlier ‘attack’ on the family in education laws.

⁴⁴ Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women He Loved*, 101; Stéphane-Pol [Paul Coutant], *Autour de Robespierre: le conventionnel Le Bas, d'après des documents inédits et les mémoires de sa veuve* (Paris, 1901), 104; Jacob, *Robespierre vu par ses contemporains*, 215-19.

⁴⁵ That at least was the recollection of Louis-Philippe in 1850: he was only 18 when the incident may have taken place in 1791: *The Correspondence and Diaries of the Late Right Honourable John Wilson Croker*, 3 vols (London, 1885), vol. 3, 209.

⁴⁶ Poumiès de la Siboutie, *Recollections of a Parisian Doctor under Six Sovereigns, Two Revolutions and a Republic (1789-1863)*, trans. Theodora Davidson, (London, 1911), ch. 2.

⁴⁷ Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women He Loved*, 224-26.

into the hands of Robespierre's opponents. Théot, dubbed the "Mother of God" by her followers, had claimed he was one of two new messiahs. The enquiry by Robespierre's opponents painted her as a pawn of the English enemy and diminished Robespierre by association.⁴⁸ His role in establishing a new religion seemed all the more sinister and was one of the reasons contributing to an abrupt swing of support away from him and his allies and in the end the bloody *coup* against him and his associates in July 1794.

Just one month after Robespierre's death, as opponents and even former allies queued up to denounce the tyrant they had once elected, an old enemy published *La Queue de Robespierre*, the first in a long series of satires based on Robespierre's supposed will, in which he had left his "tail" to his followers. The satire rehearsed the old obsession about Robespierre's hold over women. Even though Robespierre most likely died a virgin, his attractiveness to women was now imputed to his sexual potency:

Robespierre's tail is most in fashion
To soothe and still the ladies' passion.
When his tail and his sharp blade
Penetrate some charming glade,
I hear a young virgin's plea:
O how this knife stabs me!
This Robespierre of a tail
With blood will gorge and swell;
Squeeze it if you dare
Till pleasure wakes up there.
The murderer's huge tail
Makes the whole world quail;
This tail bears a deep stain
Of pleasure, love, and pain.⁴⁹

Others preferred images of a stony-faced Robespierre squeezing a human heart to assuage his thirst for blood.

Hostile biographers of Robespierre have both exaggerated the psychological damage that may have been done to a small boy by the sad circumstances of his mother's death and have minimized his abilities and achievements as a youth and young man. The combined effect has been to paint a portrait of a shrewd but envious and callous man for whom the chaos of revolution opened up possibilities about which this competent but vicious small-town lawyer could only have fantasized. For the psychoanalyst Jacques André, from 1789 Robespierre's public and political life became as one with his libidinal life, of which elements were his sexualization of revolutionary crowds, his unconscious homosexuality and his narcissism.⁵⁰

It is now fifty years since the great cultural historian Peter Gay gave a brilliant and controversial paper using psychological techniques to analyse the oratory of

⁴⁸ G. Lenotre, *Robespierre's Rise and Fall* (London, 1927), ch. 2; Haim Burstin, *Une Révolution à l'œuvre: le Faubourg Saint-Marcel (1789-1794)* (Seyssel, 2005), 796-98.

⁴⁹ Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York, 2001), 160-65.

⁵⁰ Jacques André, 'L'Incorruptible: Considérations psychanalytiques', in *Robespierre - figure-réputation*, Annie Jourdan, ed (Amsterdam, 1996), 143-52.

Robespierre and Danton.⁵¹ Since biographers are involved in inferring motives from observable behaviour by their subjects – letters and speeches, actions and decisions – we engage inevitably with psychological categories and inferences. Such reflection reminds us that Maximilien Robespierre was once a small and vulnerable child and that when children become adults they do not grow into saints and devils, but into men and women. But biographers should be wary of a confident application of psychoanalytic categories in an attempt to explain someone's actions.⁵² Few individuals in the past have been written about so voluminously as Robespierre, and even fewer so tendentiously. Despite the vast records from his public life and the richness of anecdotes from those who encountered him, we should be honest enough to admit the gaps, silences and ambiguities. There is abundant evidence that he gave and received affection; we will never know, however, why such emotions evidently did not result in a fully intimate relationship.

What we can say with some confidence is that Robespierre's experiences had formed in him strong views about the rights of children and the ideal values of marriage which were to inform his attitude to revolutionary reforms to property rights, education and the family. These reforms were at the heart of the revolutionary project, and Robespierre brought to them values learnt as a little boy and young man in a world in which his mother, sisters, aunts and grandmothers were of unusual importance. Far from the emotionally stunted, rigidly puritanical and icily cruel monster of history and literature, this was a passionate man.

⁵¹ Peter Gay, "Rhetoric and Politics in the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 66 (1961): 664-76; *Freud for Historians* (New York, 1985), 12-13.

⁵² In general, see the incisive discussions in Gay, *Freud for Historians*; Judith Brett, "The Tasks of Political Biography," in *History on the Couch: Essays in History and Psychoanalysis*, Joy Damousi and Robert Reynolds, eds. (Melbourne, 2003), 73-83.