

Virtue or Glory?: Dilemmas of Political Heroism in the French Revolution

Marisa Linton

At some point after Maximilien Robespierre embarked on a career in revolutionary politics he became known as “the incorruptible.” This meant that he was seen as a “man of virtue.” People nowadays do not use the term virtue when they talk about politics. Sometimes I am told this is an archaic term that the general public will no longer understand. Yet in the realm of contemporary politics, matters of morality and immorality are as topical as ever. We no longer speak about the virtue of political leaders, but we do speak about honesty and hypocrisy; corruption and integrity; the need to put the public good over cronyism and favoritism; the acceptability or otherwise of political ambition and careerism; and the proper demarcation between public and private life. For example, the recent detention for questioning of Nicolas Sarkozy, on 1 July 2014, following allegations about corruption during his time in public office, invoked some of the same issues that vexed the revolutionary generation.¹ There is a difference of course between our politicians and those of the French Revolution. We do not cut the heads off our politicians when they fall short of high moral standards. But we all know that the integrity or otherwise of politicians has an impact on many peoples’ lives.

We do not, however, expect our politicians to be heroes. We know that being in politics entails, in the words of Hilary Clinton, making “hard choices.”² We might well agree with Charles Nodier who, in 1831, characterized the professional politician

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¹ See: Kim Willsher, “Nicolas Sarkozy Detained for Questioning over Alleged Corruption,” *The Guardian*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/01/nicolas-sarkozy-detained-questioning-alleged-corruption>.

² This is Clinton’s title for her account of her experiences during four years as Secretary of State, Hilary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (London, 2014).

in skeptical, but realistic, terms as pursuing a “Career of ambition, of egoism.”³ But the generation before that of Nodier, the generation that made the French Revolution, took a much more idealistic view. They learned later to be cynical – largely as a consequence of their experience of revolutionary politics. The French revolutionaries are sometimes seen as naïve, but they were far from being fools. Their conception of politics was framed very consciously as a reaction against the cynicism and corruption that characterized the politics of the old regime, and needs to be understood against that backdrop. The French revolutionaries were the first generation to engage in the new cultural world of democratic politics, where politics was played out before the gaze of public opinion. They were inexperienced and improvised as they went along. They thought politicians had a responsibility to put the public good first, that they should be heroes. But what kind of heroes did the new world of revolutionary politics require?

I come to the subject of political heroism out of writing my latest book, *Choosing Terror*.⁴ This was a study of the politics of successive Jacobin leaders between 1789 and 1794. Some people have said of my book that there are no heroes in it, but I do not see it like that. It is true that the revolutionary leaders had all too human frailties, but I found many well-intentioned men – and a few women – who passionately believed in creating a better world. They experienced difficult circumstances, in the course of which they made hard choices (in Clinton’s words). Some of those choices were truly ‘terrible’ in their consequences, yet the revolutionary leaders were far from being immune to those consequences. The French Revolution was many things and impacted on many lives: for many of the revolutionary leaders it was a personal tragedy, as some became the victims, as well as the perpetrators, of revolutionary terror.

Here I am going to focus on ideas about political heroism during the early period of the Convention and the height of the Republic, from the summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794. I want to investigate how the men who dominated politics thought about their role as political leaders, how they understood that role, and what kind of dilemmas it presented. Several of my examples are drawn from Robespierre and especially Saint-Just, partly because both men had strong ideas about what it meant to be a man of virtue, but also because I am currently writing a book about these two revolutionaries, along with Desmoulins and Danton.⁵

To some extent heroism is a cultural construction, that is, a social group designates certain individuals as having heroic status according to the needs of that group. The concept of heroism was integral to the political culture of the Revolution.⁶

³ Charles Nodier, *Souvenirs, épisodes et portraits pour servir à l’histoire de la Révolution et de l’Empire*, vol. 1 (Brussel, 1831), 102.

⁴ Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2013).

⁵ The book is to be entitled, *Saturn’s Children*, and is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

⁶ On the representation and commemoration of dead heroes of the Revolution, see Annie Jourdan, *Les Monuments de la Révolution 1770-1804: une histoire de la représentation* (Paris, 1997), chap. 3; Antoine de Baecque, “Le sang des héros: figures du corps dans l’imaginaire politique de la Révolution française,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 34 (1987): 553-86; Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (London, 2001); Jean-Claude Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris, 1998); Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France, 1789-1996* (Oxford, 2000), chap.

The Republic required different kinds of heroes. Revolutionary soldiers were supposed to show heroism, in the form of courage, discipline and commitment to the *patrie*. But politicians were also supposed to show heroism albeit of a particular kind.

Several historians have considered themes of heroism in revolutionary political culture, including Annie Jourdan and Thomas Crow.⁷ One of the fundamental questions about political heroism was - can a politician be allowed to be a hero before he is dead? Does a living politician who acquires the status of 'hero' become dangerously powerful as a consequence? The French revolutionaries thought so. Their fears were confirmed by the 'unmasking' of some of the early leaders of the Revolution, including Lafayette and Mirabeau. So, by the time the Convention met, the Revolution's political heroes were invariably dead ones. Yet the reputations of dead political leaders who attained the status of heroes could also be appropriated by living ones. As an example of this process, the appropriation of the dead Marat as a revolutionary hero has been the subject of some fascinating studies, including those by Ian Germani, Jean-Claude Bonnet, and, most recently, Guillaume Mazeau.⁸

Whilst I am much indebted to these and other studies, I want to take a slightly different angle here, by focusing not so much on how the images of dead revolutionaries were appropriated after their deaths, as on how the idea of revolutionary heroism impacted on living revolutionaries. I want to look at how these ideas served, not only as a model for their conduct but also as a source of anxiety, presenting them with dilemmas, and entailing more of those 'hard choices'. I am especially concerned with how revolutionary leaders shaped their own identities within the constraints imposed by these models of heroism. By exploring how revolutionary leaders viewed political heroism I think we can throw some light on both the experience of revolution, and its emotional history.

Since the French revolutionary leaders were entrusted with political power in a regime of popular sovereignty, their conduct and motivation, as guardians of that power, were subject to close scrutiny by public opinion. Revolutionary politicians also kept a watchful eye on one another; they frequently criticized or even denounced one another's conduct. Two models of heroic behavior were particularly significant for political leaders: the man of virtue, and the man of glory. These models had a history that stretched back into the old regime and beyond to classical antiquity.⁹

There were some parallels between these two models in terms of courage, and public service. Yet there were also important differences, and the key one was motivation. Virtue was about abnegation of self. It meant literally to put the good of all before one's own self-interest. Glory, on the other hand, entailed a heightened sense of self. Thus, a virtuous act needed no praise from an audience to give it value; whereas glory was about renown, reputation and the praise of others.

The Latin word *Virtus* meant literally that quality which befits a man. *Virtus* was associated with the ethos of an elite warrior caste, from which originated the idea

1; Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁷ Jourdan, *Les Monuments de la Révolution*; Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, 1985).

⁸ Ian Germani, *Jean-Paul Marat: Hero and Anti-Hero of the French Revolution* (Lewiston, New York, 1992); Jean-Claude Bonnet, ed., *La mort de Marat* (Paris, 1986); and Guillaume Mazeau, *Le Bain de l'histoire: Charlotte Corday et l'attentat contre Marat, 1793-2009* (Paris, 2009).

⁹ For a full-length study of the concept of political virtue before the Revolution, see Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Houndmills, 2001).

of stoical virtue, as the heroic fortitude with which an individual hero could withstand the blows of adversity. As a quality denoting strength, martial prowess and valor, virtue in early modern France retained an association with this original warrior ethic. In the early part of the eighteenth century virtue was still regularly associated with the idea of the nobility as a military elite, motivated simultaneously by virtue and by love of glory. Virtue was also a key term in classical republican thought, at whose heart was the egalitarian ideal of the citizen, devoted to the public good.¹⁰ The tensions between these two meanings virtue as elite warrior courage and virtue as egalitarian civic morality would play a significant role in ideas about heroism in the Revolution.

By the mid-eighteenth century the association between virtue and nobility had weakened. There were a number of reasons for this, but one of the most significant changes was the increasingly outspoken criticism of the values behind court politics. The court was seen as the locus of personal ambition: the place where leading nobles congregated to further their individual and family interests through access to monarchical patronage. The pursuit of personal ambition and personal glory, honors and advancement were intrinsic to life at court. Courtiers were characterized in negative terms, as corrupt and self-serving: they were depicted as the antithesis of the man of virtue.

With the rise of classical republican ideas, in part through the influence of Montesquieu, the language of virtue became a means whereby commentators could criticize the excesses of politics in a monarchical regime.¹¹ Yet virtue had some extreme implications. According to the classical tradition a man who wished to be truly virtuous was obliged to make a choice. His duty was to put the public good – the good of all people in the republic – before the good of the people who were personally dear to him, his own self, his family and friends. Ultimately this might mean that a man should be prepared to sacrifice his own life for the public good, or even (and worse still perhaps) the lives of those who were personally dear to him, his family or friends. Montesquieu defined political virtue as, “a renunciation of oneself, which is always a very painful thing”.¹² This was the dual nature of political virtue: both “divine”– and “terrible”. Montesquieu described this “terrible” aspect of political virtue:

It was an overriding love for the patrie which, passing the bounds of ordinary rules about crimes and virtues, followed only its own voice, and made no distinctions between citizens, friends, philanthropists or fathers: virtue seemed to forget itself in order to surpass itself; and an action that one could not at first sight approve of, because it seemed so terrible, virtue made one admire as divine.¹³

¹⁰ There are too many studies of classical republicanism to list here. The seminal text remains J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).

¹¹ On Montesquieu’s political ideas and their influence on the revolutionary generation, see Linton, *The Politics of Virtue*, and Linton, “Robespierre’s Political Principles” in Colin Haydon and William Doyle, eds, *Robespierre* (Cambridge, 1999).

¹² *De l’Esprit des lois*, in Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois, 2 vols (Paris, 1949-1951), 2: 267.

¹³ *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), in Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1: 132.

The French revolutionaries considered Brutus to be the epitome of political virtue. This could be Marcus Brutus, but more often they meant Lucius Junius Brutus.¹⁴ Whilst serving as consul, Lucius Junius Brutus had condemned his own sons to death for conspiring to overthrow the republic. In Jacques-Louis David's painting, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (1789) David gave a visual form to political virtue (fig. 1). The painting is divided into two halves.¹⁵ The mother and sisters of the dead young men are bathed in light as they mourn openly. Brutus himself remains in shadow, his back to their bodies. The statue of Rome is behind him. Some of the commentators on this painting see Brutus as the embodiment of cold, unflinching virtue, but the reality is more complex. It is a painting of intense emotion and inner conflict. Brutus's face shows that he is suffering. His hand, clenched on the letter from his sons to Tarquin (the evidence of the conspiracy), shows his agony. So do his feet, which are twisted in an unnatural way. His whole body is contorted. His top half conveys the man of virtue; his lower body the price that is paid for virtue – paid in grief. Van Halem, who visited David's studio in 1790 and saw the painting, commented on Brutus's emotion: "He swallows his suffering, convulsive movements shake him even to his extremities, and his feet are twisting ... And moreover the spectator ought not to doubt for a moment that the wretched one suffers because he is aware of a bad action."¹⁶

¹⁴ On the influence of both Brutuses on Saint-Just, see Marisa Linton, "The Man of Virtue: The Role of Antiquity in the Political Trajectory of L. A. Saint-Just," *French History* 24, no. 3 (2010): 393-419.

¹⁵ This iconic painting has been much discussed. Studies include: Robert L. Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution: An Essay in Art and Politics* (London, 1972); Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David, A Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics and the French Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1989); and Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*.

¹⁶ Cited in Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution*, 129.



Figure 1 Jacques-Louis David, “The Lictors bring to Brutus the bodies of his sons” (1789). © Photo Wikimedia Commons, Louvre.

As David well knew, in ancient Rome bodies were taken outside the city for burial. The principal sources, Livy and Plutarch showed Brutus in public, not in his house.¹⁷ Yet David chose to paint Brutus in his home to make it evident that Brutus understands that the price of his virtue is personal devastation and perpetual grief in his family and private life.

The classical republican tradition was not the only source of ideas about virtue. There was an alternative tradition that made a much more direct appeal to the emotions: this was the concept of natural virtue.¹⁸ Natural virtue was based on the notion of an inner truth: authentic emotions written on the human heart and expressed by means of a sensibility that found an outlet in an active concern for others. Since natural virtue stemmed from the heart, rather than from higher education and the dry text of the ancients, it was a quality, which could be found as much – or more – amongst the poor as amongst the rich, for the poor had not been corrupted by the corrosive effects of excessive wealth and self-regard.¹⁹ Unlike the classical republican tradition, which painted self-sacrifice as a harsh, sometimes agonizing, choice, natural virtue encouraged the idea that the sacrifice of self-interest for the benefit of others was a way to achieve a sublime level of happiness and fulfillment.²⁰

¹⁷ David was influenced by Voltaire’s play *Brutus* (1730) which, following classical conventions of unity of action, was set in Brutus’s house.

¹⁸ On natural virtue, see Linton, *The Politics of Virtue*, esp. 51-62, 67-74, 184-6.

¹⁹ On natural virtue and the poor, see Linton, *The Politics of Virtue*, esp. 186-92.

²⁰ On natural virtue, see Linton, *The Politics of Virtue*, chaps 2,4 and 7. On virtue, self-sacrifice and happiness, see Mauzi, *L’Idée du bonheur*, 624-34.

There was, however, an underlying tension about the authenticity of virtue. Might the assumption of virtue be no more than vice disguised as virtue? The answer to this problem depended on one's view of human nature. The Jansenist theologians, Nicole and Esprit had regarded virtue with deep suspicion, seeing it as a manifestation of pride (*amour-propre*) and self-interest.²¹ According to this perspective, people portrayed their actions as virtuous, both because they wanted others to think of them as morally good, and also because they themselves also benefited in some tangible way. It was impossible to know for sure whether a man possessed genuine integrity, or was just faking it. This was particularly the case for people who took on a role in public life and who wore a mask of virtue, because it was in their self-interest to do so. Thus the question of the authenticity of a person's virtue was already acknowledged to be deeply problematic, long before the Revolution made it a matter of life or death.²²

When we look at the sources for how revolutionary leaders thought about virtue, and their rejection of personal glory, we should bear in mind the Jansenist theologians' doubts about the existence of authentic virtue. Our problem is the same that it was for people at the time of the Revolution. How can we judge the veracity of someone who said that he was motivated by his love of virtue? Was it not likely that he was deliberately assuming a 'mask of virtue' – for very understandable reasons? A lot of this is unknowable. We can look at the words people spoke; the images they left, but we cannot really know what was in people's hearts. The difficulty – indeed the near impossibility – of distinguishing between a politician who was motivated by authentic virtue and one who only professed to be virtuous, was an integral theme in one of the most traumatic aspects of the Terror. This was what I have called the "politicians' terror."²³ It was characterized by a series of trials of factions, primarily of Jacobin and former Jacobin politicians. These trials were some of the most ruthless carried out during the entire Terror. In many cases conviction hinged on unreliable evidence regarding the authenticity of the accused politicians' inner motivation. One of the most painful aspects of these trials was the way in which former friends and colleagues turned on one another. The Jacobin leaders were beset on many sides by enemies, both open and covert. But in the end perhaps the most dangerous and unforgiving enemies they faced were themselves.

Under the old regime successive monarchs were routinely represented in a glorified way, with the trappings of power, and emphasizing wherever possible their achievements in the sphere of war (fig. 2). On the other hand, images of the king's ministers were rarely brought before the public in an individualized way.²⁴ From the outset of the Revolution, its leaders consciously repudiated the paths of glory. Paradoxically, whilst the Revolution opened a new career path for its functionaries and officials, its would-be leaders were not meant to seek out the adulation of the crowd or solicit votes.²⁵ From 1789 onwards there was a tacit embargo against

²¹ Jacques Esprit, *La Fausseté des vertus humaines. Par M. Esprit de l'Académie Française* (1677-8: this edition, Paris, 1693); Pierre Nicole, *Essais de Morale, contenus en divers Traités sur plusieurs Devoirs importants*, 14 vols (1715; this edition, Paris, 1781).

²² Michael Moriarty, *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought* (Oxford, 2011).

²³ Linton, *Choosing Terror*.

²⁴ On pre-revolutionary visual portrayals of the monarchy, see Mark Ledbury, "The Contested Image: Stage, Canvas, and the Origins of the French Revolution," Peter R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Houndmills, 2005), 206-12.

²⁵ On the Revolution as a means to making a career, see Linton, *Choosing Terror*, chap. 3.

formally standing for election for the national representation. A true man of virtue was meant to wait for his countrymen to apply to him. Anyone who was seen to seek out public office, or to court the praises of the crowd, risked being labeled as 'ambitious'. Of course, revolutionary leaders courted popularity all the time, but because this practice was viewed as unacceptable they tried to do so discreetly, maneuvering behind the scenes. The very act of engaging in this kind of activity when it was formally frowned upon left them vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy. Revolutionary leaders had good reason to fear allegations that they were seeking personal glory. To take just once instance, Robespierre's sister, Charlotte described how her brother's very public welcome by the inhabitants of Bapaume as a local hero on his way back to Arras after the ending of the Constituent Assembly was an embarrassment to him, because he knew his enemies would use it against him. He had begged her to speak of his arrival to no one. "However his enemies made this reception into a crime; they reproached him with having let himself be feted. ..."²⁶

²⁶ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires*, introduction to first edition by Albert Laponeraye (Paris, 1834; this edition, Paris, 2006), 83. On the political context of the local hostility that Robespierre experienced, see Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, 2012), 105-6.



Figure 2 Pierre Mignard, “Louis XIV, dressed *a la Romaine*, crowned by Victory, before a view of the town of Maestricht” (1673). © Wikimedia Commons, Chateau of Versailles.

The new political leaders were keen for their faces to be shown to the public. The extensive circulation of engravings derived from their portraits helped to establish their identities before a wider public than could see them in the flesh. Yet there were codes about how they should, or should not, be displayed visually.²⁷ In contrast to the kings of the old regime, revolutionary leaders were not shown on

²⁷ On the cult of “great men” in the Revolution, see Annie Jourdan, *Les Monuments de la Révolution 1770-1804: une histoire de la représentation* (Paris, 1997), chap. 2.

horseback, which would have been seen as a sign that they were trying to make political capital, by portraying themselves as superior.²⁸ Nor did they wear insignia or badges of office except when dressed as deputies *en mission*. Portraits of deputies were acceptable, if they did not glorify the sitter (e.g. fig. 3). These were often simple portrayals of the individual's features, designed to show his natural virtue and sensibility, his hard work as an agent of the state. Portraits of deputies did not show them surrounded by the symbols or paraphernalia of power. Sometimes they were depicted speaking publicly, though not in a way that accentuated personal power or demagoguery (fig. 4). In the early years of the Republic deputies were almost never portrayed with swords. An exception is the portrait of Jean-Baptiste Milhaud, *représentant du peuple en mission* (fig. 5). This representation was acceptable because he was portrayed in his *en mission* regalia, with the emphasis on his official function rather than his personal glory.²⁹ There is one portrait, by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, sometimes said to be of Saint-Just, which shows him with a sword. But the attribution is doubtful; the likelihood is that this is an image of Talleyrand's nephew, not the revolutionary leader.



Figure 3 Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, "Portrait of Louis de Saint-Just" (1793). © Wikimedia Commons, Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon.

²⁸ An exception was Lafayette, portrayed in his official capacity as leader of the National Guard.

²⁹ Ironically, Milhaud's reputation for virtue as a deputy *en mission* with the Army of the Eastern Pyrenees was severely damaged by his action in sending General d'Aoust before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Kuscinski declares that Milhaud's adroit changes of political allegiance in the years between 1793 and 1815 would by rights have earned him a place in the *Dictionnaire des girouettes*: A. Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire des Conventionnels* (Yvelines, 1973), 455-57.

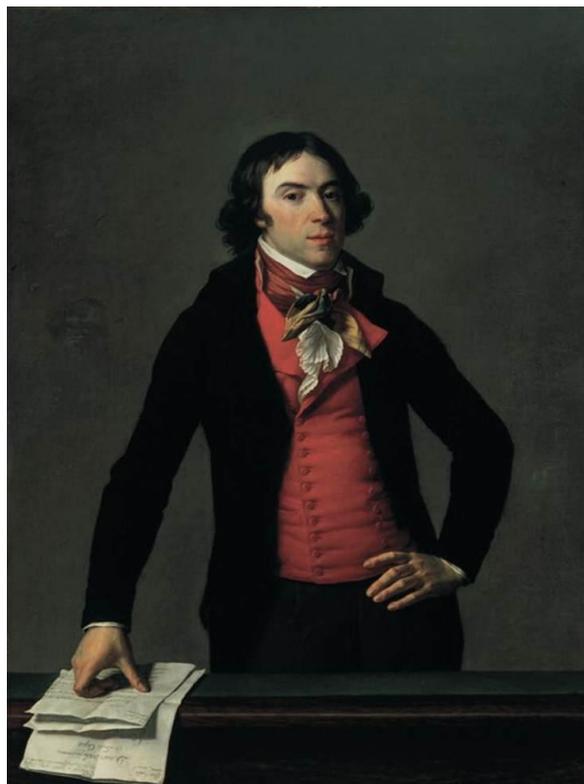


Figure 4 Jean-Louis Laneuville, “Portrait of Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac (1793-1794). © Wikimedia Commons, Kunsthalle Bremen.



Figure 5 School of David, “Portrait of Édouard-Jean-Baptiste Milhaud, deputy of the Convention, in his uniform of Representative of the People to the Armies” (1793-1794). © Wikimedia Commons, Chateau of Vizille.

There was a particular problem in representing political leaders in stone, in the form of busts or full-length statues. Stone indicated permanence: a durability that lasted beyond death; an identity that was no longer subject to alteration by human frailties and the vicissitudes of a life still being lived. Busts recalled the heroes of antiquity. To allow oneself to be depicted in a way that self-consciously emulated the ‘great men’ of antiquity could be problematic. A living man who permitted himself to be represented in stone was understood to be fixing his reputation in the public mind, and thereby making a bid for political power. Early in the Revolution this was still an acceptable tactic, though one to be pursued cautiously. During 1790 there was a small industry devoted to the manufacturing of busts of Mirabeau, many of which found their way into provincial Jacobin clubs. However, when evidence of Mirabeau’s corruption began to mount up, this helped to discredit the whole idea of busts of living politicians. As Brissot expressed this, “no statues before death.”³⁰

A common revolutionary practice was the ritualized destruction of busts of political leaders following the collapse of their reputations. Pauline Léon, a leading woman *sans-culotte*, when imprisoned and defending her conduct, listed amongst the actions she had taken for the revolutionary cause that: “In the month of February 1791, I went with several citizens and patriots, my friends, to Fréron’s house, where we broke and threw out of the windows the bust of Lafayette, which was in the apartment.”³¹

A similar process was enacted in the ritualized treatment, first of Mirabeau and subsequently Marat, as their remains were first interred in the Panthéon, dedicated to “great men” of the *patrie*, and later ejected.³² There was considerable disquietude about the process of placing the remains of a man in the Panthéon in the immediate aftermath of his death. Considering how quickly reputations rose and fell in revolutionary politics this was an understandable precaution. There was consensus that there should be an interval between a revolutionary leader’s death and the decision to formally honor him, though there was some uncertainty as to how long that gap should be. On 10 May 1793 Danton proposed that no one “could enter the Panthéon until twenty years after his death.”³³ Following the decree granting the honors of the Panthéon to Marat, Romme asked that the decree banning the Panthéon “until ten years after a person’s death” be revoked. Yet L. J. Charlier opposed this proposal, stating that whilst he supported making an exception in the case of Marat, the decree should be retained as a general principle, and that “we should submit the public lives of republicans to the surveillance of opinion” before deciding whether to honor them.³⁴ So Marat’s treatment remained an exception to the rule.

After the declaration of war in April 1792, the risks inherent to the Republic in a political leader being allowed to acquire personal glory on the battlefield became a source of major anxiety. In ancient Rome many political leaders had also been military leaders. In revolutionary France this was a dangerous combination. Between the summer of 1792 and the summer of 1794, a militarily beleaguered France badly

³⁰ Brissot, *Le Patriote français*, No. 745, 24 August 1791.

³¹ Léon’s statement of 4 July 1794 is cited and translated in Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson, eds, *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795: Selected Documents* (Chicago, 1979), 159.

³² Jean-Claude Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris, 1998).

³³ *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, ed. M. J. Madival et al, 127 vols (Paris, 1862-1972), 64: 782. From here on referred to as *Archives Parlementaires*.

³⁴ 14 November 1793, 24 Brumaire, *Archives Parlementaires*, 79: 212 and 226.

needed effective army officers. But the revolutionary leaders suspected that much of the officer corps, many of whom were still from the ranks of the former nobility, cared more for personal glory than for public service. After the treason (as the revolutionaries saw it) of Lafayette, and the even more traumatic betrayal by Dumouriez, a key task of the deputies was to keep a watchful eye on France's generals, many of whom were arrested and several executed.

During the height of the Republic it was actively dangerous to be seen to embody in one man the virtues of the political leader with the glory of the victor in battle. Whilst several of the deputies *en mission*, sent out by the Convention to oversee military operations, joined in the fighting at various critical junctures, their fighting prowess and heroism were deliberately downplayed in public accounts of these events. Deputies regularly invoked the Roman aristocrat, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, whose conduct was seen as an acceptable model for combining both political and military power. Cincinnatus became a temporary dictator and military leader only because the senate called upon him to do so in a crisis. Given the opportunity he chose virtue over glory, and ruled for a matter of days, returning promptly at the earliest opportunity to his farm, the country life, and humble obscurity.

During the Year II the cult of Brutus reached new heights.³⁵ The decoration of the meeting place of the Convention reflected the importance of Brutus as a model for deputies to emulate. A bust of Brutus, probably modeled on the 'Capitoline Brutus', was placed in front of the speakers on the rostrum where deputies stood to speak (fig. 6). It was replaced for a few months by the bust of Marat. Around the hall were painted images, or bas reliefs of Brutus (along with other leading Romans, Cincinnatus, Camillus and Publicola, and Greeks, Demosthenes, Lycurgus, Solon and Plato), so that as the speakers addressed the Convention there was no escape from the model of Brutus, and the exhortation that they too, should be men of virtue.³⁶ In time the heroes of the classical past were joined by two of the Revolution's own "political martyrs," Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau and Marat.³⁷ Both had been assassinated for their political beliefs. The rituals and symbolism surrounding their funerals and subsequent commemoration tell us much about how the Revolution envisaged its heroes.

³⁵ David Lloyd Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution* (New York, 1948); and William Vaughan and Helen Weston, eds, *Jacques-Louis David's Marat* (Cambridge, 2002).

³⁶ A description of the Convention was given by Dulaure in his journal, *Le thermomètre du jour*, 13 May 1793. See also Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (1937: this edition, New York, 1965), 147-48. On the positioning of the bust of Brutus in the Convention, see Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution*, 97, 116. See also Guillaume Fonkenell, *Le Palais des Tuileries* (Arles, 2010), 126-31; and Emil Kaufmann, *Architecture in the Age of Reason: Baroque and Post Baroque in England, Italy, France* (New York, 1955), 205-6. My thanks to Timothy Alves for discussions of the decoration of the *Salle des Machines*.

³⁷ On the impact of the deaths of Lepeletier and of Marat on the deputies. See Linton, *Choosing Terror*, chap. 6.

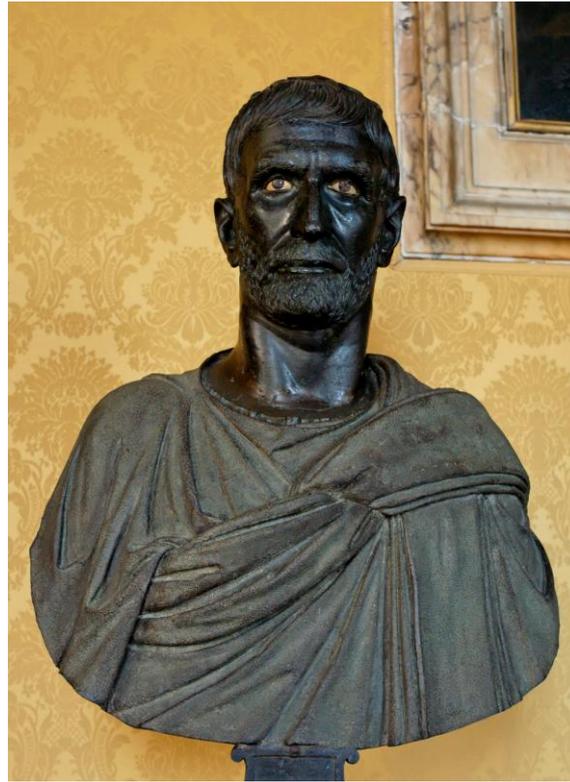


Figure 6 “Capitoline Brutus”, n.d. © Wikimedia Commons, Capitoline Museum, Rome.

The naked body of Lepeletier, covered only in a sheet, was displayed publicly at the Place Vendôme, on top of the foundations where an equestrian statue to the glory of Louis XIV had recently stood. Lepeletier’s bust was placed next to that of Brutus in the Convention.³⁸ Later David’s iconic paintings of the dead Marat and the dead Lepeletier were displayed for a time in the courtyard of the Louvre, arranged on sarcophagi (figs 7 and 8). The embargo against visual depictions of political leaders which might glorify them did not apply to a dead revolutionary who was in no position to capitalize on the public praise now heaped upon him. Deputies were told that they should envy Lepeletier and Marat for achieving “so glorious an end.”³⁹ On the other hand, there was potentially much to be gained by living political leaders who could appropriate Marat’s posthumous reputation. For this reason, Robespierre, Danton and several other Jacobins were reluctant to use the term ‘glory’ with respect to Marat.⁴⁰

³⁸ Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic*, 100-1.

³⁹ 14 November 1793, *Archives Parlementaires*, 79: 204.

⁴⁰ On the ways in which different groups sought to exploit the heroic image of Marat for their own purposes, see Germani, *Jean-Paul Marat*, esp. 50-52, 149-63.

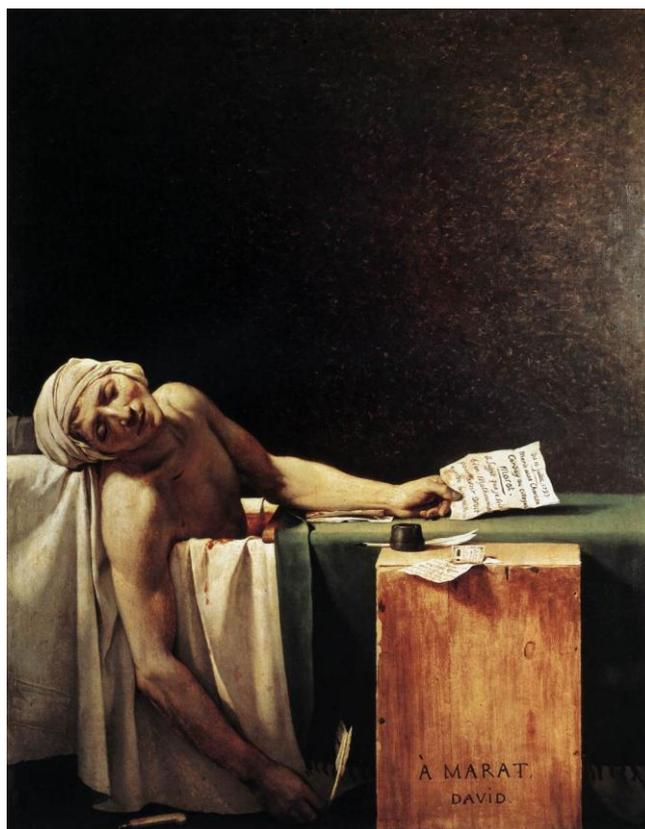


Figure 7 Jacques-Louis David, “The Death of Marat” (1793). © Wikimedia Commons, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.

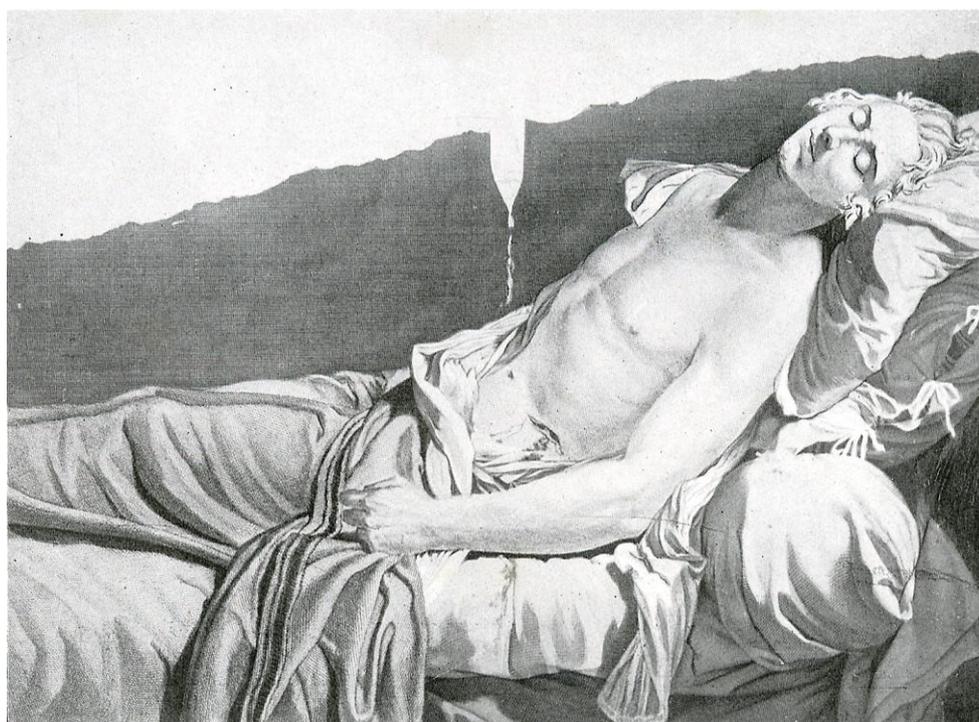


Figure 8 Anatole Desvoge, engraving after Jacques-Louis David, “The last moments of Lepeletier” (1793). © Wikimedia Commons, Charles Saunier David (photographer).

On 14 November 1793 (24 Brumaire, an II), David presented his painting of the dead Marat to the Convention, where it joined that of Lepeletier.⁴¹ The paintings were hung in the Convention on either side of the president's rostrum, Marat to the viewer's left, Lepeletier to the viewer's right.⁴² David addressed the Convention on the effect he intended his art to have upon the viewer, "...it is by making on the mind a profound impression, similar to reality. It is thus that the traits of heroism, of civic virtues offered to the regard of the people will electrify its soul..."⁴³ The deputies would look upon the representations of the butchered deputies and understand that their own flesh was equally vulnerable: this could be their own fate: "It is to you, my colleagues, that I offer the homage of my brushes; your gaze, passing over Marat's livid and blood-stained features, will remind you of his virtues, which must never cease to be your own."⁴⁴

The message was clear: the blades of assassins were close at hand, and virtuous politicians must be prepared to sacrifice their lives for the *patrie*. The paintings were intended to inspire the deputies with thoughts of heroic virtue, but the daily sight of them may also have helped to make the deputies anxious and uneasy, though this fear was unacknowledged – because true virtue was meant to be fearless – or sublimated into rhetoric about the devotion to the *patrie*. In addition, both these paintings demonstrated to the deputies that as public officials they were obliged to be readily accessible to the public, and therefore run the risk that someone would seize an opportunity to kill them.⁴⁵

It was formally decreed that David's paintings could never be removed from the hall of the Convention. But times changed, and the Revolution's heroes changed too. The paintings were removed on 9 February 1795, on the grounds that they contravened "public order." Some women in the galleries tried to prevent this happening, and to retain the erstwhile heroes in their places of honor. The women's shouts were drowned out by cries of "Vive la république" and "Down with the furies of the guillotine."⁴⁶

Thus the model of the man of virtue was intensely problematic for the men who tried to practice it. Paradoxically, there was vulnerability about the man of virtue that contrasted with the original derivation of the word *vir* – as an intrinsically masculine quality. Civic virtue was potentiality at odds with many forms of endeavor that we might see as particularly masculine – with the warrior seeking personal glory on the battlefield or with the man who was ambitious to forge a name for himself in

⁴¹ David presented the painting of Lepeletier to the Convention on 29 March 1793.

⁴² On Lepeletier's portrait, see Donna M. Hunter, "Swordplay: Jacques-Louis David's painting of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau on His Deathbed," in James A. W. Heffernan, ed., *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art* (New England, 1992). On subsequent representations of the dead Marat, see Bonnet, *La mort de Marat*; and Mazeau, *Le Bain de l'histoire*. See also the documents in Jacques Guilhaumou, ed., *La Mort de Marat* (Paris, 1989). On the hanging of these portraits in the Convention, see Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic*, 107-8.

⁴³ Cited and translated in Dowd, *Pageant Master of the Republic*, 79.

⁴⁴ 14 November 1793, *Archives Parlementaires*, 79: 211-2.

⁴⁵ On the ways that the Jacobin leaders reacted to the risks of assassination, see Marisa Linton, "The Stuff of Nightmares: Plots, Assassinations, and Duplicity in the Mental World of the Jacobin Leaders, 1793-1794," in David Andress, ed., *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2013).

⁴⁶ Cited in Hunter, "Swordplay", 187.

the world of politics. There were tensions about the extent to which deputies could assume more openly aggressive models of masculinity, whilst still being ‘men of virtue’.

With the deputies who served *en mission*, the situation was different. Here a more active heroism was required for civilian representatives who worked alongside the armies. Their principal role was to facilitate military operations, to organize supplies and the movement of troops. Sometimes they joined in the fighting, wielding swords and riding horses, though they were rarely depicted in that way, not in their lifetimes. The deputies *en mission* were relatively unprotected. Most travelled with only a few companions: a secretary and one or two others. They risked their lives in more ways than one. They could be beaten up, taken hostage, or imprisoned. Four died in the service of the Republic. Although there was praise of their heroism, none was accorded the honors of the Panthéon.⁴⁷ Yet misadventures and dangers were commonplace. Thus, Augustin Robespierre along with fellow deputy, Ricord, and Augustin’s sister, Charlotte, was subject to an inept ambush and a threatening community at Manosque. They were forced to flee for their lives up into the mountains; though they subsequently returned and established amicable relations with the local inhabitants.⁴⁸

Deputies *en mission* had the power of the Convention and its laws to back them, but sometimes this could only be enforced retrospectively. The most serious instance of this retrospective ‘justice’ occurred when Léonard Bourdon was attacked in Orléans on 16 March 1793. He escaped death. But nine men implicated in the attack were condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal in one of the first instances of the legalized terror in Paris. They went to their deaths wearing the red shirts of parricides for an attack on a representative of the National Convention, on 13 July, the very day that Marat had his fatal encounter with Charlotte Corday.⁴⁹

Another encounter, with a happier outcome, occurred the following year. When Saint-Just and his colleague, Le Bas traveling *en mission* arrived at Saint-Pol on 6 Pluviôse. Despite showing their passports, they were dragged from their carriage and manhandled by suspicious guards. Their identity finally established, Saint-Just and Le Bas promptly ordered the arrest of the unfortunate members of the surveillance committee of Saint-Pol, though the deputies relented four days later and released the prisoners.⁵⁰

The effort of trying to maintain the identity of a man of virtue could set up internal conflict. Saint-Just showed signs of that inner tension. This is evident in his handling of the reporting of the battle of Fleurus on 26 June 1794. The French victory at Fleurus effectively ended the threat that the foreign powers would overrun France. It thus obviated the need both for the Jacobin government to remain in power, and for the recourse to terror to support a campaign of military defense. Fleurus also began to open up the possibility of a new model of conduct for political leaders – one based on the military glory of charismatic individuals. Saint-Just chose to repudiate this possibility, continuing to model his conduct on the self-effacing example of Cincinnatus. He declined to make political capital out of his presence at Fleurus by

⁴⁷ Michel Biard, *Missionnaires de la République: Les représentants du peuple en mission (1793-1795)* (Paris, 2002), 117-29.

⁴⁸ Mary Young, *Augustin: The Younger Robespierre* (London, 2011), 96-101. See also Biard, *Missionnaires*, 119.

⁴⁹ For a detailed study of the politics of this event, see Michael J. Sydenham, *Léonard Bourdon: The Career of a Revolutionary, 1754-1807* (Waterloo, 1999), chap. 7.

⁵⁰ Jean-Pierre Gross, *Saint-Just: sa politique et ses missions* (Paris, 1976), 478-79.

delivering the official report on it. Instead he kept silent in the Convention and let Barère, his colleague on the Committee of Public Safety, make the report. According to Barère (admittedly a not necessarily reliable source) he had “begged Saint-Just” to give the report on Fleurus, but this Saint-Just refused to do: “He was self-absorbed and seemed discontented.”⁵¹ The constraints of this self-abnegating role evidently rankled with Saint-Just. In his final speech, on 9 Thermidor, Saint-Just twice referred to his frustration at the way in which the public reporting of Fleurus had been handled:

It is only those who take part in the battles who win them, and it is only the people in power that profit from them; what we should do is praise the victories, and be forgetful of ourselves.... They announced the victory of Fleurus, whilst others, who had been present, said nothing; they reported on the sieges, whilst others, who said nothing, had been there, in the trenches.⁵²

Saint-Just never got to speak these words. Within moments of him stepping up to the rostrum to begin his speech, he was denounced by fellow Jacobins, who used the language of authenticity and dissimulation, integrity and corruption: the same rhetoric that he himself had previously deployed to denounce other revolutionary leaders. By the following day both his reputation and his life had become co-lateral casualties of the coup that destroyed Robespierre.

The rhetoric of heroism was not just a way of cynically manipulating others. Heroism could also serve as a narrative whereby revolutionaries might make sense of their own lives and the choices they had made. Some of Saint-Just’s most striking pronouncements, which he confided to private notes meant for himself alone, may have been written in part to help him structure his own narrative out of the agonizing political circumstances in which the revolutionary leaders were embroiled in the final months of the Jacobin Republic. In these personal notes he could contribute to the shaping of his own identity by writing the conclusion to the narrative of his life – one in which he played the part of the hero. Everyone, after all, is the hero of his or her own story. Maybe he also wrote in part to give himself courage – that quality which is the prerequisite of any hero. In those last weeks he wrote several times about his own reputation and anticipated that his death would not be long in coming. He confided to his notebook his readiness to sacrifice himself “for the *patrie*”, stating that, “I have nothing more before my eyes than the path that separates me from my dead father and the steps of the Panthéon.”⁵³

In 1913, François-Léon Sicard created a monumental sculpture for the Panthéon, known as the *Autel de la Convention Nationale* or *The Republican Altar* (fig. 9). Tellingly, it was not dedicated to the glory of any one man, but to the deputies as a collective. The Republic is personified as a woman and stands at the center. To one side are deputies swearing an oath of loyalty to the Republic: they include Robespierre, Danton and Desmoulins. On the other side, amongst soldiers of the Republic, is a deputy *en mission*, in military mode, on horseback – Saint-Just. It had taken 119 years, but they had finally achieved the public acknowledgement of a heroic identity, through the apotheosis of the Panthéon.

⁵¹ Bertrand Barère, *Memoirs of Bertrand Barère*, trans. De V. Payen-Payne, 4 vols (London, 1896), 2: 130-31; also 123-25.

⁵² “Discours du 9 Thermidor, an II,” in Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Michèle Duval (Paris, 1989), 911, 917.

⁵³ *Fragments on Republican Institutions*, in Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1008.



Figure 9 François-Louis Sicard, “Autel de la Convention Nationale” (1913). © Wikimedia Commons, Panthéon, Paris.

The fall of Robespierre began a period of transition between the politics of virtue and the politics of glory. Both Saint-Just and Robespierre had warned of the possibility that the escalation of the war and the growth of the French armies might see the emergence of a Julius Caesar rather than a Cincinnatus. Such a man would base his public image not on self-effacing political virtue, but on the traditional military qualities of courage, leadership, and glory. A short distance from the Panthéon stands Les Invalides, within which rests the monumental tomb that commemorates just such a man: a man who did not shrink from taking power in his own hands. Napoleon Bonaparte proved himself not only adept at exploiting the language of the ‘man of virtue’ when it suited his purposes, but also, when the opportunity came, prepared to seize the moment to emerge as France’s ‘man of glory’(fig. 10).



Figure 10 Jacques-Louis David, “Napoleon crossing the Alps” (1802-03). © Wikimedia Commons, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.