

The Making of Maximilien: Robespierre's Childhood, 1758-69

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The greatest challenge for the historian—how to write of the past as if it was the present rather than simply reading history backwards—is particularly acute for the biographer. Since we know at least the broad outlines of an individual's life, it is tempting—and perhaps unavoidable—for us to construct a life as if its stages were neatly arranged stepping-stones rather than encounters with circumstances beyond one's control and choices whose consequences were unknowable. For no other individual in history is this challenge sharper than for Maximilien Robespierre, for as soon as he died at the age of thirty-six people rushed to vilify him as much as he had been lionized while alive, and projected onto him actions based on hearsay or their own guilt. Ever since, historians have also been divided over his stature and achievements as much as they have been divided over the meaning of the Revolution which he has been seen to incarnate.¹

English biographers have been particularly antipathetic, their judgments epitomized in 1895 by Lord Acton who famously dismissed Robespierre as “the most hateful character in the forefront of history since Machiavelli reduced to a code the wickedness of public men.”² Recently, Hilary Mantel has described him as “a fissiparous bundle of contradictions,” in his inconsistent attitudes to war, capital punishment, “the people” and government institutions. He reminds Mantel of “the conviction of [Islamic] militants, their rage for purity, their willingness to die,” just as he reminds David Andress and Lynn Hunt instead of the readiness of Tony Blair and

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¹ William Doyle and Colin Haydon, “Robespierre: after two hundred years,” in *Robespierre*, ed. Colin Haydon and William Doyle (Cambridge, 1999), 3-16, is a good summary of the historiographical debate. See, too, George Rudé, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (London, 1975), Part II; J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1988), 595-633, and Colin Lucas, “Bibliographical Note,” in *ibid.*, 635-40.

² J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London, 1952), 153.

George Bush to suspend civil liberties in the name of a war on terror.³ Others have seen him as a precursor to Stalin, Hitler or Ahmadinejad. Few biographers have attempted, like his most recent biographer Ruth Scurr, “to be his friend and to see things from his point of view,” and even she confesses at the outset that she finds him a “mediocre figure strutting and fretting on the historical stage,” narcissistic, and “remarkably odd.”⁴

The antipathy of British historians in particular may be seen to stem from two unacknowledged sources of rancor: the overthrow and execution of the monarch (forgetting British history in 1649), and the military success of the Revolution against the coalition forces, including the British, by mid-1794. While the territorial expansion sought by the Directory and Empire would ultimately end in thorough defeat in 1815, the central achievements of the Revolution in remaking French politics and society had been won by the armies of the Republic mobilized by the Terror in 1792-94. Implicit in much of the hostile biography has been the premise that the Revolution should have ended in 1791 when France was a constitutional monarchy. Louis’ own actions in June of that year would, however, make that impossible.

On the French left, in contrast, he is seen as a reminder of what has been forgotten about militant commitment to social justice, exemplified in Michel Vovelle’s 1988 speech in Arras, “Pourquoi nous sommes toujours Robespierristes” (“Why we are still Robespierrists”). Much of the positive biography has been either hagiography or an attempt to justify the Incorruptible against his detractors, led by the energetic—and successful—campaign of the Arras-based *Amis de Robespierre pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution* to rehabilitate his name locally. A common premise has been that all of Robespierre’s actions were logical, proportional and necessary responses to counter-revolution. When some of those actions seem too uncomfortable or difficult to explain, biographers have fallen back on the justification that the excesses of the Terror were as nothing compared to what working people had suffered for centuries, as if writing biography and history is a tally sheet of good and evil. So, for Claude Mazauric, Robespierre is the man of peace and principle in 1792, who “submitted” to the needs of the revolutionary state in assuming its leadership in the direst of circumstances. Robespierre’s view of the Terror would always be “without excess” and “devoid of sacrificial and impassioned verbiage.” “There is nothing in Robespierre’s actions which could lead to the idea that he failed to be the people’s mandatory, in which rests all his glory and destiny.”⁵

Historians have also been divided about the ways in which his childhood may be used to explain the extraordinary trajectory of his last few years: in 2008, 250 years after Robespierre’s birth, the circumstances of his earliest years polarize biographers as much as the Terror does. It is true that relatively little is known of the first thirty-one of his thirty-six years, and few biographies have lingered over such evidence as we do have: it is the five years of Revolution that beckons. One of the difficulties in

³ Hilary Mantel, “If you’d seen his green eyes,” *London Review of Books*, April 20, 2006, 3; Lynn Hunt, “For Reasons of State,” *The Nation*, May 29, 2006, 28; David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (London, 2005), 375-76. One Australian blog in 2007 likened him to the Federal Attorney-General Philip Ruddock, then widely characterized as rigid, cold-hearted and even cruel in his treatment of asylum-seekers: http://www.bilegrip.com/archives/2005/11/like_robepierr.html

⁴ Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London, 2006), 5, 7, 207.

⁵ Claude Mazauric, “Présentation,” *Œuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre*, 10 vols. (Paris, 2000), 1: xviii-xxix. See James Friguglietti, “Rehabilitating Robespierre: Albert Mathiez and Georges Lefebvre as defenders of the Incorruptible,” in Haydon and Doyle, eds., *Robespierre*, 212-23. The levels of animus among French historians are explored—and exemplified—by François Crouzet, “French historians and Robespierre,” in Haydon and Doyle, eds., *Robespierre*, 255-83.

writing about Robespierre is that we have little by way of personal papers. Even his surviving letters were effectively political reports, as if his life after 1789 was politics pure and simple. We have no diaries or personal reflections. Many of his papers were evidently destroyed by his sister Charlotte in 1815, anxious to avoid incrimination in the aftermath of Napoleon's final defeat and the return of the Bourbons.⁶

Most accounts of his life devote no more than a chapter to his life and formation between 1758 and 1789, as if the first thirty-one years of his life do not really matter. Nevertheless, his reactions to the unfolding drama, achievements and horror of 1789-94 were not those of an innocent: he brought to his participation in the Revolution values and beliefs that had developed across three decades of family, schooling and work. Far from his life before 1789 being "less than remarkable," in the words of Ruth Scurr, it is remarkable and instructive in every way. What can we say about his early childhood in particular which might help us understand better the country town lawyer who arrived in Versailles at the age of thirty-one in 1789?

Maximilien-Marie-Isidore Derobespierre was born and baptized in the parish of La Madeleine, Arras on 6 May to François Derobespierre, a lawyer, and Jacqueline Carraut, daughter of a brewer.⁷ A family drama had played out in the months beforehand, however, for Jacqueline had been five months pregnant with Maximilien at the time of her marriage on 2 January, and François' parents had refused to attend the ceremony. This may have been from the shame or embarrassment of such a marriage in a relatively small town dominated by its ecclesiastical establishment; or from vexation at the results of François' notoriously improper, even dissolute, behavior. For François—one of eight children—was the black sheep of a reputable and distinguished judicial dynasty.

The Derobespierre or de Robespierre lineage may be traced back to Robert de Robespierre from Ruitz near Béthune, a *bailli* (legal officer) for the seigneur of Vaudricourt in the 1460s. During the following century the de Robespierres established themselves as merchants in Lens, twenty kilometers from Arras, working as grocers and hoteliers. But from another Robert de Robespierre (1591-1663), who ended a career as a legal official as the royal notary ten kilometers further north at Carvin, the men of the family were part of a long line of men of the law, working as much for the royal and seigneurial system as in private practice.

The Robespierre family was therefore long established in Artois. Traces of it also exist in Flanders, at Gand, but it was primarily centered on Carvin, which would become a sprawling mining town in the nineteenth century, but in the eighteenth was a small administrative centre. Maximilien's grand-father was also called Maximilien and named in honor of the family's protector, Robert-Maximilien de Briois, *gouverneur* of the principality of Épernoy. In 1722 he moved from Carvin to Arras as a lawyer at the Conseil d'Artois. There *maître* Maximilien became solidly embedded in the legal and clerical world of the city, and all eight of his children would be baptized in the parish church of Saint-Aubert, in the heart of Arras' administrative and legal *quartier*. It was in that church on 2 January 1758 that his son Maximilien-Barthélemy-François married Jacqueline-Marguerite Carraut of the parish of Saint-Jean de Ronville.⁸

Despite the common use of the prefix "de," the de Robespierres were not nobles, but they were embedded in the structures of power, privilege and wealth of

⁶ Frank Tallett, "Robespierre and religion," in Haydon and Doyle, eds., *Robespierre*, 92-108.

⁷ Amis de Robespierre pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution (hereafter ARBR) *Bulletin* no. 2, Jan. 1988.

⁸ Emile Lesueur, "Avertissement," *Œuvres complètes*, 1:197-205.

Artésien society.⁹ Since the definitive annexation of Artois by the French monarchy in 1659, the province had flourished through its wealth as a grain and textile producer. As its judicial and ecclesiastical capital, and as home to one of the largest grain markets in the country, Arras was at the centre of that long boom. The gothic bell tower of this “city of a hundred steeples” dominated its flat hinterland, with a cathedral and eleven parish churches for its 22,500 inhabitants, the great Abbey of Saint-Vaast (with some 555,000 *livres* of rents) as well as eleven convents and seven monasteries, and other religious institutions and hospitals. The cathedral chapter had thirty-nine canons, forty-four *chapelains* and eleven curates, and an annual income of 150,000 *livres* from rents, tithes and dues. In all, 4 percent of the population was composed of religious.

Young Maximilien’s landscape was not dominated by the abbey of Saint-Vaast and the cathedral, as would be that of generations before and after, for Cardinal Arman de Rohan had resolved to demolish the entire sprawling ensemble, including the church in which Maximilien had been baptized. Until the age of eleven, his immediate physical environment would be dominated by what has been described as the most ambitious ecclesiastical building project of the century.

The other great landowners from the fifty resident great noble families had begun erecting the elegant townhouses which continue to give Arras its distinctive style today, despite the damage done during World War I. This was a provincial capital like many others of the eighteenth century, in which the institutions of the First and Second Estates supervised, administered and expended the income from their vast rural estates. Around Arras the nobility owned perhaps 30 percent of land, and the bishopric, cathedral chapter and abbeys another 20 percent. The Robespierres were among those who serviced and depended on the structures of ecclesiastical and seigneurial power. Since they did not own farmland they did not, however, benefit directly from the boom in grain production and land prices of the second half of the century.

On Robespierre’s mother’s side, the Carrauts were from a less comfortable and distinguished lineage, even if they were as solidly Artésien as the de Robespierres. They first appear in parish records in the little village of Hestrus, then as weavers in Etrun, just seven kilometers from Arras. Maximilien’s grandfather Jacques François (1701-78) was a brewer who in 1732 married Marie Marguerite (1693-1775), daughter of a *lieutenant-fermier* in Lattre-Saint-Quentin, fifteen kilometers from Arras. When a child, Maximilien sometimes visited the hamlet of Bel-Avesnes near Lattre-Saint-Quentin, fifteen kilometers south of Arras, where it seems that the family had kept a property.¹⁰

Despite the inauspicious beginnings of their married life, François and Jacqueline had a fecund relationship and, after Maximilien, Jacqueline gave birth in quick succession to Charlotte, Henriette and Augustin (1763). The following year, 1764, at the age of six, Maximilien caught smallpox, leaving him with a permanently pockmarked face. The same year, tragedy struck very hard at the young family: Jacqueline, aged twenty-nine, and a fifth child both died during childbirth on 14 July.

It seems that François did not attend his wife’s funeral. In December of that year he took a position at Oisy-le-Verger (twenty-four kilometers east of Arras) as *grand bailli* of the *châtellenie* of the Comté d’Oisy and the *seigneuries* of Sauchy-Cauchy and Rumaucourt. After this position ended in July 1765 he was again

⁹ The description that follows draws primarily on Alain Nolibos, *Arras: de Nemetucam à la communauté urbaine* (Lille, 2003), 86-101.

¹⁰ ARBR *Bulletin* no. 11, Oct. 1991.

conducting legal cases in Arras in 1765 and 1766. His affairs seem to have deteriorated, for he had to borrow 700 *livres* from his sister and give up his part of his mother's estate when she died in 1770. He was by then at Mannheim, he returned to conduct a score of cases at Arras in 1771-72. There is no trace of him in the local records for the next five years and he died in Munich in 1777.¹¹

Robespierre's paternal aunts Marie and Aimable, then in their late twenties, looked after Henriette and Charlotte and they usually saw Maximilien and Augustin at the Carrauts on Sundays. Very little is known of the financial circumstances of the Carrauts, although they maintained an independent business in the heart of the city. So, while born into a long line of *robins*, as lawyers and prosecutors, Maximilien was brought up in a milieu of manual work unloading sacks of grain amid the noise of workers and coaches in the *quartier* of Ronville.¹² In 1765 Maximilien was sent to the Collège d'Arras. This was a church school: the teachers were priests, and the bishop was on the governing council which had administered the school since the expulsion of the Jesuits from France in 1762.

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 the temptation. After all, he may have been the offspring of a couple who had only married from social necessity. A loved mother had died in childbirth when he was just six, leaving him as the oldest child of four who were then split up between the families of relatives. His father, often described as unstable or dissolute, may never have seen his children again, even though he spent some months in later years conducting legal cases in Arras. 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?

The most elaborate recent psychological reading of Robespierre's childhood along these lines is by Laurent Dingli, who went so far as to liken him to Hitler on national radio. So, according to Dingli, "Aged six, Maximilien suffers terribly from this loss. How could anyone doubt that?" Dingli articulates the view of a traumatized little boy who has lost a loved mother (who nevertheless took no notice of him because she was preoccupied with having more children) and was then abandoned by a "lunatic, dissipated" father. This is why he would always be particularly susceptible to what he saw as treachery or corruption, and why he would always be obsessed by a dream of an ancient world peopled by heroes.¹³

There is no doubt that the child Maximilien inhabited a world dominated by women, whether his mother or his aunts. For Claude Mazauric Robespierre was above all influenced by Rousseau: the women of his life matched his idealized femininity of Sophie in *Émile* or Julie in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and that was the psychological basis of a life dedicated to the values of the Savoyard curate in *Émile*.¹⁴ In contrast, Dingli and others have seen in the sadness of his childhood trauma the seeds of an incapacity to develop intimate relationships, even of phobias. His obsessional character is revealed by his fastidious appearance and toilet, a horror of bodily corruption which would repel him from physical intimacy. "Everything which evoked human desire—sexuality, material or romantic possession—was a synonym of decay."¹⁵

¹¹ ARBR *Bulletin* no. 2, Jan. 1988.

¹² ARBR *Bulletin* no. 10, Apr. 1991.

¹³ Laurent Dingli, *Robespierre* (Paris, 2004), 11-19.

¹⁴ Mazauric, "Présentation," xx-xxiii.

¹⁵ Dingli, *Robespierre*, 23, 35, 435.

Jean Artarit is at a psychoanalytic extreme, including the insight that Robespierre's misspelling of "Lantillette" as "L'Anguilette" (baby eel) in an electoral pamphlet shows a longing to cut off his penis. "Lantillette" was the name used by Delmotte, an illiterate *savetier* (cobbler) who became close to Robespierre during the drawing up of his corporation's *cahier* in 1789.¹⁶

There is no clear evidence to provide the basis for such an analysis, which in any case is predicated on the assumption that Maximilien had a fundamentally disturbed character resulting in monstrous actions in 1792-94. More compelling for me is an analysis which suggests 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 also the implication of the one account which we have of his childhood, by his younger sister Charlotte, pieced together before her death in 1834. Her memoirs are riveting, but redolent of her deep affection for her brother and written when she was living an impoverished existence several decades after Maximilien's death, but when his name was anathema. It may have been in response to allegations about her father's reputation that she insisted on "his probity and virtue," and that Jacqueline "was as good a wife as she was a mother"; François was utterly devastated by her death. At the same time, Charlotte recalled—and on this may well be believable—that the death of Maximilien's mother was deeply distressing and made him a rather serious, obedient boy. 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 boisterous games. He adored his pet pigeons and sparrows and was furious when his sisters neglected one of the former, leading to its death.¹⁷

So, how might we describe the child of eleven who was put on the coach for Paris in October 1769? He seems to have been a clever, determined little boy, and perhaps his growing awareness that he might one day be responsible for three younger siblings gave him an added sense of responsibility. His maternal grandparents certainly accepted responsibility for his education: by the time he started attending the Collège d'Arras at the age of six he could apparently already read and write. Maximilien was one of about four hundred boys there, but rapidly distinguished himself: at the age of eleven he was given one of the four scholarships awarded by the abbot of Saint-Vaast to the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, of which the College was an affiliate. Certainly, Robespierre's aunts—those who looked after Charlotte and Henriette—were pious and knew the abbot personally, but there is no reason to suppose that such an important scholarship was awarded on anything but merit.¹⁸

We cannot pretend that we do not know that Robespierre ended up as a household name, the embodiment of the Jacobin revolution. From our perspective, his life seems coherent, every action or reaction part of a logical "character" we have constructed. Robespierre seemed to many of his contemporaries—just as to biographers—to be the Revolution incarnate, and sometimes spoke as if he did indeed represent its purity, and those who had suffered under the Terror or feared its extension rushed to make a further identification of Robespierre and the Terror. Historians have also found convenient such an identification of Robespierre and the Terror.

¹⁶ Jean Artarit, *Maximilien Robespierre ou l'impossible filiation* (Paris, 2003), 79, 81.

¹⁷ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre sur ses deux frères, précédés d'une Introduction de Laponneraye* (1834, rpt. Paris, 1987). See Gabriel Piore and Pierre Labracherie, "Charlotte Robespierre et « Ses Mémoires », " *La Pensée* 88 (1959): 99-108.

¹⁸ Dingli, *Robespierre*, 15.

Robespierre's biography is particularly difficult to write for this reason. Despite the voluminous records pertaining to Robespierre's life, and the richness of anecdotes from those who encountered him, however, his biographer should be honest enough to admit the gaps, silences and ambiguities. Biographers should be wary of the dangers of a crude application of amateur psychology in an attempt to explain someone's actions. Indeed, Freud himself was deeply skeptical. In 1936, when Arnold Zweig asked to write Freud's biography, the great man retorted: "Anyone who writes a biography is committed to lies, concealments, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it."¹⁹ Most of us would have great difficulty in explaining our own actions satisfactorily, let alone someone else's: we know that the explicit rationale we would give for them would hide personal idiosyncrasies of which we are not always aware.

There are, then, particular difficulties in writing of the "private life" and motivations of any individual, and especially someone like Robespierre whose later public importance contrasts with the absence of evidence of his "private" life. Juxtapositions of "public" and "private" behavior which may be suggestive can degenerate into glibness if forced into causality by an inexpert application of the categories of psychobiography. There are also particular difficulties in writing biography for someone like myself trained as a social historian, for social history has generally been characterized by a reduction of the individual to a social product constrained by the environment.²⁰ In the end, however, it is precisely the relationship between individual and society, the general and the particular, uniqueness and generality, which is so fascinating about history in general and biography in particular.

For just as important, although beyond this essay, was that he was both a product of the distinctive social structures of the northeast, with its vast noble and ecclesiastical estates which underpinned a complex of patron-client relations, and yet outside it as an orphan boy raised by *petits bourgeois* wine and grain merchants. This was a world of sharp class antipathies which also produced Fouquier-Tinville, Saint-Just and Babeuf. Rather than Robespierre's childhood offering a playground for psychobiography, my conclusion therefore is that it is best illuminated by being understood within the context of the urban-rural relationships and hierarchies of Artois. This context was to form the core of Robespierre's ideology and political trajectory for the rest of his life.

¹⁹ Cited in Steven Marcus, *Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis: Studies in the Transition from Victorian Humanism to Modernity* (Boston 1984), 208; in general, see Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York, 1985).

²⁰ Lynn Hunt, "Psychoanalysis, the Self, and Historical Interpretation," *Common Knowledge*, 6 (1997): 10-19.