MATTHEW BUCKLEY

"A *Dream* of Murder": *The Fall of Robespierre* and the Tragic Imagination

> ROBESPIERRE. What! did th'assassin's dagger aim its point
> Vain, as a *dream* of murder, at my bosom?
> —Coleridge & Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre* i.ii.6–7 (1794)

THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF A LARGER STUDY OF THE RAPID AND TURBULENT metamorphosis of the dramatic imagination during the period of the French Revolution.* Within that study, this work explores one crucial moment in that transformation: the immediate impact of the Revolution upon the dramatic imagination of British romanticism.

Much very useful work has been done to understand that impact. Through the work of George Steiner, Ronald Paulson, Mary Jacobus, Jeffrey Cox, Julie Carlson, Terence Alan Hoagwood, Reeve Parker, Marjean Purinton, and William Jewett, for example, we have gained a much clearer sense of the broad trajectory and characteristic tenor of the British romantics' reactions to the Revolutionary experience: their initial enthusiasm for its cause; their sympathetic identification with its participants and their close imaginary participation in its events; their recoiling horror at the Revolution's subsequent violence, and the manner in which that psychological trauma prompted the romantics' characteristic abstraction and historical displacement of Revolutionary themes and concerns.[1]

*The larger study is my forthcoming book, *Tragedy Walks the Streets*, © The Johns Hopkins UP. Article printed by Permission of The Johns Hopkins UP.

1. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (1966 rpt.; New Haven: Yale UP, 1996); Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983); Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989); Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance: Romantic Tragic Drama in Germany, England, and France* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1987), "The French Revolution and Romantic Drama," in *Revolution and English Romanticism*, ed. Keith Hanley & Raman Selden (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990): 241–60, and "Ideology and Genre in the British Antirevolutionary Drama in the 1790s," *ELH* 58 (1992): 579–610 (rpt. in *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays*, ed. Terence

These reactions are expressed, both directly and indirectly, throughout romantic drama: however, they are most powerfully expressed, without doubt, in tragedy, that genre most closely associated with both the political ideals and the violence of the radical Revolution. Indeed, for the central years of the 1790's, tragedy was inextricably set within the implicatory context of Jacobin rhetoric and ideology—and bound up, moreover (as Jacobus has made strikingly clear), with regicide. In consequence, and in a manner matched by no other literary form, tragedy was, for the romantics, a genre bound inextricably to revolutionary experience, to the degree that romantic writers' post-Revolutionary challenge was no longer to write—like the young Schiller—a revolutionary tragedy, but to compose a tragedy that might move beyond, and perhaps redeem, the form's own grim, complicit history, liberating it from the political violence with which it had been so intimately associated. It is for this reason that we find, in tragedy, the most sustained and attenuated expression of that peculiarly romantic displacement of history remarked upon by Jerome McGann: revolutionary experience, as an implicatory context, permeates romantic tragedy, dominating its action and concern to a degree unmatched in other genres, but the French Revolutionary experience, in its historical particularity and local immediacy, appears nowhere. In fact, such pressurized displacement is so pronounced in romantic tragedy that it has been described by Terence Hoagwood as "the central fact about romantic drama."[2]

However, in its investigation of romanticism's engagement with the Revolution, modern scholarship has tended to reiterate that act of displacement: for while it has reminded us of the locality and contingency of the romantics' imaginative responses to the Revolution, it has continued, until quite recently, to elide the locality and materiality of their Revolutionary experience. Indeed, this tendency was precisely that faulted by David Jordan in his review of Ronald Paulson's otherwise immensely useful *Repre-*

Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins); Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); Terence Hoagwood, "Prolegomenon for a Theory of Romantic Drama," *The Wordsworth Circle* 23.2 (1992), rpt. as "Romantic Drama and Historical Hermeneutics," in Hoagwood and Watkins 22–55; Reeve Parker, "Reading Wordsworth's Power: Narrative and Usurpation in *The Borderers*," *ELH* 54.2 (Summer 1987): 299–331, "'In some sort seeing with my proper eyes': Wordsworth and the Spectacles of Paris," *SiR* 27.3 (Fall 1988): 369–90, and "Osorio's Dark Employments: Tricking Out Coleridgean Tragedy," *SiR* 33.1 (Spring 1994): 119–60; Marjean Purinton, *Romantic Ideology Unmasked: The Mentally Constructed Tyrannies in Dramas of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Joanna Baillie* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1994); William Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy: Romantic Drama and the Rhetoric of Agency* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997)

2. Hoagwood cites as examples of romantic drama's historical displacement of revolution Wordsworth's *The Borderers* (set in the period of the Crusades); Byron's *Werner* (central Europe during the Thirty Years' War); Lamb's *John Woodvil*, Shelley's *Charles the First*, and Godwin's *Faulkener* (all set in seventeenth-century England); Coleridge's *Osorio* (sixteenth-

sentations of Revolution: although Paulson offers a highly useful description of contemporary aesthetic responses to the revolution, he treats the revolution itself, Jordan points out, as "some vast, abstract, and amorphous upheaval," not a series of discrete events but a phantasmagoria, an undifferentiated nightmare calling forth "primal images of sex and generation and death and cruelty."[3] The problem is less pronounced, but no less evident, in the more recent work of Jacobus, Cox, Carlson, Hoagwood, and Jewett. There, the local negotiation of the romantics' responses to the Revolution, the complexities of those responses' imaginative and textual articulation, and their change and development within the Revolution have been more amply explored. In such work, the romantic experience of the Revolution has gained particularity and discreteness, but the assumption remains that this experience was, for the most part, unmediated: that the romantics (indeed, all revolutionary spectators) somehow possessed direct, comprehensive knowledge of events unfolding in France, that their meditations upon its philosophy respond directly to the articulation of those ideas in France, and that their nightmare visions of its violence and action were prompted by some direct view of its spectacle. Paulson's tendency to treat the Revolution as amorphous and undifferentiated has been overcome, but it remains here an abstract creation, displaced from the partiality and imperfection of material culture.[4]

At the same time, however, Jeremy Popkin, Jeremy Black, and other scholars of revolutionary print have made quite apparent the simple fact that the lived experience of the French Revolution was—for its participants as well as for its observers, and in a manner that was fundamental to its novelty—emphatically mediated, and that imaginative participation in its events took shape not in direct relation to revolutionary action but in and through a complex, materially distanced, highly local, and localized, process of reception, apprehension, and negotiation.[5] For they remind us that the vast majority of the Revolution's contemporaries learned of its

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century Spain); and Shelley's *The Cenci* (Rome, 1599) ("Prolegomenon for a Theory of Romantic Drama" 51).

3. For Paulson, Jordan observes, "style . . . inhabits a world apart, related but vaguely to the history of the artist's time and place," David P. Jordan, "Paulson's Representations of Revolution" (review), *The Eighteenth Century* 27.2 (1986): 206–208.

4. Parker's work on Wordsworth, however, does explore such issues, situating Wordsworth rather carefully in the milieu of the Revolution. See "Reading Wordsworth's Power" 299–304 and "In some sort seeing with my proper eyes," in which such contextualization is a central concern.

5. Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Jeremy Popkin, *Revolutionary News: the Press in France, 1789–1799* (Durham: Duke UP, 1990); Pierre Retat, "The Revolutionary Word in the Newspaper in 1789," in Popkin, ed., *Media and Revolution: Comparative Perspectives* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1995); Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Claren-

events—*experienced* those events—in, and through the decade's specific, distinguishing print medium: an exploding international political news press, that enormous system of journalistic transmission and broadcast which arose directly with the onset of the French Revolution and which changed entirely, over the course of just a few years, the basic conditions and discursive contexts of historical action and political event. From the start, the events of the Revolution were not only conveyed by this expanding apparatus but shaped by it, and in fundamental fashion, for it was in the newspaper, more often than on the street, that such episodes were given initial narrative and dramatic coherence, assigned larger meaning and import, divvied out and made known to the world as report and story. This shift in the performative and receptive context of historical action was of enormous epistemological and ontological significance, altering basic notions of temporal and historical consciousness that had held force since antiquity. For it was in the rapid establishment of that paradigmatically modern cycle of the newsday, with its mere but inescapable seriality, that one finds the gradual formation of the Nietszchean nightmare of modern history, as historical action begins to be meted out, disenchanted and bounded by, the day-to-day particularity of the daily news. Certainly, such trends have a longer and earlier history, as even a glance toward Addison and Steele make plain. However, the rise of the international daily news press in the decade of the French Revolution expanded vastly—and with shocking quickness—the extent and depth of news journalism's suffusion of social life. As George Steiner noted some time ago, it was specifically the explosion of international news journalism during the Revolution, and not merely the discrete events of Revolutionary politics, epochal as they were, that "plunged ordinary men into the stream of history."

This deeper shift in apprehension and in consciousness is apparent everywhere in the post-Revolutionary period—perhaps most concretely in the history-defying violence of Napoleonic aggression, but also in the period's almost definitive literary and philosophical concern with the possibilities of heroic action in a post-heroic age.[6] Our sense of the larger impact of this shift upon the dramatic imagination is also clear and unmistakable: as critics across the spectrum agree, that change in consciousness eliminated, and quite decisively, it seems, the ontological credibility of tragedy. In the theater, the audience now sat distracted by daily events, and in politics, historical action increasingly took on the continual rhythms of the everyday, and of the banal (Steiner 116).

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don, 1998); Stuart Andrews, *The British Periodical Press and the French Revolution, 1789–99* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

6. For an excellent recent consideration of the problem in relation to romantic drama, see Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy*.

If it is possible to see in the romantic tragedy's displacement of Revolutionary events a traumatic recoil away from the corporeal violence of Revolutionary action and the philosophical collapse of Revolutionary ideals, we must also recognize in such displacement an effort to flee—indeed, to deny, to elide, to escape—this deeper, apprehensive and ontological experience of historical disenchantment. And if we are to understand that experience, to gain some sense of the manner in which that fundamental apprehensive shift affected and found expression in romantic drama, we must look not only at the romantics' own images of revolution and their reflection of events in France, but at the hazy transformative space in between the two—at that emergent apparatus of journalistic representation through which those events were experienced by and made known to their international audience.

In this essay I explore one particularly significant moment in Britain's indirect experience of Revolutionary history: the fall of Robespierre, as it unfolded in the pages of the London *Times* in the spring and summer of 1794. My reasons for focusing on this moment in particular are twofold: first, the 9th of Thermidor, as the events surrounding Robespierre's fall are known, marked the sudden collapse of the Jacobin regime, and, with it, the decisive failure of the radical Revolution's tragic rhetoric of politics.[7] In short, it is with Thermidor that romanticism is faced with the problem of redeeming a poetics irrevocably bound up with a failure and inextricably tied to genocidal delusion.

The second reason to focus upon this moment is more particular, but no less significant: the events of Thermidor prompted the single effort by any major British romantic writer to dramatize, in direct form, the political events of the Revolution. This sole exception to romantic drama's otherwise complete displacement of revolutionary history is *The Fall of Robespierre* (1795) by Coleridge and Robert Southey, an aborted tragedy written in immediate response to the announcement, in the London *Times,* of Robespierre's fall. Although it has until recently received only passing critical attention, *The Fall of Robespierre,* as I'll show, not only records a critical moment in the formation of British romanticism's tragic imagination, but also reflects quite strongly the crucial mediation by the news press in shaping the British experience of revolutionary events.

My discussion begins with a look at the relation between the concept of imagination in British romanticism and the experience of the Revolution, focusing in particular on the way that relation is articulated by and developed through the drama of Coleridge. In the essay's second section I turn

7. The Ninth of Thermidor, as it is known by its date in the Revolutionary calendar, has long been ascribed particularly tragic status in Revolutionary history: it marked the collapse of the radical revolution, the bloody end of the Terror, the evaporation of that Roman tragic "illusion of politics" noted by Marx, and the demise of revolutionary authority.

my attention to the London *Times,* examining both the nature of the *Times'* transmission and representation of news and the paper's particular coverage of events in France during the period leading up to and surrounding 9–10 Thermidor. Finally, I investigate the effect of that coverage on the shape and structure of Coleridge and Southey's *The Fall of Robespierre* and discuss, in closing, the implications of the play's unusual history for our understanding of the French Revolution's impact upon the dramatic imagination of British romanticism.

1. Imagination & British Romantic Tragedy

a. Spectatorship, Sympathy, and Guilt

MACBETH. Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:—
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling, as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshal'st me the way that I was going.
Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (II.i.36–39)

Even in 1795, after the horrific violence of the Terror, Kant could gesture toward the shared ideals of the French Revolution and note that, in terms at least of its tendency toward freedom, the Revolution "finds in the heart of all spectators . . . a wishful participation bordering closely upon enthusiasm."[8] He was describing nothing new, for such "wishful participation" in the Revolution's aspirations had in fact been a marked phenomenon of foreign spectatorship from the very outset of political unrest in France. Indeed, for Wordsworth the extraordinary aims articulated in the early Revolution had not only prompted imaginary participation: they had also, in their sudden and apparent attempt to realize such abstract political ideals, raised the thought that perhaps the imagination itself had begun to emerge from the realm of mere fantasy to imprint its shape upon reality. In 1789 such a possibility seemed welcome, open, light, for "all those who had fed their childhood upon dreams," Wordsworth felt, might now realize those fantasies "[n]ot in Utopia . . . [b]ut in the very world."[9]

As the Revolution turned toward violence, however, the very possibility

8. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties,* trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1979) 153.

9. William Wordsworth 316. As I noted in the preceding chapter, there is good reason to believe that Wordsworth's initial reaction to the July Days as an act of liberatory romance

of some connection between the dreamt and the real—between the imaginary, sympathetic participation of men of feeling and the horrific violence of actual events—became increasingly troubling to those watching the Revolution from afar. If the Revolution suggested the imagination's material power, had sympathetic participation somehow contributed to Revolutionary violence? Had it lent support to, or even pushed to extremes, a cause that might otherwise have stopped short of regicide, of the Terror? If the radical Revolutionaries were regicides in act, were not their foreign spectators accomplices in mind?

As Mary Jacobus has observed, it was in relation to fears of just such a connection that *Macbeth* became a highly-charged play during this period. Not only did the tragedy confront first-generation romantics with a disturbing, offstage regicide—a regicide thus "acted out" in the spectator's imagination: the play also raised, in Macbeth's troubled vision of a murderous dagger, the specter of the potentially murderous power of the imagination. What, after all, is the relation between Macbeth's imagined dagger and the real weapon he draws forth? Does his "dagger of the mind" merely reflect ambitious desire, or does it, as Macbeth fears, usurp the rule of conscience, "marshalling" him toward his murderous crime? (Jacobus 34–35). For Wordsworth, who speaks in *The Prelude* of feeling an involuntary "sympathy with power" during even the height of the Terror, *Macbeth* clearly offered a resonant model for the guilty imagination of Revolutionary sympathy.[10] How could one control such disturbing dreams? How could one dispel them? As Jacobus and other commentators have argued, Wordsworth, in *The Prelude,* turns to his model as a kind of solution, crying out Macbeth's "Sleep no more!" in his own remembrance of Revolutionary murder, and thus moderating his own sense of complicity in narrative gesture that acknowledges, and dispels, the guilt of imagination.[11]

For Coleridge, however, such a sense of imaginative complicity was un-

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was influenced, as many Britons' reaction must have been influenced, by John Dent's hugely popular, romantic rendering of the event at the Royal Circus in August 1789.

10. Nicholas Roe makes this observation, noting that Wordsworth's "effort to damn Robespierre momentarily relaxes at one point [in *The Prelude*] where he admits that even during the 'rage and dog-day heat' of the Terror he had found

> Something to glory in, as just and fit,
> And in the order of sublimest laws.
> And even if that were not, amid the awe
> Of unintelligible chastisement
> [He] felt a kind of sympathy with power—
>
> (x.412–16)"

(*Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* [Oxford, Clarendon, 1988] 221).

11. See Jacobus 39: "The *Macbeth* allusion is the nearest we come to a sense of Wordsworth's complicity—if only the complicity of sympathy—in that regicide."

usually acute and uniquely enduring, as we might well expect given his more impassioned and extreme embrace of its radical politics. Julie Carlson, in what is certainly the most insightful reading of his drama to date, argues that

> Coleridge's is a body wracked by its inability to distinguish phantom from reality; and his is a mind recovering from, by covering over, a jacobin past. Not genius but guilt is what distinguishes Coleridge from his romantic fellows in terms of the politics of theatre. Unlike the second-generation poets, who did not experience the French Revolution as young men, or Wordsworth, who invokes Shakespeare to relieve his terror, only the genius of Coleridge is arrested at the stage of his youthful dreams. (24)

If such "arrest" is extreme, however, it is also exemplary: for it is precisely Coleridge's recurrent concern with such feelings that, in George Steiner's account of romantic tragedy, makes plays such as *Remorse* and *Zapolya* paradigms of romanticism's troubled dramatic imagination. It is in Coleridge's sustained "thematic concern with remorse," Steiner argues, that one finds the clearest expression of "that evasion of the tragic which is central to the romantic temper."[12] One might well read in such evasion a more nuanced version of the displacement that Hoagwood finds so fundamental to romantic drama, and thus link the displacement of romantic drama to such cultural anxieties of complicity in the Revolution's violence—anxieties that Coleridge expressed more powerfully, perhaps, than his contemporaries. However, what Steiner doesn't address at all, and what Carlson treats only in passing, is how Coleridge's sympathies arose, and how they were broken. What sort of wishful participation, and what experience of disillusionment, gave rise to such an enduring dramatic concern with remorse?

b. Coleridge and the Soul of the Tyrant

For Carlson, Coleridge's imaginary participation in the politics of the Revolution is historically diffuse, consisting in nothing more specific than the "youthful dreams" of the poet's early radicalism, of those "days of support for revolution, France, and Napoleon, the times when no apologies are needed for the poet or the man of action—or for the poet as the man of action" (22–23). This was the period, Carlson reminds us, when Coleridge first began to work out his influential distinction between absolute and

12. Steiner 130–33. Of course, not all "guilt" (Carlson) produces a "thematic concern with remorse" (Steiner). However, the viability of such a link in the instance will become evident below. In Steiner's view, such evasion takes form as "near-tragedy," plays in which "four acts of tragic violence and guilt are followed by a fifth act of redemption and innocence regained." The compromise of such redemption, he contends, registers not only a loss of belief in the finality of evil, but also the arrival of melodrama.

commanding genius.[13] Men such as Macbeth—and the French revolutionaries, Napoleon, etc.—were in Coleridge's view commanding geniuses, men impelled to "impress their preconception on the world without."[14] From such men of action Coleridge distinguished absolute geniuses, poet-philosophers who "rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium" (*BL* 1: 32; Carlson 22). While Coleridge's imaginary participation in revolution—his "youthful dreams"—conjoined him to commanding genius, his differentiation and privileging of absolute genius, Carlson argues, define precisely the shift to that enduring refuge in the imaginary which would later mark Coleridge's poetic and dramatic work. That refuge, she points out, is defined fundamentally in Coleridge's later drama, in which the meditation of poet-philosophers is privileged over action—action that itself seems threatening to Coleridge (1–29). Thus, in Carlson's reading, Coleridge appears to have maintained his sympathy for and imaginary participation in radical causes until very late in the 1790s.[15]

Yet, even Coleridge's basic distinction between commanding and absolute genius marks already a conscious concern with the problem of imagination's relation to action, and if Coleridge's dramatic imagination is so strongly marked by lingering guilt it seems unlikely that such guilt would arise *after* the poet had established a self-consciously critical attitude toward the power of the imagination.[16] The initial articulation of that concern with imagination, and in some sense the moment of Coleridge's sympathetic disillusionment, is earlier, more particularly defined, and already delineated in some detail by Nicholas Roe: as Roe has shown, it was Coleridge's "self-recognition in Robespierre" during 1794 that first prompted his consideration of the relation between imagination and action generally, and on the connections between imagination and Revolutionary violence in particular.[17]

13. Jonathan Wordsworth supports this continuity, as (of course) does Roe. Jonathan Wordsworth, "The Infinite I AM," *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver,* ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 28–29.

14. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, Volume 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* Bollingen Series 75 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 1: 32, qtd. in Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism* 22.

15. In other words, until Bonaparte's youthful heroism had been superseded by his bid for power on the 18th Brumaire (November 9, 1799).

16. It is rather curious that Carlson would suggest otherwise, for the result of such oversimplification is that she misses entirely the significance for her own argument of *The Fall of Robespierre.*

17. Roe 210. Roe's discussion of Coleridge's self-recognition in Robespierre forms the central portion of his chapter "Imagining Robespierre," which offers an invaluable discussion of how the figure of the Jacobin leader gave Wordsworth and John Thelwall, as well as Coleridge, a powerful foil to set against the rationalism of William Godwin's *Political Justice.*

For Coleridge, Roe explains, it was Robespierre himself who first offered Coleridge a version of the heroic rebel, a kind of ur-form of commanding genius. Unlike Britain's Pitt, Robespierre was in Coleridge's estimate a leader whose energy and intellect might enable the realization of imagination "in the very world." Yet, the chilling abstractions which structured that imagination ("justice," "virtue," "reason") and the impatience of Robespierre's mind were in Coleridge's view fatal flaws, flaws that had led the Jacobin leader to rationalize murder. As Roe points out, the primary articulation of this portrait appears in Coleridge's "Introductory Address" to his *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), the published version of lectures that Coleridge had delivered at Bristol during that year. "Robespierre," Coleridge asserts,

> possessed a glowing ardor that still remembered the *end,* and a cool ferocity that never either overlooked, or scrupled, the *means.* What that *end* was, is not known; that it was a wicked one, has by no means been proved. I rather think, that the distant prospect, to which he was travelling, appeared to him grand and beautiful; but that he fixed his eye on it with such intense eagerness as to neglect the foulness of the road.[18]

This image of Robespierre as a flawed visionary, as a too-eager genius whose "cool ferocity" leads him to neglect the horrors of the Terror, itself echoes an earlier Coleridgean portrait of Robespierre—a portrait sketched, by no coincidence, in the very opening speech of *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794). There, in lines written just days after Thermidor, the wavering anti-Robespierrist conspirator Barère muses in soliloquy over his fear of "the Tyrant's *soul,*"

> Sudden in action, fertile in resource,
> And rising awful 'mid impending ruins;
> In splendour gloomy, as the midnight meteor,
> That fearless thwarts the elemental war. (5)[19]

In its basic outline of the flawed, heroic rebel, this portrait anticipates that offered in the *Conciones;* in fact, it is if anything even more sympathetic. This soul carries the same incandescent ardor, the same unhesitating ferocity, the same determination to soar upward toward a sublime end, but the unscrupled means and the "foulness of the road," those indirect references to the murderous violence of the Terror, appear in this precedent portrait

18. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion,* ed. L. Patton and P. Mann. Volume 1 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Bollingen Series 75 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 35, qtd. in Roe 208.

19. All references to the play are from Samuel Taylor Coleridge & Robert Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre: 1794,* facsimile edition (Oxford and New York: Woodstock, 1991).

as fertile resources enlisted to overcome "elemental war," showing Robespierre not as a self-deluded genius but as a tragic hero battling against imminent catastrophe.

Such a portrait raises pressing questions. Here, indeed, is a marked "sympathy with power," a moment of imaginary identification with commanding genius, and an experience that seems directly, in the summer of 1794, to prompt Coleridge's first considerations on imagination and violence. Here as well, in Coleridge's first and only direct dramatic examination of the Revolution, is his only dramatic valorization of commanding genius' compulsion to realize the imagination, his only embrace of the cool ferocity that neither overlooks nor scruples its means. Indeed, in Robespierre's first speech, Coleridge gives voice to a call to action distinctly at odds with the meditative, scruple-haunted heroes that will define his later plays: "There is no danger," declares Coleridge's defiant hero, "but in cowardice."

As Roe rightly suggests, Coleridge's 1795 meditations on Robespierre's character indicate that he had, by then, discovered in the Jacobin leader "an alarming, distorted version" of himself; this 1794 portrait, however, seems to emerge from a position of less pronounced critical distance, a position marked less by alarmed self-recognition than by immersive sympathetic identification. What prompted such extreme sympathy, and what gave it such form? What about it could have engendered such enduring guilt, and why would such feelings have been exemplary rather than anomalous within British romanticism?

Part of the difficulty in answering such questions derives from the oddity of the play itself. As I mentioned earlier, Coleridge and Southey wrote *The Fall of Robespierre* immediately upon receiving news of the Thermidorean coup. In fact, the play was the product of a wager: as Southey recalled, the project

> originated in sportive conversation at poor Lovell's, and we agreed each to produce an Act by the next evening—S.T.C. the first, I the second, and Lovell the third. S.T.C. brought part of his; I and Lovell, the whole of ours. But L's was not in keeping, and therefore I undertook to supply the third also by the following day. By that time S.T.C. had filled up his.

The primary source of information for the authors, and their primary source of inspiration, was the London *Times*. As Southey puts it, he wrote act two, and on the next day act three, "as fast as newspapers could be put into blank verse,"[20] and it is not only the pedestrian quality of the

20. From (including indented quotation) a letter to H. N. Coleridge in *S. T. Coleridge: Complete Poetical and Dramatic Works*, ed. J. D. Campbell (London: Macmillan, 1903) 211n.

verse that suggests the honesty of his account. For Southey's language is clearly, even awkwardly, taken almost directly from the paper's own news accounts, and the action of those latter acts recapitulates with exacting detail the manner in which the events of Thermidor unfolded in those pages. Act Two opens with Robespierre mounting the Convention's tribunal to demand that his opposition declare itself, and he is denounced from the floor along with his associates. Saint-Just arrives and attempts to speak in defense of both Robespierre and himself, but he is denounced in turn, and the act ends with their arrest and departure under escort. In the play's final act, the action remains situated in the Convention: as the representatives rejoice at Robespierre's downfall, a messenger arrives with news of his release and repair to the Commune. The fearful representatives learn of Henriot's muster of support for the Robespierrists, of his seizure in the streets, and of the dispersal and collapse of Robespierre's armed following. The play concludes with Tallien, Lecointre, and Barère, the leaders of the anti-Robespierrist conspiracy, rejoicing over France's new-found freedom. All of these events Southey borrows wholesale from his journalistic source.

Yet—and this is what has so intrigued recent scholars—if Southey's acts seem merely to recapitulate the news (a structure that, as I will show, is in itself more significant than it may appear), Coleridge's first act does nothing of the sort. Rather than concerning itself with an essentially journalistic depiction of public action and political oratory, his rendering offers a darkly atmospheric fantasy of the conspiratorial tensions that precede Robespierre's denunciation—and one apparently derived from literary rather than journalistic sources.

As Roe points out, for example, we can in Coleridge's dark Robespierre just discern "Milton's 'dread commander' in *Paradise Lost*": "Robespierre's awful stature," he points out, "recalls Satan's towering presence, his 'disastrous lustre' the obscured glory of the fallen archangel. . . . Like Satan he retains traces of his 'original brightness' in his resourcefulness and swiftness to action."[21] There is, too, a definite sense that Coleridge recalls in this act something of the portentous atmosphere of Rome in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* a darkened city shaken by "tempests . . . dropping fire" and super-

21. Roe (207) offers in support Milton's portrait of Satan:

> above the rest
> In shape and gesture proudly eminent
> Stood like a tower; his form had not yet lost
> All her original brightness, nor appeared
> Less than archangel ruined, and the excess
> Of glory obscured . . .
>
> (i.589–94)

natural prodigies announcing a "strange impatience of the heavens."[22] "The tempest gathers," announces Barère in his first line, and much of the act is occupied with the clandestine meetings and encounters of the conspirators and the suspicious planning of Robespierre and his associates. At the close of Coleridge's act the dramatic allusion is made explicit, as Tallien declares that

> —If the trembling members
> Even for a moment hold his fate suspended,
> I swear by the holy poniard, that stabbed Caesar,
> This dagger probes his heart! (16)

Unlike Southey, then, Coleridge seems to offer, in Act One, a dramatic scene more concerned with the creation of dramatic atmosphere than with the accurate depiction of historical event. In its allusions and private scenes, the work seems evidently a product of Coleridge's imagination, and for that reason—as well as the problem of Southey's clanking verse—commentators have tended to locate in Coleridge's first act contribution the greater part of the play's literary value and significance. Moreover, these characteristics reinforce the sense that Coleridge writes this act from a position of considerable sympathetic identification with Robespierre, for the consistent conflation here is precisely between the fearful atmosphere of the city and "the Tyrant's *soul.*" If Coleridge paints the world of the conspirators, it is a world not only inhabited but ruled, "in splendor gloomy," by the "midnight meteor" of Robespierre's defiant, commanding genius. Rather than merely depicting Paris as it is revealed in the news, Coleridge shows us a city dominated by that soul, and a scene not merely historical but expressive of the Jacobin leader's imaginative conflict with the Revolution's elemental darkness.[23]

What might have prompted this powerful identification with and realization of Robespierre's own imagination by Coleridge remains, for Roe, uncertain.[24] He observes, rightly, that Coleridge's "idea of Robespierre was

22. See I.iii., Casca's midnight meetings with Cicero and with Cassius and Cinna. As is well-known, a comet did in fact appear in 44 B.C. and was thereafter associated with Caesar's assassination.

23. A similar observation is made by William Jewett in his excellent discussion of the play. See Jewett 36–39.

24. Drawing attention to the "ends" and "means" of the 1795 *Conciones* portrait, he suggests that Coleridge's "idea of Robespierre was probably influenced by [his] reading of [Robespierre's] speeches to the National Convention," and he cites in particular Robespierre's February 5 "Address on Political Morality." And indeed, although Roe is concerned with a source for Robespierre's doctrinal statements rather than his rhetorical stance, the February 5 address does offer an unusual glimpse into the Incorruptible's sternly Roman interior world.

probably influenced by [his] reading of [Robespierre's] speeches to the National Convention," and points out as well the manner in which Coleridge's discussion of "ways" and "means" is derived from Robespierre's well-known "Address on Political Morality," delivered in February of 1794. However, what neither Roe nor any other commentators seem fully to have appreciated is the degree to which Coleridge's perception of the Revolution, and of Robespierre in particular, was in the summer of 1794 mediated by the press—and particularly by the *Times*. Since June, Coleridge had been in relative isolation, being engaged upon a walking tour of some 600 miles; he arrived by August in Bristol, where he met up with Southey, and it was there that they learned of Robespierre's fall and engaged, with Lovell, in their dramatic wager. Normally, all three would have read of the shocking events of Thermidor in several papers: however, in this instance, only the *Times* was available. And if one takes a closer look at that tightly mediated experience of Thermidor, at the history of Robespierre's fall as it was shaped in the pages of the single newspaper at hand, one finds an extraordinary imaginative drama—not Coleridge's alone but a collective fantasy—of the events and actions surrounding the Jacobin revolution's decisive collapse. And in that imaginative experience, one finds not only a record of the catalyst to Coleridge's self-identification with Robespierre, but also a remarkable trace of the evolution of tragedy in the British cultural imagination.

2. *"Perish the Tyrant!"*: The *Times* & Thermidor

a. The *Times* and the Revolution

The London *Times* was established only in 1785, and among the British newspapers in existence at the outset of the French Revolution it was thus a relative newcomer. By the summer of 1794, however, the *Times* had firmly established itself as the most timely and authoritative source of Continental news among British newspapers. This achievement had much to do with financial and political support, for the *Times* was the favored organ of the Pitt government and, as such, received both generous subsidies and privileged political information.[25] However, the distinguishing feature of the *Times* was its provision of timely and comprehensive news from Paris, for such patronage and privilege enabled the paper to set up, within weeks of the fall of the Bastille, an unprecedented network of correspondence and transmission, one that enabled the rapid and regular receipt of news from the French capital. In part, the construction of that network was an obvi-

25. For a brief but highly informative account of The *Times'* coverage of the Revolution, see Neal Ascherson's introduction to his ***The Times** Reports the French Revolution: Extracts from **The Times** 1789–1794* (London: Times Books, 1975).

ous response to demand, and thus an effort pursued by many other papers as well, but the *Times* was unusual in its early and consistent devotion of resources to such coverage. Even in July 1789, just as the dismissal of Necker set off in Paris the insurrection that would culminate two days later in the fall of the Bastille, the paper had immediately asserted the superiority of its reporting: "It is an act of justice which we owe to ourselves," the editors declared on July 15th, "to call the attention of the public, to the peculiar authenticity which accompanies our foreign intelligence. While others' prints express themselves in hints and surmises, we speak boldly as to facts" (*Times,* July 15, 1789). As in subsequent years, the paper's "peculiar authenticity" was founded upon its reputation for exceptional speed: "The Messenger who brought the dispatches yesterday from France," the paper of the 15th noted, "made the quickest journey ever known, having come from Paris in 38 hours" (*Times,* July 15, 1789).

By 1794, after five years of revolution, the *Times* had set up an extensive network of regular correspondents both within and around France; it had also developed several established routes along which the news from Paris and from the rest of the Continent could be quickly and regularly transmitted to London. Within the French capital itself the paper maintained a special correspondent, who dispatched reports and a packet of the latest French newspapers several times a week, sending them northward through Flanders to Oostende, where they would be bundled with military dispatches for rapid transit across the Channel.[26]

This practice proved over time to be quite reliable. At the beginning of 1794, news from Paris arrived in London about three times per week, with an average transmission time of eight or nine days—which, given the necessity of crossing a contested military frontier, is quite impressive.[27] As a result, the *Times* offered a new installment of events and proceedings in Paris several times each week, with even single installments sometimes amounting to several pages of information.[28]

26. The identity of this correspondent remains unknown, although it is evident that he was well placed within the Revolution's political system (and such placement argues strongly that he *was* a man). Jeremy Popkin suggested to me that it is likely that such a correspondent would have been a French journalist. However, so far as I am aware no one has yet investigated the mystery.

27. During the same period, military news from Holland arrived with comparable frequency, but with an average delay of only four to six days. As the express post service from Paris to the northern frontier could only with great effort be made in two days, regular (and therefore unobtrusive) conveyance of news across that frontier in four clearly required considerable skill.

28. The proceedings of the National Convention constituted the lengthiest portion of the regular Paris news, and the necessity for translation meant that transcripts and summaries of the Convention's proceedings appeared in the *Times* over two or three days after arrival.

The superiority of the paper's resources and coverage provided it with considerable power to shape politically the initial British experience of events in France. As it received copious amounts of material more rapidly than other sources, the *Times* could, and did, influence the order and the timing with which its audience learned of goings-on in France: it fragmented events, buried facts, and frequently engaged in outright political distortion.[29]

However, more interesting for my purposes here is the manner in which the systemic operation of the paper's transmission network, its status as the leading paper of record, and the ostensibly neutral conventions of the paper's formal composition reshaped the rhythms and the dramatic structure of revolutionary events and, over time, conditioned the way those events were experienced by British audiences. For it was, as I'll show, a prolonged disruption of this system of transmission, an interruption of its well-established rhythms, that led to the production of this imaginary drama and prompted, in Coleridge but in many others as well, a troubling moment of sympathetic identification with Robespierre in the summer of 1794.

b. Spring 1794: "The guilty and distracted Tyrant"

Among the most notable distortions created by the paper's transmission practices was a recurrent sense of temporal acceleration and dramatic compression associated with especially important occurrences. News of such extraordinary events was customarily sent and published with additional haste, and such acceleration and compression added considerably to the dramatic impact and immediacy with which such moments appeared to readers in Britain. In January of 1793, for example, during the trial and in the few days leading up to the execution of Louis XVI, the paper was able to increase the speed and frequency with which it received reports to such a degree that it stopped distinguishing events in Paris by date, instead referring them simply by the day of the week and, on the day of the King's execution, by the hour as well.[30]

One of the advantages of this situation, incidentally, was that the impact of continuing French military successes in Belgium was offset by the ability of the British government and military to establish their version of events at least two weeks before the Convention's version was offered.

29. This is not to suggest that the *Times* governed the representation and reception of Revolutionary news in Britain, for its presentation of events was supplemented, contested, and critiqued by a wide variety of other sources of news and commentary. Nonetheless, it is clear that the *Times* was from the outset the leading source of news, and from this position it enjoyed a degree of influence that other sources could not rival.

30. Thus in the paper of Friday, January 25th, Londoners received a full account, received "by an express which arrived yesterday morning from Messrs. *Fector* and Co. at Dover," of the execution of Louis at "about a quarter past ten o'clock" on "Monday morning."

If such practices added considerable intensity and authority to the paper's reports, they could also magnify shock and confusion, as they did in the spring of 1794. On March 25th, the *Times* had offered its readers breathless news of the execution—just five days before—of the militant Hébertists, the first of the erstwhile radical allies to be purged by the Jacobins.[31] All told, the arrest, trial, and execution of Hébert and other leaders of the radical Revolution's left wing had been completed in just eleven days, a necessity given the enormous popular support enjoyed both by Hébert and his associates. Such rapidity was magnified by the *Times* accelerated receipt of the news, but that acceleration also made it particularly difficult for the paper to comprehend and account for this first of the Jacobin purges, for when London received news of the faction's fall it had not yet received any news of the days just preceding the purge—of its occasion and context. It surmised, as did many observers, that this strike to the left betokened some abatement of the violent course of Revolutionary politics: not only did the execution of the Hébertists mark the first time that the more moderate of two struggling revolutionary parties had prevailed over the more radical, it was also the first time, since 1789, that such a contest had been carried out entirely within the institutional structure of the standing government.[32] Moreover, the elimination of the Hébertists greatly diminished the power of the Paris *sections,* whose insurrectionary interventions had played such a prominent role in the previous course of the Revolution. In consequence, British reports were at first favorable: Robespierre, it seemed, was bringing the radical Revolution to a stable close. To those, like Coleridge, sympathetic already to the Jacobins' stern, tragic politics, news of this first of the

31. Both more militant and more popular that the Jacobins, this group received its name from Jacques-René Hébert, better known in his pseudonymous role as the editorial voice of the most popular of Revolutionary papers, *Père Duchesne.* Originally, Pere Duchesne was an archetypal character of the fairground theater, possessed of a vocabulary of scandalous vulgarity. As Hébert's journalistic persona, Père Duchesne devoted his acid-tongued commentary to a revolutionary politics that became increasingly militant. In the autumn of 1793 the paper began openly to oppose the Montagnards. Although a direct attack on the Hébertists had been expected at least since Robespierre's denunciation of de-Christianization in November, the rapidity of this first strike in the Jacobin seizure of power shocked contemporary observers. The Hébertists' scandalous Festival of Reason, staged in Notre Dame in November of 1793, had provided Robespierre with a suitable pretense for the condemnation of de-Christianization that inaugurated his attack on the Hébertists' exuberantly secular radicalism.

32. "Mallet du Pan described this new situation with perspicacity. Previously, 'the aspiring factions had toppled the ruling factions with the aid of popular force.' Now, it was 'the ruling faction that [struck down its opposition. It did so] without the people's assistance, without mob agitation, legally, in due form,'" Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic, 1792–1794,* trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum, vol. 2 of *The French Revolution* (Paris and London: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge UP, 1983) 118.

regime's internecine purges must have raised considerable hope that the Revolution had, if grimly, reached fair harbor.

Yet, just as the paper's coverage caught up with itself, news arrived of Robespierre's move against the Dantonists, close allies of, and arguably more moderate than, the Robespierrists. Danton had earlier, through his close association with the August 10 Insurrection and the September Massacres, played a considerable role in the radicalization of Revolutionary politics; however, by 1794 he had become the leader of a group determined to institute a Committee of Clemency in order to reverse, or at least mitigate, the Terror—and the Dantonists were, to boot, assumed to be close allies of the Jacobin leaders. If Robespierre's move against the Hébertists had seemed a necessary excision of the Revolution's most violent, uncontrollable members, that against Danton and his associates suggested not an effort to guide the Revolution to a moderate close but an attempt to seize uncontested power, to purge not one but all other competing factions. As reports of the Dantonists' arrest were, like those of the Hébertists' arrest and execution, received in better than average time, the Jacobin ruler's actions appeared even more ruthless and predatory in London—more shocking, certainly—than they had in Paris, and the *Times* registered explicitly the sudden implications of this unexpected news. "Here is again," the *Times* declared, "another instance of ROBESPIERRE'S growing power! There is every appearance of this man's intention to get himself declared DICTATOR" (*Times,* April 8, 1794).

The dramatic force generated by such acceleration was reinforced and lent unexpected force and depth just a week later—this time, by the remarkable coincidence and visual juxtaposition of two items in the paper's edition of April 14. The first, leading off the paper's customary presentation of major news under the heading of "The Times," was the much-anticipated report of the "Execution of Danton and His Accomplices." Just above, at the head of the column, was another announcement—this one concerning the newly-rebuilt Drury Lane Theatre. "The Dramatic Representations at this Theatre," declared the paper, "will commence on MONDAY, April 21, 1794, under the management of Mr. KEMBLE, when his Majesty's Servants will perform Shake-spear's Tragedy of MACBETH" (see *fig. 1*). The following day the *Times* played upon the obvious resonances, asserting that in its opinion, "DANTON'S Ghost will be to ROBESPIERRE what *Banquo's* was to *Macbeth.*"

There was nothing particularly unusual in the *Times'* application of drama to politics. The establishment in the early 1770s of the rights of the British press to report Parliamentary debates had ushered in an era of unprecedented theatricality in British political culture. As both Sheridan and Burke realized, the language of the drama offered a ready set of conven-

THE TIMES.

THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE.

MONDAY, APRIL 14, 1794.

The Dramatic Repreſentations at this Theatre will commence on MONDAY, April 21, 1794, under the Management of Mr. KEMBLE, when his Majeſty's Servants will perform Shakeſpear's Tragedy of MACBETH.

With the original Muſic and Choruſſes of Matthew Lock, And Accompaniments by Dr. Arne and Mr. Linley;

With entirely new Scenery, Dreſſes, Decorations and Machinery, And an occaſional Prologue and Epilogue.

The Characters of the Play, with the Farce, &c. will be expreſſed in a future Advertiſement.

Places to be taken of Mr. Foſbrook, at the Box Book Office, in Little Ruſſel-ſtreet.

LONDON.

Buſineſs in the Houſe of Commons this Day.

The Houſe to attend the Trial of Warren Haſtings, Eſq.—The Woolcombers, Statute Labour, Election, Conſolidated Fund, Prize-Ships, French Property, and Newſpaper Stamp Bills to be read a ſecond time.—Committee on the French Corps Bill, and of Supply and Ways and Means.—The Slate Duty, National Debt, and Aberdeen Paving Bills to be reported.—Indian Bonds Bill to be read a third time.

EXECUTION OF *DANTON AND HIS ACCOMPLICES.*

We yeſterday received the news from PARIS down to the 6th inſt. and it is extremely important. By a Gazette of that date we learn, that DANTON, CAMILLE DESMOULINS, HERAULT SECHELLES, PHILIPPEAUX, LACROIX, and FABRE D'EGLANTINE, having refuſed to anſwer any queſtion propoſed to them by the Revolutionary Tribunal, but in the preſence of their accuſers, ROBESPIERRE, ST. JUST, and BARRERE; and having inſulted the Preſident and Members of the Revolutionary Tribunal, the Convention paſſed a decree, on the 4th, that in caſe they ſhould purſue the ſame conduct, they ſhould be condemned without farther trial. In purſuance of this decree, the above Deputies having perſiſted in the ſame ſentiments and behaviour, they were all guillotined on the evening of the 5th, except L'HUILLIER, who was acquitted.

Fig. 1: London *Times* April 14, 1794

tions, gestures, roles and allusions through which to communicate politics (and to offer safely indirect political commentary) to the emergent reading public.[33] However, the characterization of Robespierre as Macbeth signals a rather more complicated interplay of stage and paper than a mere application of fortuitous coincidence or a satirical conceit. In making this connection explicit, the paper had now attached a character and a plot to actual events, not merely foreseeing a tragic end for Robespierre but also drawing attention, in its reference to Banquo's ghost, to the Jacobin leader's tortured regicidal imagination. The comparison between Macbeth and Robespierre was an obvious one: Robespierre's role in the execution of Louis had been exceptional, and the Incorruptible's taciturn, inward nature had by 1794 become a commonplace observation. However, in this instance that portrait was lent additional depth and detail by the particular character of Kemble's innovative production. As the *Times'* review of the opening performance at Drury Lane pointed out, "In getting up this Tragedy, great attention has evidently been bestowed to the notes of the several commentators; among the boldest alterations is that of *laying* BANQUO's Ghost, and making the troubled spirit only visible to the 'mind's eye' of the guilty and distracted tyrant" (*Times,* April 22, 1794).

A bold alteration indeed, and one that seems laden with significance when one considers that this is precisely the moment—as Mary Jacobus has pointed out—when *Macbeth* begins to resonate with larger cultural anxieties about the murderous power of the imagination, the problem of the potentially creative, determinative force of the mind. On one level, certainly, Kemble's staging suggests Lamb's 1811 observation that "a ghost by chandelier light, and in good company, deceives no spectators," and it seems reasonable to infer that in 1794 as well the appearance of a ghost on stage might be expected, as Lamb asserts, to excite mirth rather than terror.[34] In fact, the review observed what seems to have been just this sort of response to the spirits that Kemble chose to have dance about the witches' cauldron (a scene that the reviewer suspected to have been "suggested by *Fuzeli*").[35] The very fact that Kemble did choose to stage the witches'

33. See Matthew Buckley, *Tragedy Walks the Streets* (forthcoming, Johns Hopkins UP).

34. Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare," in D. F. Bratchell, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1990) 46. Mary Jacobus, too, reads Lamb in light of the textual drama of the Revolution, although her focus is on Wordsworth's nocturnal hallucinations during his visit to Paris after the September Massacres. Accordingly, she emphasizes Lamb's assertion in regard to Shakespeare's supernatural phenomena that it is "the solitary taper and the book that generates faith in these terrors," Jacobus 34.

35. "The black spirits," he remarked, "passed muster tolerably well, but the white ones wore greatly the resemblance of the dancing dogs of old.—Those barren spectators who regarded not the text, indulged in a hearty laugh at their expence!" There is more of interest here than the amusement generated by inept stage spirits: we should note as well that the

dance and *not* Banquo's ghost, however, reinforces the sense that it is not the absurdity of the supernatural but an emphasis on the imaginary that is Kemble's concern here. Such an emphasis, moreover, makes sense when we recall that Kemble's physically undemonstrative acting style and carefully modulated delivery reinforced such an interiorized portrait of Shakespeare's tortured protagonist. Walter Scott would later argue for the superiority in this regard of Kemble's Macbeth over the more animated and impetuous characterization offered by Garrick, describing Kemble's performance as an "exquisitely and minutely elaborate delineation of guilty ambition."[36] It is thus the "guilty and distracted" mind of the tyrant that Kemble places at center stage: by laying aside as well the spectacle of a murdered Banquo, the Drury Lane production better allowed its audience to employ its own imagination upon the "thoughts and internal machinery," or in Macbeth's own terms the "heated-oppressed brain," of the regicide.[37] And

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hearty laugh was engaged in by those who *"regarded not the text."* Here it seems possible to read Lamb against the grain, not as an antitheatrical critic but as chronicler of the increasingly literary dramatic imagination of his era, an imagination to which Kemble's stagecraft was addressed. As Lamb notes, "the reading of a tragedy . . . presents to the fancy just so much of external appearances as to make us feel that we are among flesh and blood, while by far the greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of the character" (Lamb, in Bratchell 46).

36. Sir Walter Scott, Review of Boaden's *Kemble,* "Article 10," *The Quarterly Review* (1826): XXXIV, 218 f, qtd. in Bertram Joseph, *The Tragic Actor* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) 202–3.

37. It was not only in its staging of a reading that Kemble's *Macbeth* suited its dramatic moment; as the audience at Drury Lane would undoubtedly have recognized, Kemble's cool, formidably monomaniacal Macbeth evoked admirably the famously taciturn, single-minded character of Robespierre. As Bertram Joseph notes,

> Kemble was a classic, not [only] in the sense that he concentrated on the outward appearance of calm grandeur, formal dignity and comparative stiffness, but because he worked from within outwards, from a classical tragic conception to the details of the acting in which it was embodied. And for him the tragic conception was essentially one of consistent intensity: the character must be developed undeviatingly in one straight line of progressive intensity: everything must point to the same end. This was the aim with which he studied, conceived and embodied a part. (187)

Sarah Siddons, also characteristically, offered a Lady Macbeth of "terrifying grandeur"; Campbell considered "her peculiar element" to be "the sublime and energetic" (Joseph 236–37). For Hazlitt, she was, as Lady Macbeth, "tragedy personified": "Power was seated on her brow, passion emanated from her breast as from a shrine" (William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt,* ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. [London, 1930–34] 4.189–90, qtd. in Jacobus 63, n. 77). The differing manner in which these two actors are constructed in the press is a question well worth asking; unfortunately, it is a question that lies outside the scope of this essay.

in the spring of 1794, it was as just such a guilty and distracted tyrant that the paper represented Robespierre.

It should come as no surprise, then, that we find Coleridge focusing at just this time upon Robespierre's tragic, guilty imagination, for it is precisely that element of the Jacobin ruler's identity and action that, in the spring of 1794, preoccupied the British public. But such focus—for Coleridge as for the audience of the *Times* and of Kemble's brooding portrait—is a long way from what Roe describes as "self-recognition." And that closer sympathy, as we shall see, came later, and was prompted by something rather more curious than merely a conjunction of politics and drama.

c. "Racked into Dread Armistice": Time and Sympathy

The suggestion that Robespierre could be seen as Macbeth would perhaps have quickly faded, except that the very transmission of news from Paris began, in uncanny fashion, to reinforce just such an imaginary drama, and to reinforce rather than set aside just such a focus on Robespierre's imagination. For on April 15th, the very day the *Times* suggested that "DANTON'S Ghost will be to ROBESPIERRE what *Banquo's* was to *Macbeth,*" the paper also informed its readers, in a brief, inconspicuous note, that "the man who had charge of the Gazettes" had been arrested near Lille, and with that arrest came an unprecedented suspension of news (*Times,* April 15, 1794).

Although it seems incidental at first, this arrest appears to have been of enormous significance: throughout the following month, this disruption of the paper's usual courier network combined with heavy military activity along the northern frontier to erode the frequency and the rapidity with which news was transmitted to London. Disruptions along the frontier had been an ongoing problem, and by this time were easily overcome, but the loss of what seems to have been a key courier was unprecedented, and seems to have combined with ensuing events to cause an extended, extraordinary disruption of the paper's network of transmission. At first, the reports merely slowed: from an average transmission delay during the first four months of the year of just *under* eight days, the *Times* slipped, in both May and June, to an average delay of just under eleven days (see *fig. 2*). However, on June 6, as the French advanced toward Brussels, the paper frankly admitted the loss of its primary channels of communication, and on June 10 the passage of the Law of 22 Prairial rendered the very provision of reports significantly more risky.[38] By the time that the British lost control of Oostende at the beginning of July, provision of the Gazettes from Paris had

38. On June 6, the paper reported that "all communication with France being for the moment intercepted," primarily because French troops had "cut off the channel between *Bouillon, Liege,* and *Brussells,* through which the Paris Gazettes have lately passed."

become more erratic than at any point since the outset of the Revolution: through July, the pace slowed to about two reports per week, with an average delay of nearly 16 days. In short, news of Paris now took almost twice as long to reach London as the *Times* readers had come to expect over the preceding four years.

At other times, such a lag might not have caused undue concern: however, this delay was accompanied—so far as sketchy impressions revealed—by both heightened tensions within Paris and, remarkably, Robespierre's own unexpected withdrawal from daily political activity. Paris became, perceptually, more distant, and Robespierre became more isolated, less often seen, or heard. In fact, from about June 26, when the *Times* remarked that one might say "of Robert SPIERRE, as Banquo said of Macbeth. 'Thane, Glamis, Caudor, thou hast them all,'" the Incorruptible ceased to participate in public politics, continuing only to exercise control over the General Police while—we now know—carefully gathering evidence and preparing his denunciation of those he suspected, quite rightly, of plotting against him.

Throughout July, vague rumors arrived in London of increasing opposition, but the first clear indications of an impending threat to Robespierre's position didn't appear until August 2, and then they took profoundly ambiguous form. The day before, the *Times* reported, an American ship had arrived from Havre-de-Grace carrying, remarkably, a *transcript* of Robespierre's speech to the Jacobin Club of July 21—just twelve days before. The speech, Robespierre's first major address in weeks, contained an outraged but carefully inspecific accusation of a powerful conspiracy: the address seemed clearly to suggest that the Jacobin leader's support was threatened or had collapsed, but it was unaccompanied by any commentary by the *Times'* Paris correspondents. What was its context? What was its import? The *Times'* regular coverage from the French capital extended by that time only to July 13th, a full eight days *prior to* the speech. And if the rapid transmission of that transcript reiterated the familiar pattern of acceleration for important news, such acceleration was—in this instance—followed by an utterly unprecedented phenomenon: after the arrival on the 2nd of regular dispatches of July 14 and 15, which shed no new light on the problem, no further news of Paris arrived from the Continent—from anywhere on the Continent—for almost a week (see *fig. 3*).

By Wednesday, August 6, the paper had exhausted its store of information fit to print.[39] There was nothing but silence from France and, of course, the speech itself.

39. On Monday the 4th, the paper devoted its entire Paris coverage to the translated transcript of Robespierre's speech. The following day it printed the remaining Convention proceedings and provided a tentative analysis of the opposition to Robespierre. On Wednesday

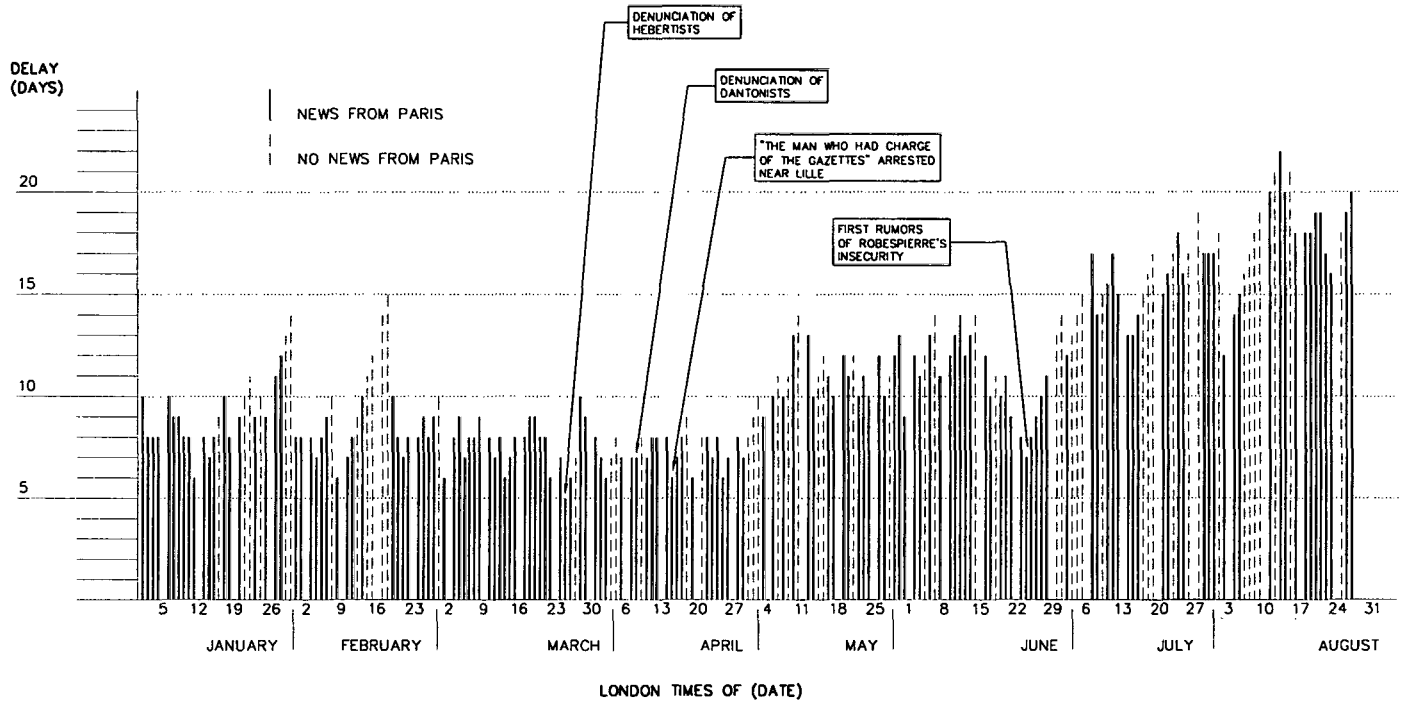

Fig. 2: Transmission Lag Between Events in Paris and Their Report in the London *Times*

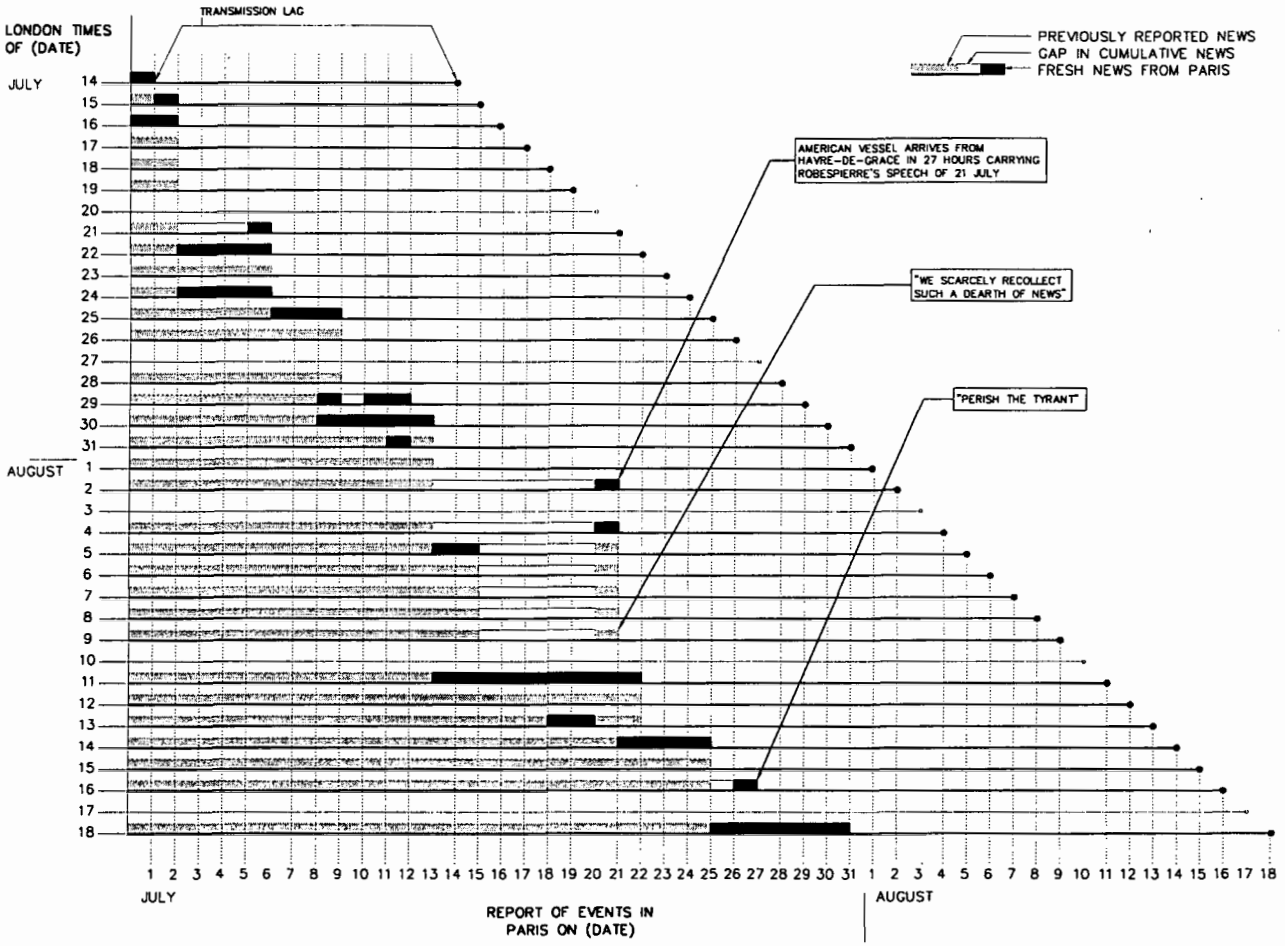

Fig. 3: Cumulative News of Events in Paris

What happened next is perhaps best conveyed by Thomas de Quincey, in a piece of dramatic criticism that is—as we would expect of the writer of "The English Mail-Coach"—a profound meditation upon the dramatic temporalities of this period. In his essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth,*" de Quincey asks how it is that Shakespeare manages to "throw the interest on the murderer," to direct our sympathy, despite our natural inclinations, to Macbeth. "Of course," he notes, "I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them." De Quincey's conclusion is that Shakespeare must find a way to express and make sensible the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart," showing Macbeth's interior transformation with such clarity that we might understand that shift and follow Macbeth through it. Asking then how this shift might effectively "be conveyed and made palpable," de Quincey answers that

> The murder and the murderer must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess: we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion.[40]

In an uncanny fashion, given Robespierre's strong characterization as Macbeth, this seems to describe in precise fashion the experience and reaction of Thermidor's distanced audience. This "ordinary tide and succession of human affairs" is exactly what was cut off in the cessation of news from France. The pressures of time drive the newspaper press, and here one finds a newspaper "racked into dread armistice": from August 2 until—as it would turn out—August 11, the attention of London was arrested in the Paris of July 21st, a moment defined and delimited by nothing other than Robespierre's own speech, and that address suggestive of nothing so much as the "guilty and distracted mind" of a suspicious, uncertain leader. And the result, certainly, was a kind of "sympathy of comprehension."

On Friday August 8, in an extraordinary departure from its usual practice, the paper offered its readers the following "news":

> There is a kind of infatuation which attends on Ambition; and this has laid strong hold of ROBESPIERRE. If such were not the case, he

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a previously received transcript of a report by Barrere on the capture of Ostend was printed, and on Thursday there was no mention of news from France whatsoever.

40. Thomas De Quincey, *De Quincey as Critic,* ed. John E. Jordan, The Routledge Critics Series (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) 243.

never would have ventured to the tip of that very precipice from which he saw his predecessors hurled. . . . But so glaring is the *ignis fatuus* of power, that the possession of it is the only object of his attention, and he looks on the glittering summit above with such earnestness, that he has not leisure to bestow a single glance on the ruins below. From his speech, however, some circumstances may be collected, which plainly point out that he dreads the effect of a calm. . . . His efforts, therefore, are wholly directed to *assist,* not to *appease* the storm. There must be no time for recollection—no moment for cool consideration. . . . If he was not wicked before he got into power, he finds it necessary to become so now; and therefore he gets rid of his conscience, that rapine and murder may be pursued without remorse. Thus fortified against all the finer feelings of nature, he has nothing to apprehend from reflection; and as he has banished from his mind every idea of an hereafter, he riots without a pang on the blood of his fellow-creatures.

The *Times* had offered portraits of Revolutionary leaders before, but this one is extraordinary in its focus not upon public identity or political action but upon private belief and personal feeling. It explains not who Robespierre is but what he is thinking and fearing. Most specifically, it takes as its particular aim a portrait of the tyrant's guilty and distracted conscience, examining precisely the troubled relationship between his commanding imagination and his murderous action.

And, crucially, we find here as well an evident source of that image of Robespierre which will dominate Coleridge's mind. In the *ignis fatuus,* the "foolish light" of power, we can see the "glowing ardor" of the *Conciones* portrait and, even more clearly, the nightmarish meteor of Barère's soliloquy. In this editorial, certainly, is that resonant image of commanding genius' single-minded ascent—the portrait of a gaze fixed so intently upon the prospect above as to neglect the foulness below—which grounds the *Conciones'* portrait of Robespierre. Here, too, appears the image of "impending ruins" that opens *The Fall of Robespierre.* Certainly, the *Times'* portrait is not without persuasive appeal, for it is evidently shaped both by Robespierre's speech and by the *Times'* self-imagined image of Robespierre as tragic Macbeth, who likewise banishes conscience in the necessary defense of power. To one convinced, as Coleridge was, that the Incorruptible Robespierre pursued not personal power but the ideals of 1789, this portrait, catalyzed by a moment of de Quinceyan sympathy, was easily accepted and redeemed—one need only transform the "glittering summit" of tyranny to the "distant prospect" of liberty. Ironically, then, it is in the pages of the *Times,* and not—as Roe suggests—in Coleridge's reflections upon Robespierre's earlier speeches, that we find the first articulation of

romantic imagination, of commanding genius impelled to bring its vision into being even at the risk of destruction. It is here, also, that we might also locate the moment of what Roe describes as "self-recognition," though with de Quincey we should probably call it a "sympathy of comprehension," a more limited effect by which Coleridge was induced to enter into Robespierre's feelings and "made to understand them." In the context of such sympathy, Coleridge's atmospheric opening to *The Fall of Robespierre* takes on additional interest, for we can recognize in its image of a city ruled by the gloomy splendor of Robespierre's soul not merely a reflection of Coleridge's own preoccupations but a dramatic rendering of the ascendancy of the dictator's figure in the public imagination of Britain during this tense period of silence.

Yet, it is important to realize that this picture is as yet incomplete: for on August 8, no "knocking at the gate" had yet occurred, and the *Times'* sympathetic participation—and Coleridge's, too—had not yet been dispelled. And before that would happen, such sympathy would give rise to yet another dreamt image, this one a collective fantasy that registered, and in its collapse radically threatened, the tragic imagination of British culture.

d. "Perish the Tyrant!": The *Times* Dreams of Murder

By the evening of August 8th, the very day of the paper's sympathetic portrait of Robespierre, the mood in Printing House Square must have been despairing, for even the paper's ordinary news dispatches should by then have closed the crucial six-day gap between the last news of events in Paris and Robespierre's speech of the 21st. Obviously unsettled, the paper's editors lamented in the Saturday edition that "We scarcely recollect such a dearth of news from every part of Europe as during the present week; not a single dispatch or newspaper having been received from the Continent since Sunday last."

The implications of such a dearth were distressing, and fraught with implication. If no news had arrived since that dispatched on the 21st of July, then some event must have occurred in Paris of sufficient magnitude to prevent the departure of news from the French capitol for an unprecedented period of days. In fact the regular packets arrived that Saturday evening, carrying news as late as July 22—but these merely increased the suspense, for they offered no indication of any event so decisive as to have brought about that echoed ripple of silence. However, the paper of Monday, August 11 does reflect one important shift: having been forced to pause, to speculate, and to stretch news, the paper now began to hurry, obviously rushing its correspondent's dispatches into print without editorial intervention or emendation. And this temporal reversal—from arrested fascination to distracted haste—thus produced an oddly complementary ef-

fect, for the paper's attitude of sympathetic participation now became reinforced by a narrative stance of striking immediacy. Monday's paper reprints what appears to be the Paris correspondent's dispatch of July 22: the tone is more terse and intimate than journalistic, the items arranged in an order less hierarchical than occasional, more like entries jotted into a notebook than news arranged, however capriciously, for publication (see *fig. 4*). Within what seems to be a merely typeset dispatch, for it is buried, ironically enough, in the middle of an otherwise unremarkable review of executions, is a single, hasty suggestion of the crisis suggested by Robespierre's speech. "Matters of the greatest moment," the correspondent writes,

> are on the point of being brought forward. It is a matter of general conversation and belief, that the *Committee of Public Welfare* are about to propose a decree for arresting several Members of the Convention. Their names are even mentioned. Very loud accusations are also made against the heads of the Committee of Public Safety.

With its sense of immediacy as marked as its nearly total lack of hard information, this correspondence could hardly have been better suited to maintain the paper's sympathetic illusion, and on Wednesday the 13th—despite the fact that it had received no further packets from France—the *Times* published an editorial denouncing Robespierre and offering this remarkable, speculative summary of the situation:

> [T]hat there exists at this moment two leading factions in *Paris,* who secretly watch each other, is certain. The *Anti-Robespierrists* are the more numerous in the Convention; and *Robespierre*'s aim is to oppose the Jacobins to them. Nothing decisive has been yet done, but the preparations are in great forwardness.
>
> The explosion which is to determine a new Revolution, cannot be far distant. What will be the issue, or on which side the victory will be, cannot yet be foreseen. Hitherto, in every period of the Revolution, the most infamous party has conquered; and it is difficult to conceive that there can exist one superior to the *Robespierrists* in every species of crime.

It is difficult but important to keep in mind that the situation this article describes is derived from nothing more substantive than a single speech and a few suggestive reports that had departed from Paris *twenty-two days* before. Yet the paper's tone is immediate and anticipatory: the two leading factions exist "at this moment," "[n]othing decisive has yet been done," preparations are "in great forwardness," the explosion is "not far distant," and the outcome "cannot yet be foreseen." But there is more than a temporal disjuncture here: there is the further irony of the article's public rep-

The anniverſary of the 14th of July was celebrated in the Convention by ſeveral ſpeeches relative to the events of that epocha. *Barrere* ſaid, he was perſuaded that the Aſſembly could not better employ the leiſure than in hearing a report upon the means of preparing new elements for victory; and he repeated the eulogium made by Citizen *Sheridan*, in the Britiſh Parliament, reſpecting the *Sans Culottes* who work in the ſaltpetre manufactories, and added, that Paris alone had furniſhed 600,000 weight of ſaltpetre ſince February. He concluded by announcing, that the new eruption of *Veſuvius* had ſtopped the fleet of the Neapolitan tyrant, which was ready to join that belonging to Great Britain, in the Mediterranean. The eruption, he ſaid, had deſtroyed half the city of Naples, and all its ſuburbs.

The executions continue daily as numerous as ever. On the 15th, thirty perſons were executed; on the 16th, thirty-one; on the 17th, forty; on the 18th, twenty-four; and on the 20th, fourteen;—in all 139 perſons, in the ſpace of 6 days.

Among theſe are—*Edelman*, the compoſer, and his brother; the *ci-devant* Count *Faudoas*, and his daughter, aged 18; and ſeveral perſons accuſed of having endeavoured to throw the French army into confuſion in the late action of Fleurus. In the liſt of thoſe executed on the 19th, are *Magon de la Balue*, aged 81 years, born at *St. Maloes*, and one of the richeſt men in France, and the whole of his family, ſons and daughters. He was accuſed of having opened an account current with the French Princes. *Legris*, a Clerk of the Revolutionary Tribunal, was guillotined at the ſame time, as being an accomplice with *Magon*, and having five times emigrated to carry ſpecie out of the country.

Matters of the greateſt moment are on the point of being brought forward. It is a matter of general converſation and belief, that the *Committee of Public Welfare* are about to propoſe a decree for arreſting ſeveral Members of the Convention. Their names are even mentioned. Very loud accuſations are alſo made againſt the heads of the Committee of Public Safety.

All the papers belonging to the Emigrants, and thoſe guillotined, are ſent hither, and carefully examined by perſons appointed for the purpoſe.

Fouché, of Nantes, has been ſtruck off the liſt of the Jacobins.

The wife of *La Fayette* has been arreſted on her eſtate near Limoges, and brought to Paris.

Matters of the greateſt moment are on the point of being brought forward. It is a matter of general converſation and belief, that the *Committee of Public Welfare* are about to propoſe a decree for arreſting ſeveral Members of the Convention. Their names are even mentioned. Very loud accuſations are alſo made againſt the heads of the Committee of Public Safety.

Fig. 4: The London *Times*, August 11, 1794

resentation of a hidden conflict, of "secret" oppositions on the verge of open conflict—in short, the *Times* creates, from within its own heat-oppressed brain, precisely that portentous, brooding atmosphere that characterizes Coleridge's dramatic vision in the opening act of *The Fall of Robespierre.*

Finally, on August 16, a Saturday, the *Times* printed as fact the following report, despite the fact that it had been received from Calais rather than through regular channels, lacked any corroboration, and appeared evidently contradictory to other, more accurate information. "ROBESPIERRE's greatest enemies," it informed its readers,

> were in the very bosom of the Committee of Public Safety. The first blows were struck by BARRERE and ST. JUST. On the 27th of July, BARRERE mounted the Tribune in the Convention, and denounced the DICTATOR, whose mouth piece and apologist he had been for the last six months. Several Members threw themselves upon ROBESPIERRE, and murdered him with poniards, crying out, *"Perish the Tyrant!"* The two Factions fought in the Hall, and their mutual fury reached the city, where the conflict is said to have lasted three days, in which time from 10 to 14,000 men fell.

And one can see why this account made sense. In the spring and summer the *Times* had carefully cast Robespierre as Macbeth, focusing attention on and investing significance in his "guilty and distracted" mind. In the "dread armistice" of early August the paper had turned its attention to his speech, its "sympathy of comprehension" directed to this half-imagined tyrant. Sympathy with Macbeth, then, but with a Jacobin Macbeth: look through the eyes of a Jacobin Macbeth and one falls not as a Scot but as a Roman—as Julius Caesar.

Thus we find in the *Times* as well the imaginary source of Coleridge's borrowed image of Shakespeare's brooding Roman city, and the inspiration, moreover, for his act-ending threat of the "holy poniard, that stabbed Caesar." We probably find here as well the original ending and presumptive denouement of the collaborators' planned drama—probably something very like Lovell's original third act.

The significance of the report of August 16th, however, extends beyond the question of sources. For we must keep in mind that, for readers of the *Times,* including Coleridge, that fictive denouement was first experienced as historical truth, and it is worth pausing to consider the implications of that perception. On August 16th, in Britain, Robespierre fell as a tragic hero, and the Revolution found, for a moment, what seemed a properly tragic denouement—indeed, a denouement apparently aimed at by Robespierre himself, who in the months preceding its events had leaned upon the

rhetoric and logic of classical tragedy, taking up quite explicitly the role of self-sacrificing Roman. If the Incorruptible's assassination marked his fall, it seemed, for a moment at least, to legitimate his political imagination, to bear out rather than undercut the power of his imagination. Two days later, however, the *Times* finally received a detailed account of the actual events from its regular Paris correspondent—and reality came knocking at the gate, awakening Coleridge, like thousands of others, from their collective, and quite murderous, fantasy.

e. The Knocking at the Gate

On August 18, having on the previous day received a wealth of news dispatches from the continent, the *Times* offered the British public its first clear account of what had in fact happened in Paris at the end of July. As is well known, Robespierre had not been stabbed at the convention and, in a manner that distinguished Thermidor from virtually all of the Revolution's prior *journées,* the city had not shaken with mass conflict. Indeed, rather than producing anything like a tragic confrontation with fate, or even a decisive confrontation between Robespierre and the conspirators who opposed him, the events of Thermidor unfolded in a manner both confused and indecisive in the extreme. As Southey's broken verse laboriously records, Robespierre had not been nobly assassinated but hurriedly denounced and hastily arrested. He had quickly gained his freedom, but the Convention, rather than moving directly against the liberated prisoners, anxiously remained in session and issued a proclamation outlawing Robespierre and his associates. The Robespierrists, having taken refuge in the Hôtel de Ville, attracted a sizable crowd of support, but the Incorruptible himself, with exacting rebuttal to the suggestion, refused to call them to action. "In whose name?" he is said to have replied, and with that the crowd began to dissolve.[41] Late in the night, the Convention sent a force to seize the fugitives. Robespierre, having attempted unsuccessfully to commit suicide, and having in consequence merely broken his jaw with a shot, offered no confrontation at all: the voice of the people, ironically enough, could only groan, and on the following day the recaptured prisoners were hastily, fearfully guillotined.

The imaginative impact of this news must have been considerable, not only for Coleridge but for all those who had, like him, staged already, in their mind's eye, the dictator's tragic murder. First and most obviously,

41. One of the few quibbles I have with Jewett's excellent discussion of the play is that he misreads this moment, suggesting that "One of the most important aspects of Thermidor, as *The Fall of Robespierre* affirms, was the novel agency of the crowd: its strategic nonact of refusing to serve as a personifiable agent. It was perhaps the first time that the revolutionary crowd declined to play the role of the people" (Jewett 47).

there was the shock of the real: Robespierre had not died as Caesar, as a commanding genius struck down by fate, but as one of his own apparatus' mutilated victims—and one rendered mute by his own cowardly hand. By the same token, his assailants had not acted as tragic conspirators, raising the daggers of open conspiracy in public action, but as fearful politicians, exercising in anxious haste their institutional powers of denunciation, arrest, and proclamation. For those, like Coleridge, who had embraced, immersed themselves in what that tragic fantasy played out—in uncanny fashion indeed—since the spring of the year, the shock of this disillusionment must have constituted something very like a bitter plunge into the flow of history, and one that carried the same guilty implications that attached to Macbeth's own conjured dagger. For if the British conception of Robespierre as Macbeth and as Caesar had proven illusory, it had been no less decisive for that in shaping the British public's response to Robespierre's actions, and its collapse carried the same connotations as that marshalling mirage. When Coleridge has Robespierre declare, in the lines quoted at the outset of this essay, "What! Did th'assassin's dagger aim its point / Vain, as a *dream* of murder, at my bosom?" he seems clearly to be gesturing not only to the acts of the play's conspirators but to those of his nation, which by casting the Incorruptible as Macbeth—as a guilt-ridden, self-deluded tyrant—had perhaps contributed to the murder it imagined. Indeed, such a sense of complicity must have seemed well-warranted in the wake of Thermidor's report, for that delusion, like the Roman drama that it produced, had lent the illusion of inevitability and the legitimacy of fate to what now seemed a craven, coldly engineered plot—and one obviously supported, it soon became clear, by the efforts of the Pitt government. In short, the image of Robespierre as Macbeth appeared, in the wake of Thermidor, not as a penetrating portrait of the Incorruptible's fevered, delusive mind, but as a convenient product of the public imagination, a fiction that blinded the British public to the more sordid plotting that Robespierre seemed now rightly to have suspected. Rather than constituting an act of sympathy, that dream of murder now seemed a betrayal, and an act of blind complicity.

However, rather than merely dispelling the particular tragic delusion that had taken hold of the Revolution's British spectators, the events of Thermidor seemed, and quite specifically, to dispel the illusion that tragedy could any longer define great historical action, that it might be realized not only in the mind but in actuality. For the movement and denouement of Thermidor—both the declarations of the Convention and the renunciation of authority by Robespierre—were not tragic, and were certainly not chaotic. Rather, they were governed by the mediated act of proclamation, the issuance of official statement: in short, not by action but by the interpretation of action, and specifically by the rapid provision and reception of au-

thoritative news: Robespierre is denounced, declared outlaw, and thus cannot speak. Indeed, in Southey's closing act, we do not even see the Jacobin leader, the play's central and titular figure. Instead, the action is confined to the Convention, and consists in the rapid-fire arrival of no less than fourteen messengers bearing frantic reports of his actions and situation, each of which prompts countervailing declarations of authority. Southey's acts, in other words, dramatize directly, and embody generically, the dissolution of tragedy in the now-mediated milieu of revolutionary politics, a milieu governed by nothing other than the timely arrival and dispatch of news. Robespierre's alleged query—his "In whose name?" renunciation of a call to arms—is in this sense a decisive moment indeed, and a tragic one: but it is so, not least, because it registers the end of tragedy as a viable poetics of historical action, revealing it to be an ideological rhetoric of politics rather than a governing language of fate. As Marx would soon grasp, modern revolution would have to seize its poetry from the future.

Although in its corrected account the *Times* offered no retraction of its dramatic report of the 16th, the paper's commentary on the 18th suggests strongly the sobriety born of such disillusionment, and possesses a tone far more in keeping with the day-to-day rhythms of modernity. "We shall not," the chastened editors caution,

> now anticipate the consequences of this new Revolution. The circumstances are not yet sufficiently known to comment on them. We have therefore confined ourselves in giving a very faithful analysis of the proceedings of the Convention, from the 27th of July to the 30th. . . . Our extracts have been made with great care; and we trust the history will be found clear and connected. It is taken from the Papers of the *Moniteur* of the 26th, 27th, 28th, 29th, 30th, and 31st of July; and we believe there are not three copies of so late a date in town.

Conclusion

Although there is no way to establish the precise date that Coleridge, Southey, and Lovell sat down to write their historical tragedy, it seems clear enough, given the character of the collaborators' contributions and revisions, that the project was initiated in response to the arrival of the assassination fantasy of August 16 and completed with the arrival, two days later, of corroborated accounts: in such a scenario it is not difficult at all to see why "poor Lovell's" third act would turn out "not in keeping," and why it would be replaced by Southey's workmanlike rendering into verse of the lengthy reports of the 18th. The result, as the lack of critical commentary on the play suggests, is a strange and awkward work, and one that

seems—as we've seen in the commentary by Roe, for example—to derive its awkward, partially redeeming tragic elements and resonance largely from the fertile depths of Coleridge's creative mind.

However, if we look at the play through the lens of the larger, collective drama described here, it takes on far more significance than as a crude product of a hasty wager. One the one hand, as Marx observed long ago, Roman tragedy provided that "illusion of politics" with which the bourgeoisie could reconcile itself to the violence of the Terror, and Thermidor marks, undoubtedly, that moment at which this illusion was most powerfully realized, both inside and outside of France. On the other hand, as I've tried to show, the Revolution catalyzed the formation of an international daily news press, a press that reshaped the nature and the possibilities of political action, and Thermidor marked as well the decisive collapse of the Revolution's tragic illusion on that modern political stage.

The Fall of Robespierre captures both facets of that imaginative experience, opening in the illusory world of Jacobinism's tragic vision, and closing in the chilling material world of political modernity. In its conception and composition, and quite literally in the fracture and collapse of its tragic action, the play offers a stunning representation of the failure of tragedy as an appropriate representation of public action, and a precise, remarkably legible record of that moment of disillusionment and guilt—the knocking of history at the gate—that would catalyze Coleridge's later dramas of remorse and drive romanticism's extraordinary displacement of its French Revolutionary experience.

Scholars of revolutionary print have in recent years raised the question of whether the newspaper is, in Jeremy Popkin's terms, "the right place to look for what is revolutionary about the Revolution."[42] In terms of the evolution of the tragic imagination, I think it may well be, for the rise of the news press, as I've tried to show, brought about a radical, disruptive shift in the texture and the rhythms of historical experience—a shift that, perhaps for the last time in Thermidor, allowed for the kind of dread armistice of ordinary life, and the sympathy of comprehension, necessary to persuade us of the possibility, "in the very world," of tragedy.

Rutgers University

42. Jeremy Popkin, keynote address, "Revolutions in Print," Thirteenth Annual DeBartolo Conference on 18th-Century Studies, University of South Florida, Tampa, February 1999.

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