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Edited by J.C.C. Mays and Joyce Crick:

The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: □ □

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INTRODUCTION

A. DATE

Aug–Sept 1794. Robespierre’s execution on 28 Jul 1794 was reported in the English papers during the second half of Aug. In the earlier part of the month, on a walking tour in Somerset, C and RS heard of it from one of the Pooles at Shurton Court, Stowey, or Marshmill—i.e. from Henry, Tom, or John Poole (see *Poole* 199–105). Part of a letter by RS to Grosvenor Bedford, dated 21 Aug (*S Letters*—Curry—168–9), suggests that the play was written as soon as C and RS returned to Bristol.

Part of another letter by RS to Horace Bedford (*S Letters*—Curry—172–3: 22 Aug 1794) reports that the play was written “in the space of two days”. In an other letter, to his brother, RS claimed the play was written in twenty-four hours (*S Letters*—Curry—175–6: 7 Sept 1794). This minor contradiction is explained in the account of the play’s composition RS later gave HNC, quoted below in section c. In the same letter to HNC RS says that C rewrote his own contribution after he left Bristol. This explains another apparent contradiction, arising from C’s letter to RS of 1 Sept in which he reported that he had finished his part only a day or two before, after his arrival in London (*CL* 197).

C offered the play to London booksellers over the following weeks (*CL* 198: to RS [1 Sept 1794]; 101: to RS [11 Sept 1794]) and took it with him to Cambridge on 17 Sept, where Benjamin Flower agreed to publish it. The dedication and the advertisement at the end of the volume are dated 22 Sept, C reported that all but the title-page had been printed by 26 Sept (*CL* 110: to RS [26 Sept 1794]), and the *Cambridge Intelligencer* advertised the play as published “this day” on 4 Oct and again on 11 Oct.

C’s contribution, Act I, incorporates a song which was probably written in Apr 1794. See 1214–27EC, and 66 *Domestic Peace*.

B. TEXT

The Fall of Robespierre: An Historic Drama. By S. T. Coleridge, of Jesus College, Cambridge (Cambridge 1794).

C described projected sales and distribution to RS on 11 Sept and 21 Sept 1794 (*CL* 1101, 117). He said that he himself had sold five copies to individuals and made presents of six more (*CL* 1117), some or all of which may have been inscribed and none of which has been located. One of the six copies was presented to Ann Brunton, with a poem (*CL* 1117–18, and see 81 *With a Poem on the French*

(apparently) to GC (see *CL* 1 125–6: 6 Nov 1794).

The reprintings in the 1829 Galignani edition (pp 180–201), the 1831 Philadelphia edition, and *LR* 1 1–32 have no textual significance. Douglas Cleverdon, in a letter to T. J. Wise dated 18 Oct 1930 (BM MS Ashley B. 2893 ff 109–10), reported a novel entitled *The Son of Robespierre* in five ms copybooks, dated early 1800. This was not apparently in C's hand, and, despite some coincidences with his other writing, was almost certainly not written by him.

A leaf at the end of the volume carries a displayed advertisement for C's "Proposals for Publishing by Subscription, Imitations from the Modern Latin Poets, with a Critical and Biographical Essay on the Restoration of Literature". (The same proposals, in more extended form, had been advertised in the *Cambridge Intelligencer* for 14 Jun and 26 Jul 1794.)

C. THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION

RS gave a succinct account of the play's composition and background in a letter to HNC, given in *LR* 1 3fn (see also *S Life*—CS—1 217):

This is the history of *The Fall of Robespierre*. It 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. A dedication to Mrs. Hannah More was concocted, and the notable performance was offered for sale to a bookseller in Bristol, who was too wise to buy it. Your Uncle took the MSS. with him to Cambridge, and there rewrote the first act at leisure, and published it. My portion I never saw from the time it was written till the whole was before the world. It was written with newspapers before me, as fast as newspaper could be put into blank verse. I have no desire to claim it now, or hereafter; but neither am I ashamed of it; and if you think proper to print the whole, so be it.

The initial plan was for the play to be published over the name "Lecoridge of both Universities"—i.e. over an anagram of C's name, qualified by "both Universities" so as to add Oxford and Cambridge and thus indicate RS's share.¹ In the event, the play was published over C's name only; he said that this was to help its sales at Cambridge and because "It would appear ridiculous to put two names to *such* a Work" (*CL* 1 106: to RS 19 Sept 1794). He described it to Wrangham (*CL* 1 121: 24 Oct 1794) in words adapted from the opening sentence of the prose preface to bk 1 of Statius' *Silvae*: "libellus, qui mihi subito calore et quâdam festinandi voluptate fluxit"; tr (var) J. H. Mozley (LCL 2 vols 1928) 1 2 "a piece,

¹ See Chrystal Tilney "An Unpublished Southey Fragment in the National Library" *National Library of Wales Journal* 1x (Winter 1955) 149–56 at 150.

improvisation". He was later as frank about the division of labour as RS had been privately all along: *Lects 1795 (CC)* 73fn; *EOT (CC)* II 458; *S Letters (Curry)* I 88: to Thomas Southey [1 Dec 1794]; etc.

After C moved on from Bristol to London and Cambridge, he found it necessary to make changes and improvements in the two acts written by RS. The revisions must have been minor, and they cannot now be isolated with certainty. It is impossible to say whether RS continued the Act I references to Brutus, or whether C wrote them into Acts II and III after he received them. One instance which at first appears confirmed by other evidence turns out to be less certain on closer examination. The cockatrice as emblematic of monarchy and despotism at II 267 was referred to by C in *Lects 1795 (CC)* 134 and 288, and might therefore be thought to be one of his insertions; but he had previously dwelt on the same emblem in a letter to RS of Jul 1794 (*CL* I 84), so that it was a symbol already shared. A similarly inconclusive instance involves the reference to the upas-tree at III 1–3: it was a favourite image of C's from schooldays on, but RS could have derived it independently from Erasmus Darwin or from C earlier in conversation: see **150** *To the Rev George Coleridge 25–8EC*; *Remorse (Printed)* I i 20–4.

Both RS and C were shocked by the news of Robespierre's death. RS's reaction was characteristically more outspoken: "I had rather have heard of the death of my own father" (*Poole* I 101). His contribution draws very obviously on reports of Robespierre's trial and execution in *M Chron* 18 Aug 1794 and *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* 23 Aug 1794, and his interpretation of events is as direct and extreme as in the contemporaneous *Wat Tyler*. When C averred that the sentiments of *The Fall of Robespierre* were contrary to those of *Wat Tyler* (*EOT—CC—II* 458), he appears to have had in mind his own contribution, which has a different tenor from RS's and is what one might call more domestic.

RS and C each found it difficult to condemn Robespierre, for similar reasons but with significantly different kinds of reasoning: compare *S Letters (Curry)* I 73: to Horace Walpole Bedford 22 Aug 1794 and I 75–6: to Thomas Southey 7 Sept 1794 with *CL* I 283fn: to John Thelwall 17 Dec [1796]; *Lects 1795 (CC)* 12, 35, 73–4; *EOT (CC)* II 66; *Friend (CC)* I 328. Both reacted against the simple attacks on Robespierre by the British press and government. For instance, the scurrilous doggerel *Soliloquy of the Famous or Infamous Robespierre, the Present Chief Ruler of France, Overheard by Deborah Sweephouse* appeared in the *Reading Mercury* for 10 Mar 1794 (p 4) and might have been read by C when he was at Reading in the Dragoons (there has even been a suggestion that C was the author: see **65.XI**); and the play is as much about Pitt's England as about intrigue, censorship, and violence in Robespierre's Paris. Opposition newspapers described Pitt as the English Robespierre and the British Barrere (sc Barère)—see e.g. *M Chron* 17, 19 May 1794; and John Thelwall lectured on "a Parallel between the Character of PITT and ROBESPIERRE" (*Tribune* I—1795—254–60). C's views were complicated, however, by a more subtle awareness of moral and political issues, and of the point where such issues intersect: "Bad means for a good end—I cannot conceive that (there can be) any road to Heaven through

but the power which shapes and depraves the character of the possessor” (*Lects 1795—CC—35*).

The difference between RS’s and C’s contributions is abetted by the fact that events in Act I are the background to the public events of Acts II and III, and are necessarily less dependent on written reports and more on guesswork. It is typical that Adelaide, who is introduced in Act I, is the only invented character in the play. Though she corresponds to Tallien’s real-life mistress Thérèse de Cabarrus, and though C could have picked up gossip from Englishmen who had recently been in Paris (e.g. William Shield at Bray), he could only have guessed at many of the domestic details he gives. The fictional name he chose to give her resembles that of the heroine of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), Adeline, and recalls the same values of fashionable Sensibility.

D. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The play is set over two days in July 1794, at the end of seven weeks of the Great Terror when the guillotine claimed more victims than it had done in the preceding fourteen months. It acts out a struggle for power between two groups. On one side, the fanatic triumvirate of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Couthon—assisted here by Robespierre’s younger brother Augustin, the young deputy Lebas, and Henriot, in charge of the National Guard—would preserve the hideous momentum of revolution. On the other, Tallien and Legendre, Bourdon l’Oise, Billaud, and other deputies known as Thermidorians plot to turn revolution into less destructive channels. Barrere, who has the first and last words in the play, holds and tips the balance of power—as he did in real life.

The play merges the historical events of the two days it describes. The invented discussions which fill Act I can be supposed to take place on the morning of 26 July (8 Thermidor). Act II conflates the debate which took place later that same day, when opposition to Robespierre began to consolidate, with that which took place on the following day, when the opposition overthrew him. In reality, Robespierre might still have expected to triumph at the end of the first day—the cries of “A bas le tyran” were not so audible—and Robespierre, Saint-Just, Lebas, and Couthon were not arrested till after 4.00 P.M. on the second day. Act III merges the overnight plotting which brought about Robespierre’s downfall with the events of 27 July, when Robespierre and Saint-Just were prevented from re-entering the debate. Barrere’s concluding speech can be supposed to be delivered in the early afternoon of 27 July.

Following the story told in the play, Robespierre and his supporters were arrested on 27 July (9 Thermidor), some of them committed or attempted suicide in the places where they were imprisoned, and Robespierre was guillotined at 8.00 P.M. the next day, followed by other of his remaining supporters in the days thereafter.

To document all the real-life characters who are incidentally mentioned—e.g. the moderates and opponents of Robespierre who lost their lives as he rose to

traction here. They can be traced in such guides as E. Boursin and Augustin Chalmel *Dictionnaire de la révolution française: Institutions, hommes et faits* (Paris 1893). More recent discussions of the events and of the larger context can be found in Françoise Brunel *Thermidor: La Chute de Robespierre* (Paris 1989) and William Doyle *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford 1989). I have annotated only those allusions which an ordinarily informed reader might overlook. It should be noted that the spelling and handling of accents in the play are sometimes irregular (e.g. C's Henriot for Hanriot, Barrere for Barère, RS's Daubigné for Daubigny).

What C worked up from hints and instinct embodies the features which, he said, make the play different from *Wat Tyler* and which distinguish his own contribution from RS's. It is significant that Adelaide's song might have been written earlier in 1794, and her character appears to have been built around it. The idea of domestic peace and retirement significantly modifies the political theme—as C pointed out to his brother George (*CL* I 125–6: 6 Nov 1794). His critique of Robespierre is mixed with his view of patience (*CL* I 283fn: to John Thelwall 17 Dec [1796]; cf *Lects* 1795—CC—12), which is not dissimilar to Milton's view of the inner spiritual qualities involved in true revolution: "the better fortitude | Of patience" (*PL* IX 31–2). The same idea is also an aspect of C's commitment to Pantisocracy: "The *Heart* should have *fed* upon the *truth*, as Insects on a Leaf—till it be tinged with the colour, and shew it's food in every the minutest fibre" (see *CL* I 114–15: to RS 21 Oct [1794]). Woodring 89, 194–8 has some helpful remarks on the complexities of C's attitude. RS's attitude was meanwhile not entirely simple. Already between 3 and 9 Sept 1794 he had written to tell his friend C.W.W. Wynn that "vexed as I really [am at the dea]th of Robespierre I never laughed more than whilst [dealing with] the subject" (Tilney "An Unpublished Southey Fragment" 150). And while both authors maintained a cool distance when they discussed the play with selected correspondents, its reception by "the hot-headed and youthful democrats of Bristol" was enthusiastic: Q (an anonymous contributor) "To the Editor" *Monthly Magazine* XLVIII (Oct 1819) 203–5.

E. THE DEDICATION AS FRONTISPIECE

The mixture of committed radicalism and sly humour which the play contains—or, more accurately, allows—is prefigured in the Dedication. Henry Martin was from Silton, near Mere, Dorset, and one of the three pensioners (students paying for their own commons) in C's year at Jesus. C's relations with the other two (Henry Poole and Thomas Berdmore) are better documented but he is not known to have been close to any of them. The long letter C wrote to Martin during his Welsh tour in July 1794 (*CL* I 90–6) is unusual, and one might have expected C to have written such a letter to other friends he evidently knew better. Martin appears, then or later, to have been acquainted with William Bowles, and a coincidence of literary tastes may explain the letter; but other friends in other colleges were publicly more committed to C's side in politics, and would have been more

incumbent of Cucklington, Somerset, and of Silton.

C must have been prompted by other motives than what appears to have been casual friendship. He was undoubtedly conscious that Henry Martin, usually spelled Marten (1602–80), was the name of the outspoken regicide who signed the death sentence on King Charles and was prominent in the proceedings which led to the establishment of a republic. His relation to the English revolution bears a number of resemblances to Robespierre's rôle in France. C's "fraternal" dedication to the unknown and respectable pensioner who shared the same name establishes an association between the English and French revolutions and also floats it on a joking alibi.

Marten spent his last twenty years in Chepstow Castle, as C must have been reminded when he passed through Chepstow on his way back to Bristol from his Welsh tour. RS visited Marten's prison and wrote an inscription on him (*Poems—Bristol 1797—59*), which Canning parodied and applied to Mrs Brownrigg, the notorious murderess, in the first number of the *Anti-Jacobin* (20 Nov 1797 p 8).

F. THE PRESENT TEXT

The present text reproduces that of the 1794 edition. A few minor corrections have been made and are noted in the textual notes. The normalisation of typographic features affects brackets and punctuation in stage directions and a few instances of spacing, and acts have been given new pages.