

Looking like Death: dress and allegory at the *bals des victimes*

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Clothing and costume

The oddities of dress and behavior exhibited by the young men and women of the post-aristocracy during the concluding days of the French Revolution have long earned them the epithets of *Incroyables* and *Merveilleuses*, along with remarkably persistent censure by contemporaneous critics and modern historians alike for a perceived immersion in vulgar excess and debauchery. Indeed, in the history of dress, the Directory is typically portrayed as an episode characterized by a state of temporary psychosis, with the so-called *bals des victimes* periodically cited as one of its most outrageous manifestations.

Certainly, as we shall see, the fashions worn at the *bals des victimes* embodied a radical, heterogeneous, and often contradictory mix of signifiers. But having just emerged from a period of abysmal bloodletting, those who remained standing after the Revolution had significant personal trauma to negotiate. As the American costume historian Katherine Morris Lester (1925, 156) has pointed out, ‘these freaks of fashion [were] the natural outcome of [the] vast upheaval’ of the age. In fact, their very epithets encode perhaps the most meaningful ciphers to their state of mind: for the *Incroyables* and the *Merveilleuses*, life during the transitory period of the Directory, was both *incredible* and *marvelous*: the Terror had passed, and they had survived it.

Clothes, fittingly, provide the materials with which the idea of the self can be articulated on the exterior plane; they serve as a canvas for the inscription of individually and collectively held beliefs that shape identity. During the period of the French Revolution, the ideology of the State encompassed a systematic appropriation and transformation of the body into a propagandised instrument, with dress awarded the complex function of subordinate political signifier. For instance, the prominent wearing of emblems of egalitarianism such as the tricolor cockade, at times legally enforced, was, overall, enthusiastically adopted by the majority of citizens. Nevertheless, for a small but significant minority – the dispossessed members of the nobility – the Revolution was experienced as an episode requiring constant sartorial vigilance and even

subterfuge. For, in order to evade persecution or – in many cases, to escape the country entirely – aristocrats routinely resorted to disguise, masquerading as peasants, or *en bourgeois*. Indeed, in key ways, clothing during the Revolution metamorphosed, for everyone, into costume: a mutation at whose origins, arguably, lie the highly performative scenarios staged for the people by the government. Good citizens, after all, were expected to actively participate in recurrent patriotic demonstrations as well as attend the ongoing performance of public executions.¹

The mass killings gained horrifying momentum during the Reign of Terror, the period lasting from the summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794, and marked by an unprecedented surge in the legally sanctioned carnage of citizens. The closure of the theatre of the guillotine on the 9th day of Thermidor, Year II of the revolutionary calendar (or the 27th of July 1794), therefore, brought with it an almost inexpressible sense of relief, and in its wake clothing continued to serve as one of the chief barometers of psychological states.

The *bals des victimes*

Nowhere was the vestimentary inscription of symbolic meaning more pronounced than at the *bals des victimes*. These, according to memoirists such as the Duchess of Abrantès and a handful of others, as well as observers of contemporary Parisian society such as Louis-Sébastien Mercier, were private soirées held during the winter of 1795, at which members of the former nobility gathered to dance in an improvised festive wake for recently deceased relatives. This celebration of the dead was enacted through a transference of identity achieved by the strategic appropriation of potent visual elements – attire that simultaneously gestured specifically to the moment of dying and alluded to the promise of regeneration.

Based on the accounts that have surfaced in my research on the topic so far, as well as pictorial documents that illustrate apparel worn at the time the balls were held, I will attempt to reconstruct the picture, and argue that the participants’ need to reconcile the trauma of the guillotine engendered a symbolic lexicon that expressed – sartorially – anxieties surrounding life

and death, and also communicated a reconfiguration of habitual notions of masculinity and femininity.

With the Terror pronounced over, the Directory government released hundreds of former state enemies from prison, among them scores of aristocrats. The collective feeling of panic gave way to a widespread *joie de vivre* which was epitomized by a dance craze; in the days and weeks that followed, no less than six hundred ballrooms opened their doors in Paris alone (Quichérat 1877, 633). Spared by Thermidor, the former nobility, whose ranks were enlarged by the return of exiled compatriots, was also in the mood to celebrate. For the most part however, they remained isolated, cloistered in *hôtels particuliers* (private homes) as recluses who refused to associate with the *nouveau riche* that had emerged to fill the public spaces of the Capital.

But though the erstwhile leaders of society no longer dominated the public scene, they presided over private ballrooms where they held intimate reunions, the most remarkable of which were the *bals des victimes*. The Duchess of Abrantès, who professed to have attended the gatherings, stated (1893, 3: 98) that in order to qualify for a subscription to the ball, one had to have a blood relative who had died in the Revolution. This claim is corroborated by Mercier, who reported (1797 [1994], 3: 339) in *Le Nouveau Paris* that those who sought to gain admittance to the *bals des victimes* were obliged to produce a death certificate proving that they had lost an immediate relative to the guillotine.

It is significant that although it was demanded that participants be in mourning, there are no indications that they were required to wear mourning dress – with the exception of a crêpe arm band (a well-established funerary convention by the end of the eighteenth century). Mercier decried this apparent disregard for orthodox mourning decorum:

Will it be believed in posterity that people whose relatives had died on the scaffold did not institute solemn and communal days of bereavement during which, assembled in mourning wear, they attested to their grief over such cruel and recent losses, but rather, established days of dancing where one waltzed, drank and ate to one's heart's content? (1797 [1994], 3: 339, *my translation*).

Yet that the fundamental elements of funerary protocol were neglected in this particular case is not altogether surprising – for a number of reasons.

In the first place, mourning fashion had been undergoing considerable change in the years leading up to the Revolution, and for women at least, the custom of wearing full black had undergone steady erosion until, by the 1790s, widows in half-mourning could convey their status in a white ensemble only discreetly trimmed with black embroidery.

A second crucial obstacle to the observance of traditional funerary custom for those who attended the *bals des victimes* was imposed by the opprobrious status of the dead; condemned as criminals of the state, executed aristocrats were not only denied the right to burial in consecrated ground, but to be seen in mourning for a figure associated with the counter-revolutionary movement was to invite unwanted scrutiny. There was, furthermore, the grave danger of being perceived as mourning the demise of the monarchy, the penalty for which was summary execution. To further complicate matters, Robespierre had issued an edict in mid-1794 forbidding all aristocratic assemblies. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the revolutionary government had banned the Church, and as a consequence, traditional Christian funeral celebrations were circumscribed by force of law, not to be resumed until 1799. Since regular channels for mourning had been thus banished from the social praxis of the new regime, the need to construct alternative mourning rituals, away from the public eye, was all the more urgent.

So what, then, was worn at the *bals des victimes*? Georges Duval, who lived through the Terror, reported in his memoirs (1844, 2: 80) that they were attended by 'the most elegant and wealthy aristocrats garbed in greco-roman gowns'. These seemingly innocuous neo-classical garments telegraphed multiple connotations.

The whiteness of the gowns was especially significant as it suggested not only a virtuous simplicity but also passively articulated both an aspect of mortality and a muted politicised protest. For, being the colour traditionally worn in the mourning of innocents and children, white carries intrinsic associations of purity and martyrdom.² Analogously, the ivory complexions of the dancers at the *bals des victimes* denoted both the pallor of corpses drained of their blood and the countenance of the condemned during their last moments at the guillotine. In his memoirs, Charles-Henri Sanson, the chief executioner of the Revolution, related (1988, 115) that when the King's mistress, Madame du Barry, mounted the scaffold, her face passed from a shade of feverish violet to ashen white. This anecdote of vivid transformation metaphorically encapsulates the general fading of colour in clothing and cosmetics that attended the demise of the *ancien régime*. As Lester has remarked (1925, 156), 'the disappearance of rouge' accompanied the Revolution.

On the literal level, the impulse to acknowledge the dead at the *bals des victimes* gave rise to fashions termed *à la victime*, and *à la sacrifice*, which actively inscribed the exterior signs of the guillotined victims. Their principal distinguishing feature was a short, dishevelled hairstyle known variously as the *coiffure à la victime*, *à la Titus*, or 'porcupine hair'.

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Sources vary on the question of the exact origin of the hairstyle. Duval claimed that it had originated specifically at the *bals des victimes*, and wrote that

Some strong-minded patrons of the ball... devised a regulation that one would henceforth be admitted only after having cropped one's hair along the nape of the neck in the manner imposed by the executioner on the victims of the revolutionary tribunal (1844, 2: 80).

The hairstyle thus made overt reference to the ritual shaving known as the *toilette du condamné* which was carried out on the condemned, ostensibly in order to facilitate their decapitation.

Women who were reluctant to cut their hair (or who regretted having done so) exposed the nape of the neck by sweeping their tresses up under a kerchief. Others resorted to the artificial remedies of hairpieces and wigs modeled in antique styles known as *perruques grècques* and *cache-folies*. 'Les élégantes possèdent tout un jeu nombreux de perruques, le plus souvent blondes, et même des perruques de couleur' (Sée 1929, 33). This seemingly innocuous caprice for flaxen locks nevertheless contained its own peculiar undertones of death, for the wigs were fabricated from the blond locks of guillotined victims – an impromptu mourning practice that had been initiated, it was said, by a circle of counter-revolutionary women (Mercier 1797 [1994], 2: 249-50). In her detailed compendium of French clothing during the Revolution, *Les Vêtements de la liberté*, Nicole Pellegrin offers further evidence of the macabre custom (1989, 47). She quotes a German visitor to Paris who observed:

Les perruquiers préfèrent surtout les cheveux des personnes guillotonnées, et ils étoient très recherchés, parce que ceux des gens morts en bonne santé, sont plus souples, plus délicats et plus faciles à travailler, que ceux des malades, ou lorsqu'on les leur a coupé [sic] après leur décès. On coupe les cheveux aux malheureux condamnés à la guillotine, avant leur exécution: ainsi un grand nombre de nos belles à la mode portent sur la tête un legs d'homme, qui par le plus grand malheur furent privés de cette propriété de la nature! Elles en font parade, et relèvent leurs attraits par les tristes restes des victimes de la Révolution! Et c'est précisément dans le temps de la Révolution, que ces perruques sont partout à la mode.

To the voluntary appearance of ritual tonsure was added the most explicit marker of death, the *collier à la victime*, or 'victim's necklace' (Pellegrin 1989, 5). It consisted of a red ribbon wrapped around the neck in emulation of the fatal cut of the guillotine, as seen in Figure 1.

Symbolic ribbons also surfaced in such fashions as the *ceintures* and *croisures à la victime*. The nineteenth-century historian Jules Quichérat described the fad as follows (1877, 635, *my translation*): 'in the *à la victime* attire, which was almost a political manifestation, a red ribbon was wound around the neck, drawn under the

arms, tied across the back, and then knotted over the breast'.

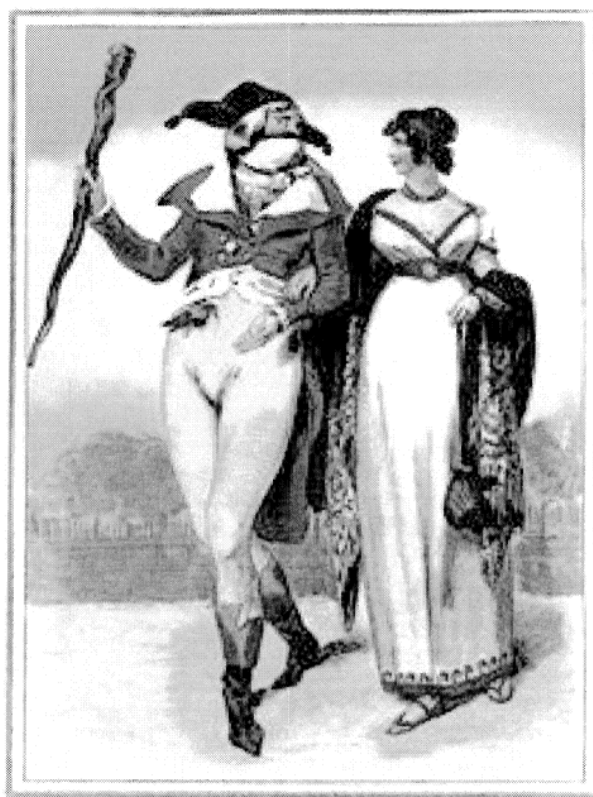


Fig. 1. A *Merveilleuse* on the arm of an *Incroyable*
'Costume parisien: croisures à la victime',
Journal des dames et des modes (1799).

The actual spilling of blood was communicated by means of red accessories such as bonnets and shawls dubbed *à la Corday* in homage to the counter-revolutionary heroine who had been subjected to an injunction decreeing that murderers be conducted to the place of execution clothed in a red shirt. Duval (1844, 2:81) confirmed this association, noting that 'the habitués of the *bals des victimes* ... adopted the red shawl, [like] the one that Sanson had thrown on Charlotte Corday's white shoulders as she proceeded to the scaffold'.

If the Revolution could be said to have been dominated by bloodthirsty male tyrants, the Directory, in the words of the mid-nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet, was ushered in by women, in the guise of 'dancing furies, spattered with blood' (cited in Duhet 1971, 201). Some may have extended the metaphor so far as to appear at the *bals des victimes* in blood-spattered clothing recovered from the bodies of family members.

This claim surfaces in the writings of contemporary historian Charles Nodier, who reported (1850, 1: 261-262) that 'the required dress of the danseuse was that in which her mother or sister had fallen under the hand of

the executioner', and of Luise Muhlbach, a nineteenth-century biographer of the Empress Josephine who stated (1867, 118)

the heirs of the victims wore some token of the departed ones, and ladies and gentlemen were seen in the blood-stained garments which their relatives had worn on their way to the scaffold, and which they had purchased with large sums of money from the executioner.

Despite the perhaps mythopoeic ring to these accounts, such a scenario could have occurred, for the records show that the garments of the dead were indeed obtainable. In accordance with an authorized practice known as the 'executioner's tip', executioners were entitled to the clothing worn by their victims, plunder from which they commonly profited through private sale (Schama 1989, 670).

The *Merveilleuses*

With the proliferation of mimetic emblems that denoted death was juxtaposed an abundance of allegorical elements that signalled its dialectical opposite, regeneration. To begin with, the new fashions emphasised the erotic appeal of the female form. The insubstantial drapery, cut of the sheerest cotton, linen or silk, plainly revealed the wearer's physical attributes. As Mercier (1797 [1994], 3: 338) remarked, it 'stuck close to the body [and] did not leave the beholder to divine, but perceive, every secret charm'. Further, an impression of nudity was suggested by skin-toned auxiliary apparel such as knit stockings and removable sleeves that could be discarded in the evening.

This calculated revelation of the feminine physique was a distinctly post-Revolution phenomenon. For, during the Revolution, a significant number of women had attempted to appropriate democratic elements of masculine costume such as the red cap of liberty, and even that emblem of Sans-culottist politics, trousers. Their crusade for gender equality in dress, however, was swiftly – and vigorously – suppressed by the revolutionary Convention, with the result that *citoyennes* were left with little option but to accept the iconic conception of femininity enshrined in the official Republican rhetoric of the Supreme Being, a cryptopagan doctrine which posited a genderless deity whose earthly representative was a semi-divine female figure. This apotheosized status of women was even insinuated in their ball gowns which were christened 'priestess chemises', 'vestal tunics', or 'Diana' and 'Minerva gowns', to name but a few (Bertaut 1946, 173; Sée 1929, 23).

The surrogate priestess function assigned to women was also evident in the performative centrality they assumed when dancing. Women at the balls of the era, writes Ribeiro (1988, 125), danced 'with abandon, and with almost a religious ecstasy'. Mercier witnessed them presiding over the ballroom as ecstatic celebrants,

dancing in a silent, almost maenadic rapture. 'Silence reigns over the multitude of [dancing] women', he observed (1797 [1994], 1046, *my translation*), and the women 'do not speak, but they watch and they observe.'

Woman's state-sanctioned role as goddess entailed an accompanying veneration of her fertility which, on the one hand, was overtly reinforced in official pageantry and visual propaganda, and on the other, was conveyed metonymically by the amplification of maternal attributes in her dress. Thus, the high waist greatly emphasised the bosom, and the prominent stomach lent the wearer the appearance of pregnancy. Indeed, essentialised by revolutionary rhetoric as pure biological form and function, woman's civic duty encompassed nothing less than the regeneration of the French nation.

This constantly reinforced portrayal of women as possessors of an inexorable life force carried with it associations of miraculous powers of regeneration, a trope which persisted into the Directory period. In *Le costume de la Révolution à nos jours* (1929, 26), Raymonde Sée makes the fascinating observation that the omnipresence of the flimsy neo-classical gowns communicated a paradigm of '*estivalité permanente*'. Indeed, the wearing – in spite of icy weather – of apparel originally designed for the Mediterranean climate asserted a defiance of human mortality, and by extension, served as an affirmation of eternal fertility. But for all that, these icons of eternal renewal were mortal, and they were dying. The winter of 1795 was 'one of the harshest on record', and thin shawls and removable silk sleeves provided meagre protection from the elements (Ribeiro 1988, 108, 127). According to published testimonials by contemporary doctors, scores of young women fell victim to pneumonia and died, perishing, as far as medical opinion was concerned, as a direct result of the vogue for 'fake nudity' (*ibid.* 113).

We can add to this a further paradox advanced by Raymonde Sée (1923, 25), who observed that 'on the heels of the Terror, not only pallor, but thinness, too, was deemed a civic virtue'. The full bosoms and rounded stomachs fabricated by Directory fashion thus in fact concealed a gauntness that, arguably, expressed a negation of life, a refusal to feast after the famine.

Hence, as we have seen, women's dress incorporated manifold contradictions. In society at large, as at the *bals des victimes*, the *Merveilleuse's* appearance embodied vital polemics, yet her identity remained liminal, hovering between life and death.

The *Incroyables*

Among the young men who attended the *bals des victimes* were members of an unofficial legion known as the *Incroyables*, 'sons of "suspects" and ... guillotine victims', assessed at about 'two to three thousand in number' (Ribeiro 1988, 116). Avowedly monarchist,

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they wreaked public havoc, roaming in bands, defacing revolutionary monuments, and settling scores with rival Jacobin gangs in street brawls. Originally labelled the *Jeunesse dorée*, or *gilded youth*, they were assigned a string of soubriquets throughout the 1790s that can be translated roughly as Fops, Black Collars, Green Collars, Royal Cravats and Cudgel Lords. All of these designations referred either to the aggressive or outlandish qualities of their dress or to the political signifiers encoded therein.

As I have mentioned, the particular semiologies adopted by men and women at the *bals des victimes* denote divergent impulses that suggest a 'gendered' response paradigm, one that aligns the sexes in a more or less parallel relationship with respect to the signaling of motifs implying life and revitalization, but in a dialectical one with respect to the encoding of symbols of death and political resistance. It could be argued that through the medium of clothing, men celebrated the triumph of life over death, while women ultimately conveyed the reverse trope. For, while the *Merveilleuses* enshrined key symbols of mortality and vulnerability in their dress, thus allegorically reliving the martyrdom of their relatives, the dress of their male counterparts contained a heterogeneous blend of elements that displayed a tropological bravado which repudiated death, and in its place, communicated vigor and defiance.

In his *French Revolution*, Carlyle catalogued a number of these references: 'Behold,' he wrote (1837 [1904], 3: 378),

Young men ... in superfine ... 'square-tailed coat,' with elegant antiguillotinish specialty of collar; 'the hair plaited at the temples,' and knotted back, long-flowing, in military wise ... They have come out, these Gilt Youths, in a kind of resuscitated state; they wear crape round the left arm, such of them as were Victims. More they carry clubs loaded with lead; in an angry manner: any ... remnant of Jacobinism they may fall in with, shall fare the worse. They have suffered much: their friends guillotined; their pleasures, frolics, superfine collars ruthlessly repressed...

Evidently, the men and women of post-Thermidor society drew in different ways from the semiotics of antiquity and contemporary life. While the *Merveilleuses* had accepted a classical vision of femininity filtered through the mythologising lens of revolutionary rhetoric, the *Incroyables* rebelled against the masculine prototype – the disheveled proto-proletarian uniform espoused by the *Sans-culotte* establishment. At the same time, they cautiously avoided explicit reference to the excessively elaborate fashions of the *ancien régime*. Instead, looking closer to home – geographically and temporally – for a sartorial model, they traded in *anticomanie* for *anglomanie*, and adopted the studied simplicity of the English squire's riding ensemble.

The outfit *à l'anglaise*, consisting of a swallow-tailed great coat with exaggerated lapels, a waistcoat with equally oversized lapels, a high cravat, long fitted leggings (termed pantaloons), and high-cut riding boots, was in fact a comparatively safe choice, for, having its origin in functional garb, it connoted appropriately utilitarian values. At the same time however, subversive inclinations were covertly conveyed since England was formally opposed to the Revolution. The wearers' royalist affiliations were further reinforced by the contraction of their pantaloons at the knee by means of ribboned garters – a visual truncation that obliquely referenced the aristocratic knee-breeches once worn by their fathers. To this wardrobe they added emblems of factual and symbolic might by appropriating that quintessential accessory of the rural English lord, the gnarled walking stick which, hollowed out and filled with lead, they converted into the aforementioned cudgels (popularly christened 'Hercules clubs'. In the *Diary of a Citizen in Paris During the Terror*, historian Edmond Biré adds that pistols, carried in waistcoats or coat pockets, were likewise considered indispensable by many *Incroyables*.

Cryptic political messages were also inscribed through colour-coding. Green, the colour associated with the comte d'Artois, the King's exiled brother and putative heir to the throne, indicated support for the monarchy, and so it commonly adorned collars, coats and waistcoats. Black collars, too, were worn, connoting as they did the 'black Austrian cockade dubbed "à la Marie-Antoinette"' (Séguy 1998, 32). For their part, the members of the Jacobin street gangs who clashed with the *Jeunesse dorée* donned long trousers and blood-red collars that alluded menacingly to the guillotine.

The hairstyles adopted by the *Jeunesse dorée* communicated the triple message of political rebellion, Samsonesque virility, and a commentary on the guillotine, for in defiance of the short republican style known as *à la Brutus*, they wore a long and shaggy hairdo with pendant forelocks called 'dog ears', and long tresses at the back which were sometimes plaited – and not infrequently snipped and carried off as trophies by their foes (Pellegrin 1989, 40). Like the women at the *bals des victimes*, men mimicked the shaved heads of the condemned, and Duval (1844, 2: 80) reported that some shaved their hair at the neck. Others, who felt that cropping their hair carried undesirable republican associations, solved their dilemma by devising a versatile hairstyle that allowed them to maintain their long locks and their anti-Jacobin stance. Known popularly as the *coiffure à tresses victimées*, it was fashioned by pinning up their dissident tresses to the backs of their heads with a comb in order to expose the napes of their necks (Pellegrin 1989, 106).

The most palpable response to the guillotine, however, was transmitted through the high cravat or *haute cravate à la mode*. Where the *Merveilleuses* stressed the vulnerability of the throat by slashing it with a blood-red ribbon, the *Incroyables* concealed their necks under layers of linen so voluminous that their chins – and sometimes even their mouths – were hidden from view. The exaggerated symbolism inspired visceral commentary from critics and historians. Mercier (1797 [1994], 5: 761) remarked that the cravats appeared to entomb the wearer's chin. Carlyle (1837 [1904], 3: 337) characterised them as 'enormous horse-collar neck-cloth[s], good against sabre-cuts'. Also of course, good, metonymically, as a bandage to assuage the cut of the guillotine. More recently, the French fashion historian Nicole Pellegrin (1989, 58) has suggested that the image of the *Incroyables*' heads thus swaddled, operated as phallic synecdoches, and proposed the intriguing argument that the stiffly creased and starched neckcloths functioned elliptically as 'penile sheaths'.

In addition to this putative marker of sexuality, the *Jeunesse dorée* signalled sexual potency in another, more direct, way – specifically, by their buff-coloured close-fitting pantaloons, contrived to exude an appearance of nudity from the waist down. At the same time, although their modes and manners superficially expressed – and even bombastically broadcast – virility, the *Jeunesse dorée* exhibited eccentricities of dress and behavior that destabilized traditional notions of masculinity. Inspired by the coarse aesthetic of sailors, for example, they introduced the decidedly radical and unaristocratic fashion for gold earrings, and they spoke to one another in a lisping patois which was compared by their critics to the babbling of infants (Séguy 1998, 31). And although in comparison with the affected mannerisms of their extinct progenitors, the *Jeunesse dorée* embodied a poetics of machismo, they were disparaged as unnatural and affected by those who wielded the editorial pens. Their street swagger, in particular, provoked ridicule. As early as 1791, an issue of the *Journal de la mode et du goût* scoffed 'What a pleasing thing it is to see our young men walking about as Hercules, their feeble arms trailing heavy clubs, which so far, have served only to slay flies and frighten little children' (cited by Ribeiro 1988, 68, *my translation*).

Yet for all that, the antics of the *Jeunesse dorée* were hardly childish. This unofficial militia had contributed to the overthrow of the terrorist regime and had also helped to quell the threat of ensuing Jacobin insurrections. Finally, in spite of the fact that the attire of the *Jeunesse dorée* was condemned for an alleged effeminacy, its pseudo-military character arguably affirmed masculine culture *a fortiori*. As Carlyle rhetorically noted (1837 [1904], 3: 379): 'Do not these long-flowing hair-queues of a Jeunesse Dorée in semi-military costume betoken,

unconsciously, [an] important tendency? The Republic, abhorrent of her Guillotine, loves her Army.'

Perhaps in the end, the hallmark of the youthful members of the Directory who enacted the traumatised self at the *bals des victimes* was their ability to generate an improvised response to the events that shaped their world. The majority of costume historians have tended to endorse the conventional view of the *Incroyables* and *Merveilleuses* as anomalous fashion fanatics, but as Pellegrin (1989, 106) reminds us, in introducing flamboyant trends, the *Jeunesse dorée* was no different from any other rebellious youth movement.

This is a crucial point. The *bals des victimes*, like Post-Terror society in general, were dominated by a young generation, orphaned and independent – a cohort striking out on its own. Having lost their parents, and the entire lexicon of modes and manners that was buried with them, they were obliged to experiment with new models, to learn to fashion their own paradigms of resistance and renewal. And central to the complex task of constructing their adult selves was the obligation to acknowledge the dead. As we have seen, the Revolution furnished a large-scale scenario in which the boundaries between life and performance were reconfigured. The proscenium was lifted, daily existence metamorphosed into drama, and everyday wear was converted into costume. Death is incommunicable, as is the severing of a generation, but for those eligible to dance at the *bals des victimes*, costume provided an effective medium in which to embed a coded text that commented allegorically on a morbid legacy too problematic to articulate literally. This temporary adoption of the identity of the dead generated a performative tableau in which a collective catharsis was sought, a purging of the Terror and its ghosts.

Notes

- 1 Theatre historian Michael Sidnell has observed that it was this large-scale performative enactment of life and death that inspired Thomas Carlyle to coin the term 'theatricality' (personal conversation, 4 Sept. 2003; see Carlyle 1837).
- 2 As Aileen Ribeiro remarks (1988, 98), 'Madame Roland and Lucile Desmoulins wore white gowns when they were guillotined, as did many others in an ironic echo of the republican ideal of martyrdom'.
- 3 *The Empress Josephine* (New York: Appleton, 1867). It is currently out of print; my source is the text provided by the online Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.simonova.net/library/1169-1.html>>.

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