

---

H-France Review Vol. 2 (October 2002), No. 105

Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York and London: Routledge, 2001. 243 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl); ISBN 0-415-92616-5. \$22.95 U.S. (pb); ISBN 0-415-92617-3.

Review by Gary Kates, Pomona College.

Antoine de Baecque has offered us a way to understand the French Revolution from a novel vantage point, and if for nothing else, the originality of this book's approach is itself enough to warrant our attention. By looking at the way revolutionaries perceived the deaths of seven contemporaries, de Baecque comments on the importance of the "corpse at the center of representation" (p. 2). The book's strength lies in the variety of the chosen corpses de Baecque himself has chosen to represent. They include Honoré Gabriel Victor Mirabeau, the Revolution's first great politician who died of natural causes in 1791; Voltaire, whose life may have ended in 1778, but whose corpse was revived by the revolutionaries in their efforts to transfer his bones to the Pantheon in 1791; Marie Thérèse Louise de Savoie-Carignan, better known as the Princess de Lamballe, who was hacked to death during the September Massacres of 1792 because of her friendship with the queen; King Louis XVI; Maximillian Robespierre; an ordinary citizen named Geffroy who helped save the deputy Jean-Pierre Collot d'Herbois from assassination; and Suzanne Curchod, better known as Madame Necker, who died of natural causes in 1794.

While each case study forms a chapter that stands on its own, de Baecque weaves them together by arguing in the introduction that the presence of "the corpse" at the center of revolutionary iconography and debate allows us original and unusual insights into revolutionary politics. For one thing, it helps us more fully understand the Terror, when, in de Baecque's words, "political life...was suddenly abandoning calm reason, intangible principles, and ordinary methods of public action. Each political decision at that instant enters a dialogue with death, with the corpse that legitimizes it, the corpse that it engenders, or the actual body, constantly threatened, of the one that makes the decision. It is through this *discourse of corpses* that a period like the Terror can be contemplated" (p. 10).

As a reader, this sort of fanciful and engaging prose heightens my imagination and brings me closer to the subject. But frankly, as a historian, I'm not sure what it means. First, the Terror was certainly not characterized by a sudden abandoning of calm reason, for everyone knows that such calmness is not found anywhere in late eighteenth-century French politics, either before or after 1789. Second, since only four of the seven chapters address deaths that occurred in close proximity to the Terror (the Princess de Lamballe, Louis XVI, Robespierre, and Geffroy), the line between the Terror and the Revolution is hazy. Sometimes de Baecque seems to think of the Terror as a distinct political culture within the Revolution, but most of the time he seems to think of it as the Revolution itself. Such obfuscation does little to help us understand the role played by the corpse. (This confusion is further revealed by comparing the French and English sub-titles of the book: *Sept morts sous la terreur* was changed to *Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*.)

The chapters themselves are uneven in quality, though never without insight. Those on Mirabeau, Voltaire, Louis XVI, and Robespierre recycle old ideas in a new style. But among them are two gems

---

that deserve the widest possible readership because of how de Baecque combines original scholarly erudition with a light literary style. The first concerns Geffroy (we never learn his last name), “father of a family, locksmith on the Rue Favart” (p. 121), who was shot in the shoulder while trying to defend National Convention deputy Collot d’Herbois from a would-be assassin. The voluntary intervention of a common citizen who put himself in harm’s way to defend the Revolution against its enemies became a theme of popular literary culture during the Terror. A play was performed in Geffroy’s neighborhood that turned him into a celebrity. De Baecque brilliantly uses this “cult of Geffroy” to show how it personified the role “regeneration” played in the cultural politics of the Terror. “The Revolution is now nothing but a struggle to the death between regeneration and corruption,” writes de Baecque, “to which Geffroy’s body can testify in the eyes of all Republicans” (p. 130). Equally effective is the very different chapter on Madame Necker, who died in 1794 at the age of fifty-four, but who, as de Baecque demonstrates, had been living in her corpse, neurotically worrying about her health since the 1760s. Interweaving biography and culture, he shows a female savant who used her own turmoil about illness and death to develop a critique of “the Catholic treatment of the corpse” (p. 189). The result is a portrait of a Madame Necker who seems closer to Flaubert than to Diderot.

Unfortunately, the book is poorly edited. If one of the delights of this study is de Baecque’s almost constant discussion of visual images, it is frustrating that the vast majority of such illustrations are not reproduced in this book. Likewise, throughout the book minor politicians are introduced in the text without their first names; nor are their first names even included in the index. Considering how many revolutionaries had the same last name, this is potentially confusing if not simply sloppy.

Despite these drawbacks, this book confirms that Antoine de Baecque is among the most original cultural historians writing on the French Revolution today.

Gary Kates  
Pomona College  
gkates@pomona.edu

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172