

Loris Chavanette, Danton et Robespierre. Le choc de la Révolution, Paris (Passés/Composés) 2021, 480 p., ISBN 978-2-3793-3024-7, EUR 25,00.

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The figures of Robespierre and Danton are deeply engraved within French Revolutionary historiography. The two men's differences were more than evident at the time: after a period of harmonious relations, Robespierre led the move to have Danton sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal, to his certain death. Yet it is especially from the time of Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez in the Third Republic that the opposition between the two has been amplified and elaborated in historical accounts. In highly polemical exchanges, »Robespierrist« Mathiez pitched Robespierre against his mentor, »Dantonist« Aulard, in terms of character (ascetic Robespierre versus pleasure-loving Danton), morality (incorruptible Robespierre versus allegedly corrupt Danton) and political ideas (Robespierre's populist republic of virtue versus Danton's ultimately anti-terroristic humanism). It should also be said that film-maker Andrzej Wajda's vivid depictions in his »Danton« (1983) have further etched the contrasts between the two men in the popular imagination.

Loris Chavanette's new dual biography, »Danton et Robespierre«, which traces the growing and ultimately mortiferous rivalry between the two men, views their »duel« as crucial for understanding the Revolution as a whole and its wider historical significance. Colourfully written, with an eye for drama, Danton et Robespierre is certainly an entertaining read. Yet it perhaps works better as a study in the political mythography of the two »frenemies« than a strictly historical account. Chavanette displays a very thorough acquaintance with the historiography of the Revolution over the last two centuries where it has touched on the two men. Yet there is no primary research, and the sources, if copious, are all printed. The result is essentially a synthesis, aimed more at an informed general public readership than at students, scholars and researchers working on the Revolution. Oddly, Chavanette does not really engage with contemporary historians and biographers of the two men and refers to their work only relatively sparingly and often dismissively. Where he cites recent scholarly biographers such as Jean-Clément Martin and Hervé Leuwers, for example, he falls back on confident assertion rather than careful scrutiny of sources. This seems of a part with his stated distrust of recent academic scholarship: he mocks university scholars' alleged preference for Robespierre over Danton as a choice involving a »bien meilleur élève« as against the »impertinent et turbulent« Danton (p. 72). This is an odd way to conduct historiographical debate.



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Regrettably too, while Chavanette carefully considers the views of fiction-writers like Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Anatole France and Arthur Koestler, he has not seen fit to consult any scholarly works in English. Glaring omissions include biographies of Robespierre by Ruth Scurr (2006), Peter McPhee (2012) and Norman Hampson (1974), as well as the latter's biography of Danton (1978). These scholars do not have a monopoly of wisdom, of course, but their contribution has been widely acknowledged in France, and their writings are firmly grounded in original research in French archives.

Chavanette's treatment of the two men is stronger on colour than nuance and ultimately falls back on established stereotypes. Danton the »bourgeois matérialiste« comes off much better in his hands than Robespierre the »bourgeois puritain« (p. 392). Robespierre's bachelor status is held against him – he was married to the Revolution, Chavanette claims (p. 144) – whereas Danton, as a family man and womaniser, had a better sense of humane values, and was more wholesomely masculine. Chavanette gives the benefit of the doubt to Danton over evidence of corruption too (p. 426), and minimises the value of Robespierre's putative incorruptibility. Danton's life also, he contends, resonates more evidently than Robespierre's with modern-day feminism and *laïcité* (p. 333).

Biographers are prone to over-emphasise the importance of their subject. Clearly these were two exceptionally important figures in the Revolution. All the same, Chavanette's unwavering focus on the two men means that the wider historical contexts of their lives are often either lost from view or underplayed. This is less of a problem in the chapters on the Ancien Régime – the account of the two men's childhood and adolescence is fuller and more informed than in most other biographies. But it becomes increasingly troublesome the more the Revolution unfolds. When considering responsibility for the Terror, for example – which is largely laid at the door of the two men – it is surely incumbent on a biographer to consider the full range of those whom many years ago the American scholar R. R. Palmer dubbed the »Twelve Who Ruled«. But Chavanette has precious little time for the Committee of Public Safety's Carnot, Prieur de la Côte d'Or, Lindet, Billaud-Varenne or Collot d'Herbois, while even Robespierre's allies Couthon and Saint-Just are short-changed. While »Danton et Robespierre« is less effective than one would have wished in portraying the epochal events in which they played a key part, Chavanette vividly demonstrates the powerful hold that the two men have long enjoyed in the French political imagination.



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