

Original citation:

Wardhaugh, Jessica (2015) In the shadow of Danton : theatre, politics, and leadership in interwar France. In: Wardhaugh, Jessica, (ed.) Politics and the individual in France 1930-1950. London: Legenda, pp. 13-27. ISBN 9781909662247

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/99116>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

<http://www.mhra.org.uk/publications/Politics-Individual-in-France-1930-1950>

Reproduced with kind permission from Legenda publishers.

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

PART I. THE INDIVIDUAL AND HISTORY

Chapter One

In the Shadow of Danton:

Theatre, Politics, and Leadership in Interwar France

Jessica Wardhaugh

On 13 July 1936, an historic encounter took place between French leaders, past and present, in the Parisian Arènes de Lutèce. On stage stood the iconic revolutionary hero Georges Danton, his charismatic personality and electrifying rhetoric brought to life through the words of Romain Rolland's eponymous play of 1898.¹ In the audience was France's first Socialist Président du Conseil, Léon Blum — an intellectual leader whose aesthetic demeanour could hardly have been further removed from Danton's earthy popular appeal. Around them, two intermingled crowds: the actors on stage playing the part of volatile revolutionaries; the mass audience in the Arènes drawn from the equally volatile crowds of 1930s street politics. At the moment when Léon Blum made his appearance in the company of the Communist leader Maurice Thorez, the actors on stage greeted them with gusto, Danton and Saint-Just raising their fists in fraternal salute. Blum applauded Danton; the actors on stage applauded Blum. For a few fleeting moments, the two leaders basked in the adulation of their respective popular supporters. For Danton, the crowd would prove fickle by the end of Act Three; for Blum, the illusion lasted slightly longer.

This performance of *Danton* is rarely described in detail in histories of the Popular Front and studies of Romain Rolland. The reason is straightforward. On the following day there was a performance that was larger, more widely publicized, and apparently more closely attuned to the sense of left-wing triumph and mass festivity in early summer 1936: Rolland's *Le Quatorze Juillet*. Performed at the Théâtre de

¹ The play was written in 1898, published in the *Revue d'art dramatique* in 1898–99, and first performed in December 1900.

l'Alhambra in Paris and also broadcast on national radio, this was an optimistic retelling of the storming of the Bastille from which all violence had been excised (at least from the staged version).² In the finale, the enthusiastic acclamation of liberty culminated in a popular festival that Rolland had intended to spill out from the stage into the auditorium, representing 'le principe d'un art populaire nouveau: le peuple contraint de mêler non seulement sa pensée, mais sa voix à l'action; le peuple devenant acteur lui-même dans la fête du Peuple.'³ [the premise of a new popular art: the people obliged to contribute not only their thoughts but also their voices to the action, the people themselves becoming actors in the popular festival.] Rolland himself attended the final performances in August, after many years of self-imposed exile from the theatre.⁴ Little wonder, therefore, that this particular performance should be so frequently cited in classic accounts of the Popular Front as representing the climax of their unity and victory — soon to be threatened by ongoing economic crisis and by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.⁵

Yet in many ways, *Danton* is a far more profound and pertinent reflection than *Le Quatorze Juillet* on the triangular relationship between masses, leaders, and politics that was to determine the political fortunes of nations during these years of European crisis. Often neglected in the study of Rolland's experimental Théâtre de la Révolution, the text and performances of *Danton* can — as this chapter will demonstrate — shed important light on the relationship between the individual and history. They illuminate, for example, Rolland's idiosyncratic interpretation of the French Revolution and the problems of individual agency within it, contributing to the current re-evaluation of this important intellectual. In so doing, they also reveal an aspect of Rolland's own writing on popular theatre — and of popular theatre more broadly — that has received relatively little analysis, namely the ambiguous relationship between the people and their leaders (both intellectual and political). Setting *Danton*, together with Rolland's reflections on popular theatre, within their

² This is specified by Rolland in the stage directions. See Rolland, *Le Théâtre de la Révolution: Le Quatorze Juillet* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1926), p. 137.

³ Rolland, 'Le Quatorze Juillet', p.151. Pascale Goetschel makes implicit reference to this objective in a study of the poster for *Le Quatorze Juillet*, described as seeking to 'Faire advenir le peuple comme acteur de son destin'. Goetschel, 'Le 14 Juillet de Romain Rolland à l'Alhambra: l'affiche de Suzanne Reymond', *Parlements* 8 (2012–13), pp. 173–80, here p. 180.

⁴ Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Théâtre populaire, enjeux politiques* (Paris: Complexe, 2006), p. 197.

⁵ E.g. Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–38* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 124 and 126. Jackson refers to the performance of *Danton*, but only that of *Le Quatorze Juillet* is described in detail. Cf. also Meyer-Plantureux, *Théâtre populaire*, pp. 177–9.

wider historical context and with particular reference to the performance of 1936 ultimately offers an insight into the French imagination of political leadership. Blum applauded Danton with gusto, but his own fall from popular and political grace would be similarly dramatic (although fortunately not fatal) when he requested full powers as *Président du Conseil* in April 1938, for the Third Republic had a long-standing and difficult relationship with powerful leadership. Audience reactions provoked by *Danton* in 1936 offer, indeed, a striking insight into some of the key characteristics of this particular relationship. Sudhir Hazareesingh has described the Fifth Republic as in the shadow of de Gaulle,⁶ but there was a different — but equally determining — shadowplay in the politics of the Third.

Romain Rolland: The Individual, the People, and History

Romain Rolland (1866–1944), now relatively neglected, was one of the intellectual heavyweights of the Third Republic. In his own lifetime he was more widely read than either Paul Valéry or André Gide,⁷ his literary works and political engagement projecting him to both fame and notoriety. Few would dispute his overall literary merit: in 1913, he received the Académie Française's Grand Prix for literature; in 1915 he was awarded the Nobel Prize after the publication of his *Jean-Christophe*, a voluminous novel in which the friendship between a Belgian composer and a French intellectual offers a striking contrast to the rising nationalism dividing Europe. Rolland was, moreover, not only a prolific novelist and playwright but equally a renowned biographer whose studies of artistic, literary, and musical genius — Michelangelo, Tolstoy, Beethoven — revealed his own deep-rooted fascination with the heroic individual.

Rolland's earnest engagement with national politics and international affairs would earn him rejection and resentment as well as admiration. He became notorious for his anti-nationalist essay *Au-dessus de la Mêlée* (1914) (criticized by George Bernard Shaw, among others, for its abstraction),⁸ and was a guiding force behind the

⁶ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of de Gaulle* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

⁷ Maurice Nadeau, 'Romain Rolland', *Journal of Contemporary History* 2.2 (1967), pp. 209–220.

⁸ Ruth Harris, 'Rolland, Gandhi and Madeleine Slade: spiritual politics, France, and the wider world', *French History* 27.4 (2013), pp. 579–99.

creation of *Europe, revue mensuelle*, in the 1920s.⁹ Yet he provoked consternation from some of his left-wing friends when in the 1930s he performed the seeming volte-face of joining the French Communist Party. To his socialist friend Jean Guéhenno, who protested that war was unacceptable, Rolland's response was curt: 'Pour être "pacifiste" complet, faut-il donc abdiquer le bon sens?'¹⁰ [Does being an integral pacifist mean rejecting common sense, then?] At his funeral in 1944, Rolland was accorded military honours; and over his coffin waved a banner bearing the Soviet hammer and sickle.

Despite his eventual commitment to the Communist Party, however, Rolland's political and intellectual engagements were nothing if not complex. Indeed, as recent research is beginning to clarify, a superficial assessment of this writer as a left-wing intellectual glosses over the very tensions and ambiguities that structured his own trajectory.¹¹ Chief among these — especially for the understanding of his theatre — is the conflict between his fervent elitism and his equally fervent belief in the people and their political agency.¹² This was a man who not only conceived of artistic genius and mission in quasi-mystical terms, but who also professed with equal sincerity a belief in the people who would make the future their own, even if this would entail destruction or oblivion for the cultural inheritance he cherished. 'Et vive la mort si elle est nécessaire à fonder la vie nouvelle ! Puisse l'art populaire s'élever sur les ruines du passé !'¹³ [And long live death if it's essential to the creation of new life! Let popular art arise from the ruins of the past!]

It is important, therefore, to look beyond *Le Quatorze Juillet* in the analysis of Rolland's *Théâtre de la Révolution*, as in the analysis of Rolland himself.¹⁴ A wider

⁹ On Rolland's importance in *Europe, revue mensuelle*, see Jessica Wardhaugh, 'Europäer erschaffen: die Rolle der Zeitschrift *Europe - Revue Mensuelle*, 1923–1939' in *Der Europäer – ein Konstrukt. Wissenbestände, Diskurse, Praktiken* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2009), ed. by Kiran Patel, Veronika Lipphardt, and Lorraine Bluche, pp. 97–117.

¹⁰ Rolland, letter to Guéhenno, 23 January 1936, in *L'Indépendance de l'esprit: correspondance entre Jean Guéhenno et Romain Rolland, 1919–1944* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1975), p. 370.

¹¹ See Harris, 'Rolland, Ghandi, and Madeleine Slade', p. 583. Similarly, Marion Denizot criticizes the tendency to classify Rolland's more idiosyncratic political vision within traditional Marxist thought. Denizot, 'Le Théâtre de la Révolution de Romain Rolland' in Denizot (ed.) *Théâtre populaire et représentations du peuple* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010), p. 194.

¹² Rolland's 'profonde méfiance envers tout ce qui pourrait transformer le peuple en foule' is, for instance, emphasized by Denizot in 'Le Théâtre de la Révolution', p. 202. Her chapter refers only fleetingly to *Danton*.

¹³ Romain Rolland, *Le Théâtre du Peuple, essai d'esthétique d'un théâtre nouveau* [1903] (Paris: Albin Michel, 1926), p. 169.

¹⁴ This chapter seeks in particular to deepen the analysis of Rolland's critical depiction of the crowd and their leaders. This is, for example, noted briefly in Valérie Battaglia's overview, 'Romain Rolland

appreciation of the complexities of this work — both as a series of texts and also as successive performances — not only develops the understanding of Rolland's intellectual contradictions; it also sheds new light on the real and imagined relationships between leaders, masses, and politics during the Third Republic.

Despite its important association with the popular festival at the climax of the Popular Front, *Le Quatorze Juillet* is in many ways unrepresentative of the cycle as a whole. Certainly, it is more nuanced than many evocations of its elision with popular festival would suggest, and its portrayal of the crowd is by no means uncritical. In his dramatic depiction of the storming of the Bastille (which poses obvious challenges in performance), Rolland endeavours to capture both the dangerous volatility of street politics, and equally the naïve inexperience of men and women unprepared for their newly significant historical role. Surely, at the moment when the royalist aristocrat Vintimille doffs his hat to the crowd with the dry observation: 'Voici donc le Nouveau Roi [...] Messieurs, la Canaille.'¹⁵ [So here is the New King [...] Gentlemen, the people.], Rolland has at least some share in his scepticism. He notes, for example, in his stage directions that the crowd should appear at this point as 'une marée humaine [...] têtes hurlantes.' [a human tide [...] screaming heads.]¹⁶ Moreover, he also portrays the bloodthirsty women of the people as deflected from killing the Invalides only by the judicious intervention of such revolutionary leaders as Marat, Hulin, and Hoche. It is the last of these who rushes to place the child Julie (a somewhat clumsy personification of the crowd's childlike sentiments and idealism) in the niche left empty by the displaced statue of the King.

Nevertheless, Rolland allows the crowd's idealism to triumph over their more animal instincts. It is in this sense significant that the play should culminate with Hoche's utopian cry of 'Frères! tous frères! tous libres! ... Allons délivrer le monde!'¹⁷ [We're brothers! All brothers! All free! Let's go and deliver the world!] Less ambiguous, more optimistic than other contemporaneous plays in the cycle such as *Danton* or *Les Loups*, Rolland's *Le Quatorze Juillet* was to be more immediately taken up by mainstream theatre.¹⁸ And it is the irrepressible optimism of the play and

et le Théâtre de la Révolution', *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 41 (1989), pp.178–195, but not developed in detail.

¹⁵ Rolland, *Le Quatorze Juillet*, p. 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁸ David James Fisher, 'Romain Rolland and the French People's Theatre', *Drama Review* 21.1 (1977), p. 82

its centre-stage portrayal of the people that remain the dominant impression, as noted by reviewers of both the 1902 and 1936 performances.¹⁹

Viewed against the backdrop of Rolland's complete *Théâtre de la Révolution*, however, *Le Quatorze Juillet* is anomalous both in its privileging of the crowd as a collective actor and also in their optimistic portrayal. Rather than assuming — or hoping for²⁰ — a linear relationship between Rolland's more combative theoretical writing on popular theatre, the plays themselves, and their fusion with the popular festivities of 1936, it is more illuminating to explore the Théâtre de la Révolution as a series of ongoing dialogues. First, there is a dialogue between Rolland's initial scheme for the cycle, sketched out in the late nineteenth century, and the writing of the plays in their more immediate historical contexts. Secondly, there is a dialogue — intense, and often unresolved — between Rolland's fascination with the crowd as a wild, awe-inspiring force of nature, and his identification with individuals (especially heroic individuals), as they struggle with the personal and moral dilemmas of political engagement.

When Rolland's Théâtre de la Révolution was revived in 1930s France by the Théâtre du Peuple, many assumed it was a trilogy: *Les Loups*, *Danton*, and *Le Quatorze Juillet*. In fact, the cycle was composed of eight plays written over a period of forty years. Four of these were written before the First World War: *Les Loups*, *Danton*, *Le Quatorze Juillet*, and *le Triomphe de la Raison* (originally published in a separate series entitled *Les Tragédies de la Foi*). Four were composed in the 1920s and 1930s: *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort*, *Pâques Fleuries*, *Les Léonides*, and *Robespierre*. The order of their composition does not reflect the overall chronology of the plays: the 'preface' is actually *Pâques Fleuries*, set in 1774, and the 'épilogue' to the series is *Les Léonides*, set among revolutionary and counter-revolutionary exiles in Switzerland in 1797. But while Rolland had mapped out the grand scheme of the cycle at the end of the nineteenth century, the composition of the plays was inevitably shaped by his evolving political concerns and commitments in both France and Europe: *Les Loups*, for example, deliberately echoed the contemporary conflicts and

¹⁹ 'Recueil d'articles de presse et de programmes pour *Le Quatorze Juillet*, de Romain Rolland', Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des arts du spectacle (hereafter BN DAS), Rf 71 145.

²⁰ David Bradby and John McCormick criticized the cycle 'of what now seem rather conventional plays, [where] Romain Rolland accepted the idea that to encourage progressive social policies, it was sufficient to present a passive popular audience with heroic images of its past.' Brady and McCormick, *People's Theatre* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p.34. Others, however, have seen in Rolland's own theatre an anticipation of agit-prop. See Battaglia, 'Romain Rolland', p. 190.

debates around the Dreyfus Affair, while *Robespierre* offered a pertinent reflection on leadership and the nation for inter-war Europe.

It was indeed the success of Rolland's plays in post-war Europe — and not the bitter debates they occasioned in 1920s France²¹ — that inspired him to continue with his Théâtre de la Révolution in the 1920s and 30s. The revolutionary tumult of the 1790s had, by this point, a very contemporary resonance, and Danton was to appear frequently on the post-war stage, especially in Germany. During the Weimar Republic, one of the most popular classics was Georg Bücher's *Dantons Tod* (1835), with no less than 89 different productions between 1919 and 1933.²² Meanwhile, a spectacular production of Romain Rolland's *Danton* was directed by Max Reinhardt at the Grosses Schauspielhaus in Berlin, a city echoing from its own revolutionary upheavals, from February 1920 until September 1921. Reinhardt's production ran concurrently with the filming of Dimitri Buchovetzki's *Danton*, which was based on Bücher's play, while Reinhardt's own 1929 production of *Dantons Tod* would incorporate texts from the play by Rolland. Danton also prompted reflections on contemporary politics in Stanislawa Przybyszewska's 1928 play *The Danton Case*, with its clear references to the Russian Revolution (the play went underground after its 1933 production in Warsaw, and was not revived until 1967).²³ In the same period, Rolland's other revolutionary plays were also popular across Europe and beyond. In 1918, the Petrograd Proletkult Arena celebrated the first anniversary of the October Revolution with a production of *Le Quatorze Juillet*,²⁴ which was further performed in Cologne in 1924.²⁵ *Les Loups* was performed not only in Germany and Russia but also in Czechoslovakia and even Japan, where performances after an earthquake in Tokyo were particularly popular, the audience possibly identifying with the difficulty of individual choice and action in the midst of devastating upheaval.²⁶

The programme notes Rolland composed for these post-war performances shed light on the ways in which he conceived of the cycle as a response to natural

²¹ In France, meanwhile, Rolland's wartime notoriety as author of *Au-dessus de la Mêlée* had by no means subsided, and a proposal to stage *Danton* at the Comédie-Française in 1921 provoked fiery controversy. See Gabriel Boissy in *Comœdia*, 11 December 1921. 'Articles de presse sur *Danton*, de Romain Rolland', BN DAS Rf 71140.

²² Bruce Arthur Murray and Christopher Wickham, *Framing the Past: The Historiography of German Cinema and Television* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 119.

²³ Dudley Andrew and Steve Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 158.

²⁴ Bradby and McCormick, *People's Theatre*, p. 45.

²⁵ 'Romain Rolland, dossier biographique', BN DAS, WGT-834.

²⁶ Romain Rolland, *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1925), preface.

grandeur and tumult, as well as revealing his fascination with the effects of such tumult on human experience and engagement. His 1924 notes for the Cologne production of *Le Quatorze Juillet*, for instance, evoke the symphonic depiction of a popular cyclone;²⁷ the 1925 introduction to *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort* records a similar observation he made in 1900, while attending rehearsals for *Danton* and writing *Le Quatorze Juillet*: 'je sens que s'organise un vaste poème dramatique; j'entends gronder l'océan soulevé: L'Iliade du peuple de France.'²⁸ [I sense the coming together of a vast dramatic poem: I hear the tempestuous sounds of a stormy sea: the Iliad of the people of France.] Rolland's artistic tastes and ideals had, after all, been formed in response to the grandeur and emotion of the music of Beethoven and Wagner: this cycle of revolutionary drama was surely an effort to echo his musical ideals in 'symphonic' prose. And as far as the people (often depicted here as the crowd) are concerned, they clearly hold for Rolland the fascination of a fundamentally untameable natural force: transformative, destructive, awe-inspiring, and terrifying. Significantly, however, it is the formidable genius of the Revolution itself and its effect on individuals that are in many ways the key themes of the dramatic cycle. In his 1924 programme notes Rolland describes the people as guided by this revolutionary genius, rather than as self-conscious historical actors in their own right. 'Ce génie de la Révolution française est le héros du *Quatorze juillet*. Il s'exprime par le peuple aux mille têtes, inconscient encore de sa force...'²⁹ [This genius of the French revolution is the hero of *Le Quatorze Juillet*. It expresses itself through the many-headed people, still unconscious of their strength...]

Notwithstanding Rolland's dramatic innovation in placing the crowd at centre stage in *Le Quatorze Juillet*,³⁰ the Théâtre de la Révolution as a whole favours a more traditional place for the individual, and — as the analysis of *Danton* also reveals — a more nuanced appreciation of the revolutionary people. The dilemmas of individual action at times of political tumult and war are, for example, movingly explored in both *Les Loups* (1898) and *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort* (1925). *Les Loups*,

²⁷ Romain Rolland, 'Préface au *Quatorze Juillet* pour les représentations au Stadttheater de Köln, novembre 24 (texte inédit en français)', 'Romain Rolland, Dossier biographique'.

²⁸ Rolland, 'Préface au *Quatorze Juillet*'; Rolland, *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1925), preface, p. 11.

²⁹ Romain Rolland, 'Préface au *Quatorze Juillet*.'

³⁰ Battaglia, for example, describes *Le Quatorze juillet* as representing 'le surgissement du peuple sur la scène théâtrale et politique, sa prise de parole, son entrée dans le temps historique.' Battaglia, 'Le Théâtre de la Révolution', p. 184

written in less than a week (20–26 March 1898),³¹ is set in Mayence in 1793 and centres around the unjust conviction of an army officer, d'Oyron: a revolutionary aristocrat of counter-revolutionary background who is suspected of treachery. 'Vous ne me pardonnez pas d'être d'une autre race,' he observes drily.³² [You will not forgive me for being of another race.] The parallels with the Dreyfus Affair are self-evident and intentional, and yet the play offers none of the straightforward moralizing or didacticism that some contemporary Dreyfusards expected from its performance.³³ At the moral centre of the play is a bitterly impassioned debate between two officers: Teulier, who though personally suspicious of d'Oyron as an individual nonetheless suspects the evidence of his treachery still more strongly, and Quesnel, a pragmatist who believes it expedient for one man to die for the people. For Rolland's contemporaries, this was of course an incendiary topic. In May 1898, when a performance of *Les Loups* was attended by some of the key figures in the Dreyfus Affair such as Colonel Picquart and Dupaty de Clam, the exchange of insults across the auditorium rendered this the very interchange between Teulier and Quesnel almost inaudible.³⁴

Written almost thirty years later, *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort* likewise centres on an inner drama of personal choice at a time of political tumult. Set in March 1794 — and like *Les Loups* constrained by its enclosed, threatened interior setting — this is a love triangle against a backdrop of political commitment and Terror. The hero is Jérôme de Courvoisier, a member of the Convention revolted by its 'dictature de sang'³⁵ [dictatorship of blood] to the point of resolving to make that decisive rupture with routine characteristic of political commitment — Alain Badiou's 'truth event'.³⁶ Having refused to take part in the vote on Danton, certain in the knowledge that this will bring his own character under suspicion, he offers his wife the opportunity to flee with the Girondin deputy who claims her love. But in what becomes both a powerful love story and an existentialist Resistance drama *avant*

³¹ Rolland, *Mémoires et souvenirs* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1956), p. 290. The play was entitled *Morituri* in its original performance.

³² Rolland, 'Les Loups', in *Le Théâtre de la Révolution*, p. 26.

³³ The work received the support of Lugné-Poë on account of its implicit approval of the Dreyfusard cause. Gertrude R. Jasper, 'Lugné-Poë and the (Euvre', *The French Review* 15.2. (December 1941), pp. 127–34, here p. 131. Yet Rolland wrote in his diary that he intended to demonstrate 'la grandeur farouche qui ennoblit les deux causes'. Rolland, *Mémoires*, p. 291.

³⁴ Rolland, *Mémoires*, p. 292.

³⁵ Rolland, *Le Jeu de l'Amour*, p. 146.

³⁶ Cf. Chapter three, p. xx

l'heure, Sophie honours his refusal to collaborate and the two await their certain arrest around the embers of the family hearth.

For all three central characters this is indeed a 'game of love and death', but for Jérôme Courvoisier it is also a battle between the rights of the individual and those of the nation. Just as in *Les Loups*, one of the most powerful dialogues concerns the relationship — and battle — between individual conscience and liberty on the one hand, and the demands and security of the state on the other.

Courvoisier: J'ai le droit de ma conscience, et le pouvoir de me sacrifier pour elle.

Carnot: Pour que l'homme soit libre, il faut d'abord le défendre contre ceux qui l'asservissent. Les droits de l'individu ne sont rien sans la force de l'Etat.

Courvoisier: Ils ne sont rien, sacrifiés à la force de l'Etat.

Carnot : Ils ne sont rien. Ils seront. Sachons sacrifier le présent à l'avenir!³⁷

[Courvoisier: I have a right to my own conscience, and the power to sacrifice myself for it.

Carnot: If man is to be free, he must first be defended against those who enslave him. The rights of the individual are nothing without the power of the state.

Courvoisier: They are nothing if sacrificed to the power of the state.

Carnot: They are nothing at the moment. They will exist in the future. We must know how to sacrifice the present for the future!]

Danton and the Crowd

While *Le Quatorze Juillet* focuses on the drama of the crowd, and *Les Loups* and *Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort* on the inner dramas of individuals, it is *Danton* that addresses most clearly the relationship between the two. Here, indeed, is a study of

³⁷ Rolland, *Le Jeu de l'amour*, pp. 146–7.

the charismatic leader and volatile crowd of particular relevance to the French Third Republic — both at the time it was written and initially performed, and also when it was revived in France in the mid-1930s. Action against rhetoric; crowds against leaders; the innocence or guilt of individuals as determined by the impetuous and ever-changing demands of Revolution — these themes, already tackled in *Les Loups*, recur in *Danton* to striking effect. To begin with, the action of the play takes place in a similarly enclosed space (important in reinforcing the effect of claustrophobia): the first act in Camille Desmoulins' home, the second in Robespierre's spartan lodgings, and the third in the revolutionary tribunal before which Danton, Desmoulins, and others are on trial for their lives. Well-known revolutionary heroes not only head but almost entirely dominate the list of *dramatis personae*, in which the few female characters appear — together with 'Le Peuple' — only at the end. Rolland adds his own details on their appearances and dominant traits of the lead characters (as well as listing their ages, as he does for every play in his revolutionary cycle). Danton, for example, is '35 ans. Gargantua shakespearien, jovial et grandiose. Mufle de dogue, voix de taureau (...) Athlétique, sanguin.' [thirty-five years old. A Shakespearean *Gargantua*, jovial and larger than life. The muzzle of a mastiff, a bullish voice (...) Athletic, fiery.]³⁸ The crowd or people (they are described in both terms at the opening of the play) appear in contrast in their least attractive aspect. They are joyful, certainly, but only in their rush towards the guillotine — the final image in Rolland's previous play.³⁹

In *Danton*, it is the struggle between the revolutionary leaders, the people, and the all-consuming genius of the Revolution itself that forms the centre of the play. The first passionate debate between the revolutionaries focuses on the volatility — but also potential docility — of the people in politics. 'Qui peut se flatter d'être aimé de cette brute?' [Who can flatter himself that he is really loved by that brute?] asks Marie-Jean Héroult de Sechelles, adding that there can be no lasting unity of purpose between the individual and the popular conscience. 'Le cerveau du peuple est une mer, grouillant de monstres et de cauchemars.' [The popular mind is a sea, swelling with monsters and nightmares.]⁴⁰ Camille Desmoulins, meanwhile, is brashly confident of the swaying power of his rhetoric, even if cynical about people

³⁸ Rolland, 'Danton', in *Le Théâtre de la Révolution*, p. 1.

³⁹ 'Au dehors, une clarinette joue un air grotesque. Le peuple rit à grand fracas.' Rolland, 'Danton', p. 9

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

themselves.⁴¹ Yet the example provided for the audience of Desmoulins' powers of persuasion is a highly bookish speech on the ideal Republic, laden with classical illusions that would surely have been lost on a popular audience. As Hérault de Séchelles observes with considerable derision: 'Tu es un Athénien chez les barbares, Ovide parmi les Scythes.'⁴² [You are an Athenian among the barbarians; Ovid among the Scythians.]

If the intense but fragile relationship between the people and their leaders is one key theme, the battle between rhetoric and action is another — and, of course, intrinsically connected. The eponymous hero of the play encapsulates this battle between rhetoric and action with particular potency, and Rolland plays effectively with the well-established opposition between the ascetic Robespierre, coldly true to his ideal of the Republic of Virtue,⁴³ and the earthy *bon viveur* Danton, battle-scarred from his youthful wrestling with wild bulls. Danton is both a man of the people and a highly skilled orator: yet when we first encounter him in Rolland's play he is resolutely against the infernal machine of the Revolution, proclaiming, somewhat like Voltaire's *Candide*: 'Faisons l'amour, et cultivons nos champs.'⁴⁴ [Let's make love, and farm our land.] Danton's idea of the people is of a peaceable folk weary of bloodshed, war, and politics — weary, too, of heroic leaders, and yearning for simple human pleasures. Robespierre's people are, in contrast, a pure and idealised body of citizens, and an inspiration to revolutionary acts.⁴⁵

These rival images of and claims to the people clash still further in the decisive final act, in which, for the first time, the audience also encounters the crowd on stage. The scene is set in the revolutionary tribunal: another enclosed, oppressive space, filled with sleep-deprived men consumed by mutual suspicion and fear for their lives. A crowd has assembled to watch the proceedings (while a further crowd gathers menacingly outside the courtroom as the trial progresses). Yet there is a curious ambivalence in their depiction. This crowd is representative of the people; and described as such by both accusers and accused. But although the substance and outcome of the trial depends on how they have supposedly been led astray, and on how they will react to the likely conviction of their popular heroes, the crowd is both

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴² Ibid., p. 17.

⁴³ Cf. The title of Ruth Scurr's biography: *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London: Chatto, 2006).

⁴⁴ Rolland, 'Danton', p. 10.

⁴⁵ 'Dans le peuple est notre lumière; son salut est notre loi.' Ibid., p. 75.

central and marginal to the action on stage. In the stage directions, Rolland describes them as a public watching a melodrama, both amused and moved⁴⁶ — they are not actors, but audience, like those watching the play itself: two ‘peoples’ watching the activities of their leaders. And even the reader faced with the printed text of the play finds the people pushed visually and symbolically to the edge of the text: their various shouts and movements indicated only in the footnotes (Rolland justified this strategy as encouraging creativity in performance, with his own lines merely indicative of the words and reactions that could be developed).

The paradoxical depiction of the people in this play thus echoes their duality in Rolland’s cycle as a whole: they are the ‘social tempest’ — powerful, untameable, terrifying — and yet they have the fatal flaw of susceptibility to emotional and instinctive appeal. In this last act of *Danton*, the stakes are high as the accused deliberately play to the gallery (and are duly reprimanded for doing so) in their assertions that they have been unjustly accused, and that popular wrath must avenge this injustice. The charismatic Danton is, predictably, the most effective: his gutsy appeal a powerful contrast to the more abstract rhetoric of his accusers.⁴⁷ In his presence and at his defence, the crowd grows instinctive, elemental, and symphonic: they tremble, echo his ‘thunderous’ laughter, and are transported by ‘Homeric’ joy. When Danton makes a final resounding appeal to the people to defend the truth that is being smothered, their agitation mounts to a ‘crescendo’, their approval of their hero breaking out into ‘une tempête de cris et de bravos, qui couvre toutes les paroles.’ [a tempest of shouts and *bravos*, drowning out the speeches.]⁴⁸ Thus inflamed, the crowd begins overturning the benches of the court, and the officials fear that a more summary justice will take over from the scripted proceedings. But the crowd’s susceptibility is both their strength and their weakness. In a brilliant manoeuvre, Saint-Just redirects their energies by announcing that carts bearing flour and wood to the famished capital have just arrived at the Porte de Bercy. Without a second thought, the crowd forces its way out of the courtroom, leaving Danton and the others to their imminent fate.

An earth-bound crowd; its heroic but doomed leaders — these are the two most powerful images in *Danton*. And the analysis of the text within the wider

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

context of Rolland's *Théâtre de la Révolution* thus adds new and significant detail to the appreciation of this intellectual's political and literary trajectory. In his personal response to the drama of the French Revolution, Rolland reveals his fascination with grandeur — whether expressed by the untameable crowd or by the nobility of heroic individuals, perishing in their chosen stand against the overwhelming force of the Revolution itself. Rolland himself was, of course, a leader-figure in his role as an intellectual speaking to educated opinion but also to a wider public. In his nuanced appreciation of the powerful but volatile relationship between people and their leaders, there is surely a glimpse of the anxieties and insecurities of a writer dependent for his success and reputation on public opinion.

In short, Rolland's *Théâtre de la Révolution* is not what might be imagined from its best-known example — or indeed from his own highly influential theoretical articles on popular theatre, in which he was engaged while composing *Danton* and which would later appear collectively as *Le Théâtre du Peuple* in 1903. Lauded by Lucien Mercier as a dream of art for the people,⁴⁹ and indelibly associated with a 'théâtre de combat',⁵⁰ these reflections are often associated with just one of the forms of popular theatre that Rolland eventually suggested as a model for the future: the popular festival, whereby theatre loses its very meaning by becoming action. Rolland himself contributed to such an emphasis by his prefaces — that of 1903 describing popular theatre as a 'machine de guerre contre une société caduque et vieillie'⁵¹ [a war machine against an aged and outmoded society.] In formulating this particular model he was, moreover, explicitly indebted to such thinkers as Denis Diderot, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the last of whom would make an appearance as a misunderstood prophet in the 'Preface' to Rolland's revolutionary theatre).⁵²

And yet like his historical plays themselves, *Le Théâtre du Peuple* is marked by a more circumspect approach to popular entertainment and agency than this particular example would suggest. Rolland expresses this succinctly when he

⁴⁹ Lucien Mercier, *Les Universités populaires 1899–1914* (Paris: Les Editions ouvrières, 1986), p. 166.

⁵⁰ Melly Puaux, Paul Puaux, Claude Mossé, *l'Aventure du Théâtre populaire, d'Epidaure à Avignon* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1996), p. 13.

⁵¹ Rolland, *Le Théâtre du Peuple*, xi.

⁵² *Danton* is far removed from the conception of mass theatre and festival that Rolland proposed at the end of his theoretical work. The play was clearly conceived within the mental framework imposed by the size and shape of a nineteenth-century theatre building: the acts are set within confined spaces, and the mass movements of the crowd confined to shouts from off-stage.

introduces the people as the speechless sovereign — ‘le peuple, comme d’habitude, ne parle guère, et chacun parle pour lui’,⁵³ [the people, as usual, hardly speak at all, and everyone speaks for them] condemned to eternal regency even though they are in principle to transform the world. This ambiguous position profoundly shapes his consequent proposals for the ideal character of popular theatre itself. For if the people are — despite their political potential as agents of revolution — also malleable, vulnerable and even ‘feminine’,⁵⁴ then they need to be guided by suitable leaders, whether intellectual or political, to secure their best interests. In terms of popular theatre, this means for Rolland that prospective playwrights and directors should proceed with caution in their choice of repertoire and strategies of performance.

Rolland’s *Théâtre du Peuple* offers, therefore, a series of reflections that critics have sometimes termed ‘paternalistic’⁵⁵ in their protective and prescriptive approach to popular entertainment. His own circumspection concerning the people explains his wariness in presenting them with either romantic drama — which might seduce them;⁵⁶ boulevard theatre — ‘la maison de débauche en Europe [the brothel of Europe] — or even classical dramas from antiquity, dangerous not for their obscenity but for their inadequate translation into modern French.⁵⁷ No wonder that one of the few remaining options for popular theatre, together with the festival, was historical drama.⁵⁸ Effectively performed, such drama might elevate actors and audience alike in its evocation of past national grandeur and individual heroism: and this was the edifying goal that Rolland set himself with his *Théâtre de la Révolution*.

The importance of this underlying ambivalence about the people as historical actors and audience is that it also illuminates a lesser-known trend within the theory and practice of popular theatre more generally. Much of the scholarship on popular theatre in this period (and not solely on French examples) assumes its supportive relationship with democracy — it is often referred to as aiming at and indeed furthering cultural democratization, not only by bringing ‘high’ culture to a more

⁵³ Rolland, *Le Théâtre du Peuple*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Echoing late nineteenth-century writings on the crowd, such as those of Gustave Le Bon, Rolland explicitly described the people as feminine, prompted not only by reason but also by instinct and passion. Rolland, *le Théâtre du Peuple*, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁵ E.g. Denizot, ‘Le Théâtre de la Révolution’, p. 200. Similarly, Nancy Sloan Goldberg identifies an almost dictatorial quality to his ‘total aesthetic philosophy’. Goldberg, ‘Unanimism in the concert hall: les fêtes du peuple, 1918–39’, *The French Review* 65.5 (1992), pp. 785–797, here p. 787.

⁵⁶ Rolland, *Le Théâtre du Peuple*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

general audience but also in encouraging audiences to become more critical and participative citizens.⁵⁹ Yet those who developed and promoted popular theatre — whether this meant cheap or free tickets to performances of classic plays, Breton folk theatre, anarchist or socialist plays and sketches for the working people, or even Communist agit-prop — often tended towards circumspection in their attitudes towards the people themselves. Louis Lumet, an anarchist who liked to think of himself as epitomizing individual revolt against society,⁶⁰ organized some of the earliest performances of Rolland's *Danton* through his Théâtre Civique, including one prefaced by a speech from the socialist leader Jean Jaurès, and intended to raise funds for striking textile workers on the Nord.⁶¹ Yet his greatest lyricism was reserved for poet whose genius established a communion between the people and the sublime.⁶² Pierre Corneille, a descendant of the better-known seventeenth-century dramatist, and who organized and directed a long-lived popular theatre in La Mothe Sainte Héray (Poitou), preferred to write in verse so that the danger of popular actors taking liberties with the text would — he hoped — be diminished. While poetry imposed a certain rhythm on its performer, 'la prose lui laisse une initiative, une indépendance qui pourraient être dangereuses.'⁶³ [prose would allow an initiative and independence which could be dangerous.]

Even the later agit-prop with which Rolland is often associated — not least on account of his sometime call for a 'théâtre de combat' — was forcibly shifted away from working-class initiative and spontaneity towards a more traditional collaboration with professional playwrights, theatre owners, and directors. Romain Rolland was invited to the Olympiade of agit-prop theatre in Moscow in 1933: yet this was both a showcase for international agit-prop before an assembly of illustrious foreign dignitaries, and a valedictory commemoration of an art form now deemed by Soviet

⁵⁹ E.g. Pascal Ory, *Théâtre Citoyen: Du Théâtre du Peuple au Théâtre du Soleil* (Avignon: Association Jean Vilar, 1995); Sally Debra Charnow, *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de-siècle Paris: Staging Modernity* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), especially p. 180. Gary Thurston has similarly described popular theatre in Russia before 1917 as a vital stage in the civilizing process, *The Popular Theatre Movement in Russia, 1862–1919* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 290.

⁶⁰ Charles Max, 'Louis Lumet', *La Province nouvelle*, 1897. Max (whose real name was Charles Poirson) and Lumet were close associates, working together for the review *L'Enclos* as well as collaborating to found the Théâtre Civique.

⁶¹ 'Articles de presse sur *Danton*, de Romain Rolland', BN DAS Rf 71140.

⁶² Louis Lumet, 'Le Théâtre: critique', *La Plume*, 1 November 1897.

⁶³ Corneille, 'Le Théâtre en plein air de la Mothe-Saint-Héray', *Le Monde Nouveau* (1901), p. 516.

authorities to be outdated and unsuitable.⁶⁴ Those who credit popular theatre with transformative political powers, and with increasing democratic participation and initiative among the working people, are often surprisingly nervous of such initiative among popular actors or audiences.

Leaders and Mass Politics in 1930s France

Focusing on Rolland's *Danton* illuminates important and lesser-known trends in his dramatic work and intellectual trajectory, as well as offering a significant counterbalance to dominant assumptions on the character and consequences of popular theatre. The play itself highlights Rolland's elitist preoccupation with heroic individuals, and with the difficult relationship between a charismatic leader and the people who could prove not only his strength but also his undoing. Yet this relationship was not merely a matter for intellectual reflection. Rather, throughout the period in which Rolland was composing his Théâtre de la Révolution and most particularly in the 1930s, the relationship between leaders and masses was crucial to political debate and experience in France, as elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, reactions to performances of *Danton* provide a glimpse into the ways in which contemporaries perceived and grappled with models of charismatic leadership, parliamentary debate, and popular politics that were an inescapable concern in contemporary Europe.⁶⁵

The French preoccupation with powerful leadership was especially pronounced during the Third Republic, a regime characterized by a notoriously weak executive. Although a presidential regime, it had been established in the wake of the military defeat of Napoleon III, and the role outlined in the constitution of 1875 for the executive was very limited.⁶⁶ Indeed, Presidents of the Third Republic tended to

⁶⁴ Lynn Mally, 'Exporting Soviet culture: the case of agit-prop theatre', *The Slavic Review* 62.2 (2003), p. 331.

⁶⁵ This chapter seeks therefore to illuminate some of the specific preoccupations with leadership and mass politics that were debated in France during this period, while also suggesting further areas for study in what Yves Cohen has described as the 'culture of leadership' — a surprisingly unexplored field. Yves Cohen, 'The Cult of Number One in an Age of Leaders', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 8 (2007), pp. 597–634, here p. 609.

⁶⁶ On the political consequences of the constitution, see Stephen Hanson, 'The founding of the Third French Republic', *Comparative Political Studies*, 43 (2010), pp. 1023–58.

become notorious less for leadership than for eccentricity — Félix Faure dying *à la gauloise* in the arms of his mistress, or Paul Deschanel reputedly climbing trees in the gardens of the Elysée Palace.⁶⁷ Consequently, the potential for a strong, populist leader to undermine the regime was both real and threatening, as evident not only during the Boulanger affair of the 1880s but also in the surging popularity of radical right-wing movements at moments of crisis. In particular, movements such as the Fédération Nationale Catholique and the Faisceau in the 1920s, and the Parti Social Français and Parti Populaire Français in the 1930s uniformly championed the providential leader as a solution to the perceived ‘problem’ of the Third Republic. Although strong leaders did emerge within the framework of the Republic itself — Georges Clemenceau, Gaston Doumergue, and Edouard Daladier, for example — the Fall of France in 1940 nevertheless heralded a much more authoritarian regime, with Pétain, the head of state, accorded powers greater even than those of Louis XIV.⁶⁸

At the same time, difficulties in achieving strong leadership within the French Republic were compounded by the need to counter more authoritarian European models. Europe after the First World War was no longer a place in which heads of state and government were, as far as the people were concerned, to be seen and not heard. Rather, the revolution in mass communications meant not only that leaders appeared on newsreel but also that they could speak directly to the nation on the radio, creating new possibilities and expectations. Especially at times of crisis, when public opinion was prone to ebb away from traditional politicians in favour of leaders proudly claiming to be ‘outside the system’, direct communication with the people via the radio could have significant implications. Franklin D. Roosevelt used his ‘fireside chats’ to cultivate the image of a president in touch with his citizens. Yet when Gaston Doumergue used radio broadcasts in 1934 to air his views on political questions, deputies complained that he was attempting to bypass parliament and destabilize the democratic system.⁶⁹ And when Edouard Daladier (Président du Conseil in 1938–9) broadcast on the primacy of public safety during the failed general strike in November 1938, he was speaking at a time when government by decree law

⁶⁷ ‘Hélas! Le président de la IIIe République était trop souvent connu sous le seul angle ridicule de la petite histoire...’ Jacques Georgel, ‘Un Siècle d’offenses au Chef de l’Etat français’, *La Revue Administrative*, 29 (1976), pp. 253–67, here p. 260.

⁶⁸ Pétain’s advisers often made this point. Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–44* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 133.

⁶⁹ François Monnet, *Refaire la République: André Tardieu, une dérive réactionnaire 1876–1945* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), p. 331.

had replaced normal parliamentary discussion and debate. Could the French master mass communications with the impact of their Fascist or Nazi counterparts? And should they, considering that those seeking to manipulate the masses with the media could end up at the mercy of their new strategies? As the dramatic critic Gabriel Boissy observed in 1936:

Plus on réfléchit aux secousses causées par ses retentissants appels au sentiment des peuples voisins par delà leurs représentants réguliers, plus on constate l'effet produit sur les cœurs, sur l'espérances et l'imagination, plus on se demande si les chefs sont bien maîtres d'eux quand ils usent de tels moyens, j'entends exactement s'ils restent exactement dans leurs limites, les limites pratiques et géographiques, les intérêts temporels de leurs nations, s'ils ne déchaînent pas des puissances qui les dépasse.⁷⁰

[The more one reflects on the dramatic consequences of these reverberating appeals to neighbouring peoples, over and above their normal representatives, and the more one observes their effects on hearts, hopes, and imaginations, the more one asks if the leaders are really masters of themselves when they employ such strategies — I mean whether they remain precisely within their limits, the practical and geographical limits, the current interests of their nations, or whether they are not in fact unleashing forces beyond their mastery.]

In one sense, the Popular Front movement and government seemed to be France's riposte to fascist Europe: here, what began as a mass movement of the left against fascism attained power through the electoral victory of 1936 and — albeit briefly — promoted programmes of popular culture and leisure at a time when other countries were more intent on increasing production in anticipation of future war.⁷¹ Even Rolland — whose plays had often failed to find favour in interwar France on explicit account of his 'anti-national' stance during the First World War — was particularly fêted, with revivals of the three best-known plays of his Théâtre de la Révolution extensively funded by the new government. And yet the problems faced

⁷⁰ Gabriel Boissy, 'Au Vent des jours', *Comœdia*, 1 March 1936.

⁷¹ See Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934–39* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Chapter Five.

by the Popular Front exemplified Rolland's concern that the people nonetheless remained the 'speechless sovereign' with no direct voice and a multitude of conflicting representatives. Who could legitimately and convincingly claim to represent their sovereign will — parliament, the *Président du Conseil* or President of the Republic, the parties, the unions, the spokesmen for the *rassemblement populaire*? Political rhetoric was an essential means of claiming this representation (although not the only means, as the visual and physical importance of the demonstration suggest). And yet it was at the same time insufficient in the battle for individual or collective leaders of the people to substantiate their claims. The leader who employed powerful rhetoric in radio broadcasts or at mass demonstrations to suggest a particularly close and direct relationship with the people laid himself open to criticisms that he was bypassing parliament, aiming at dictatorship, or just delivering empty promises with no real connection to political action.

Reactions to the depiction of the people and their leaders in the 1936 production of *Danton* offer a striking insight into the perception of such rhetoric — its power, and its failings. When *Danton* was revived in 1936 by the *Fédération du Spectacle* and under the direction of Jacques Grétilat (who also assumed the leading role), it was staged quite differently from the early twentieth century performances and in a manner better suited to some of Rolland's own suggestions for popular theatre. In particular, Grétilat chose not the closed setting of a nineteenth-century theatre building but the open-air *Arènes de Lutèce*, a Roman amphitheatre behind the *Rue Monge* in Paris.⁷² Although a traditional auditorium would have conveyed a more accurate impression of the play's claustrophobic atmosphere, the *Arènes* — with their connotations of classical 'bread and circuses', and bloody battles offered for popular entertainment — were by no means inappropriate. In a spirit of contemporary populism, the government also funded a free matinee performance on 13 July 1936, and the crowds massed outside the entrance testified to popular enthusiasm for subsidized entertainment, as well as for the play itself (there were, in fact, other free matinees on the same day, not least *Le Cid* at the *Comédie française* and *Horace* at the *Odéon* theatre).

Reviews and photographs of the performance suggest not only the density of the audience but also their vocal and lively response to the historical action of the play

⁷² See the 'Programme des fêtes artistiques et sportives du 13 juillet', *L'Excelsior*, 11 July 1936.

— and to the more contemporary action of the Arènes de Lutèce. The revolutionary leaders captured the audience's imagination, not least Saint-Just and Danton himself, robustly performed by Grétilat; the plight of Lucie Desmoulins affected their sensibility.⁷³ Still more vocal enthusiasm was prompted by the arrival of the two contemporary Socialist and Communist leaders Léon Blum and Maurice Thorez, with both actors and audience standing to sing *L'Internationale*. Indeed, for some reviewers the very fact of Blum's attendance — without any additional security — testified to his own bravery as a leader, for as France's first Jewish and Socialist premier he was the object of verbal abuse from both right and left, and had also been the victim of a violent physical attack earlier in 1936.

Yet while critics revelled in the crowd's enthusiasm for a revolutionary play in the wake of the Popular Front victory, they were both admiring of and also frustrated by the leaders on stage. 'Puisqu'on s'occupe de préparer de grands spectacles populaires,' commented one critic in *le Figaro*, 'que le ciel nous préserve du Verbe. Les bavardages sont insupportables dans des spectacles qui doivent, avant tout, être faits de mouvement et d'action.'⁷⁴ [Since the preparation of great popular festivals is underway, may heaven preserve us from the Word. Wordiness is unbearable in spectacles that should consist primarily of movement and action.] Even Pierre Scize, otherwise enthusiastic,⁷⁵ complained that '*Danton* a de très hauts moments. Son défaut est celui de ses héros. Ces grands ancêtres étaient de terribles bavards.'⁷⁶ [*Danton* has some real high points. Its weakness is that of its heroes. These great ancestors were terribly garrulous.]

Here, reactions to *Danton* shed light on a very particular characteristic of contemporary attitudes to political leadership: the conflicting appreciation of rhetoric. *Le Figaro*'s critic, for example, echoes a widespread sense of frustration with the peregrinations of parliamentary debate that was present on both left and right. While Communist deputies tried (on occasion) to introduce 'the language of the proletariat'

⁷³ Pierre Scize, 'Aux arènes de Lutèce: Danton', *Comœdia*, 15 July 1936.

⁷⁴ 'Spectacles populaires : *Danton* aux Arènes de Lutèce', *Le Figaro*, 14 July 36.

⁷⁵ Scize was a well known supporter of open-air theatre, especially in the Roman amphitheatre at Orange.

⁷⁶ Scize, 'Aux arènes de Lutèce'. Rolland had, indeed, taken pains to use as much dialogue as possible from historical records in his *Théâtre de la Révolution*, in a concern for 'truth' that was less evident in his manipulation of characters or events in the interests of artistic licence. Other articles were also critical of the dialogue. 'Recueil d'articles sur *Danton*', BN DAS Rf 71140 .

into parliamentary debate,⁷⁷ right-wing journalists, veteran soldiers, and would-be leaders spoke disparagingly of the interminable and ineffectual discussions of the ‘Maison sans Fenêtres’,⁷⁸ and drew sharp contrasts between words and action.⁷⁹ Ironically, of course, the very leaders who were the most vocal in these criticisms — such as Colonel de la Rocque, with his notorious threats of ‘H-Hour’ and ‘D-Day’ — were those excluded from governmental action and indeed often criticized for verbiage themselves (Action Française was sometimes sardonically renamed ‘inaction française’)⁸⁰. But in a regime theoretically based on popular sovereignty, and where authority gained its legitimacy through the representation of such sovereignty, the power of rhetoric was crucial, whatever its attendant frustrations. Even Pétain’s ‘constitutional acts’, which dissolved the Third Republic and established him as head of state would eventually be undermined by the rhetoric (as well as the action) of another leader, and in a battle in which radio would play a determining role.

Rolland’s *Danton* speaks above all of unresolved tensions between individuals and masses, between rhetoric and action. It was a play that, whenever and wherever it was performed, was able to suggest powerful contemporary parallels and possibilities. Indeed, it is striking that, like much of Rolland’s Théâtre de la Révolution, its performances in the interwar years took place mainly in countries other than France, places more profoundly marked by the post-war upheavals and revolutions. The particular resonance of *Danton* in France was perhaps less dramatic, but it is no less valuable in illuminating the political problems of the moment. Just as the study of *Danton* within Rolland’s Théâtre de la Révolution illuminates the details of his personal quest to interpret the revolution and to imagine the role of the individual in politics, so do the French performances of the play shed light on some of the reasons why the charismatic leader remained the focus for such a powerful love-hate relationship.

⁷⁷ When Maurice Thorez was called to order for shouting out insults during the tumultuous session of 6 February 1934, he retorted that he was only using the language of the proletariat. *Journal officiel. Débats parlementaires — Chambre des députés*, 7 February 1934.

⁷⁸ E.g. Joseph Delest in an Action Française meeting of April 1934. ‘P.P. 5 avril 1934 – réunion organisé par la section de Bois-Colombes de la Ligue d’Action Française’, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris, Ba 1894.

⁷⁹ As Chris Millington writes, ‘The contrast between ‘words’ and ‘action’ was a well-worn tactic in veteran discourse. Politicians specialized in snivelling and demoralizing speeches and excelled at useless chitchat.’ Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Inter-War France* (Manchester: MUP, 2012), p. 7.

⁸⁰ E.g. by Lucien Rebatet in 1942. Steven Wilson, ‘Action Française in French Intellectual Life’, *The Historical Journal* 12.2 (1969), p. 328.

