

Combat and Culture: Imagining the Battle of the Nile

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The French Revolutionary wars represented a significant escalation in the ferocity of international conflict in Europe. This ferocity was the offspring of ideology and of a struggle pitting the French nation, with its principles of popular sovereignty, liberty and equality, against the monarchies of Europe, embodying not just the defence of religion, morality, and of social and political order but also of rival identities of nationality and of freedom. The renewal of conflict between France and Britain in 1793 was marked on both sides of the channel by a propaganda campaign that demonized and dehumanized the enemy.¹ It was also marked by unprecedented legislation to mobilize the combatant societies for war, both materially and psychologically, and to repudiate the conventions which had served to normalize relations between states, even during conflicts.² In France, the 1793 decrees ordering summary execution of émigré troops were extended to British forces in 1794. In Britain, correspondence with the enemy was declared an act of treason. While the impact of legislation and propaganda can be difficult to measure, there is evidence that these developments escalated the intensity of armed conflict. A surgeon attached to Moreau's army of the Rhine recalled how he had been called to treat fifty émigré troopers at Dachau in 1796: "these unfortunates were horribly cut up, having been unwilling to surrender; they refused even to be tended to, persuaded that they were to be shot, according to the revolutionary laws."³ The testimony of French soldiers indicates that the émigrés' fears were justified. Alexandre Brault of the French army of the north recorded that émigré prisoners were shot on the spot, and that he had witnessed the execution of over four hundred.⁴ As for the English and their allies, Brault proudly explained their discomfiture in the face of French aggression: "They say, rightly, that we have no military tactics and that this is not how one should make war...They are right to say that it is our republican method, the only one known to free men who have sworn to vanquish or to die, that will give us victory."⁵

Historians have recognized the importance of the efforts made to condition the mentalities and behaviour of soldiers like Brault.⁶ The intensity of revolutionary warfare was the product of those efforts. What is not so commonly recognized, however, is that war fed on war, as the experience of military engagement was reported and reconstructed in contemporary media. In both England and France there were concerted efforts by the official media to repackage the experience of war to confirm and reinforce the mythologies that underpinned the respective nations' war efforts. The combatants were themselves, of course,

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the product of those mythologies. Aspiring to emulate the heroic ideal of patriotic self-sacrifice which flourished equally in England and France, they both made that ideal a reality and resurrected it in subsequent reports and recollections.⁷ It was the participants themselves who began the task of reconstructing the experience of battle for public consumption. Nevertheless, their imaginations were often restrained by a professional probity which dictated a self-effacing indifference to the hazards of battle, as well as respect for the enemy. It was journalists, artists, poets and playwrights far removed from the field of action who idealized, allegorized and trivialized the experience of war, thereby sustaining the nationalist identities and xenophobias that rendered the state of war both acceptable and desirable. Remarkably, however, given the restrictions placed upon the freedom of expression on both sides of the channel, voices dissenting from the official line were still to be heard. Their dissident accounts of military events repudiated the official myths of universal enthusiasm for war and reflected the dissatisfactions created by economic dislocation, military conscription and requisitioning, increased taxation, and the myriad demands of modern war.

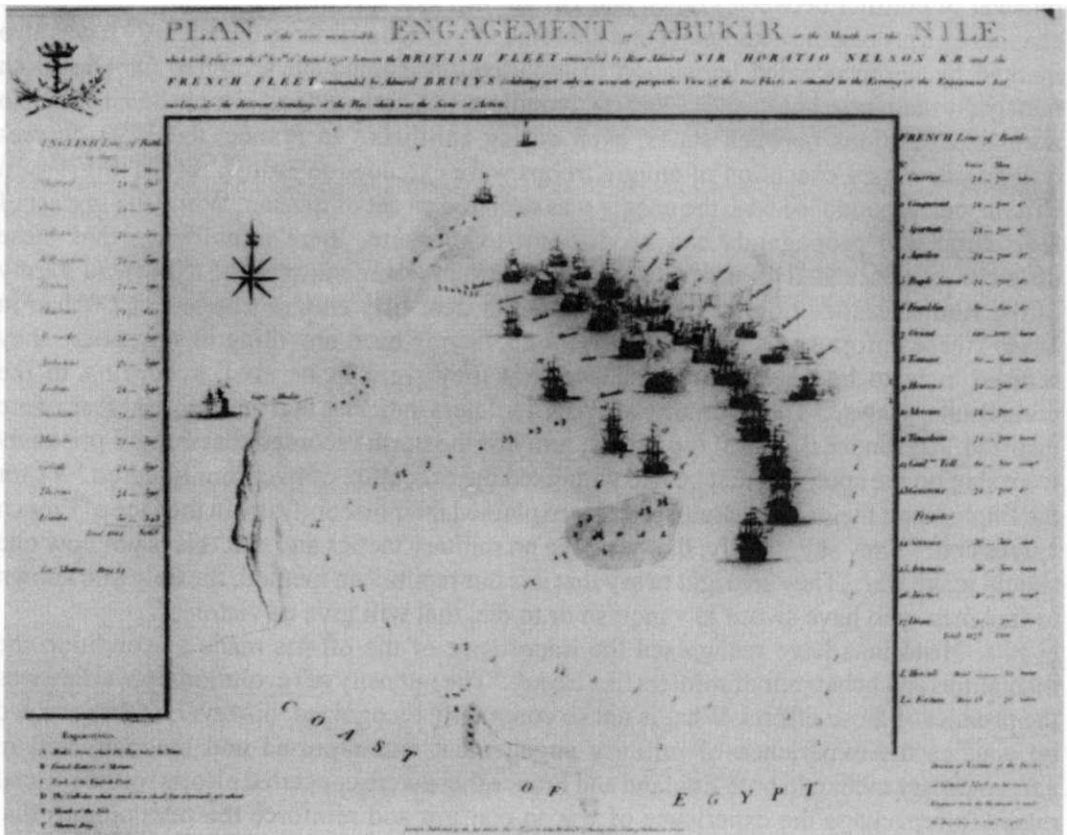


Figure 1: Plan of the "Ever Memorable Engagement of Abukir at the Mouth of the Nile."

Source: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

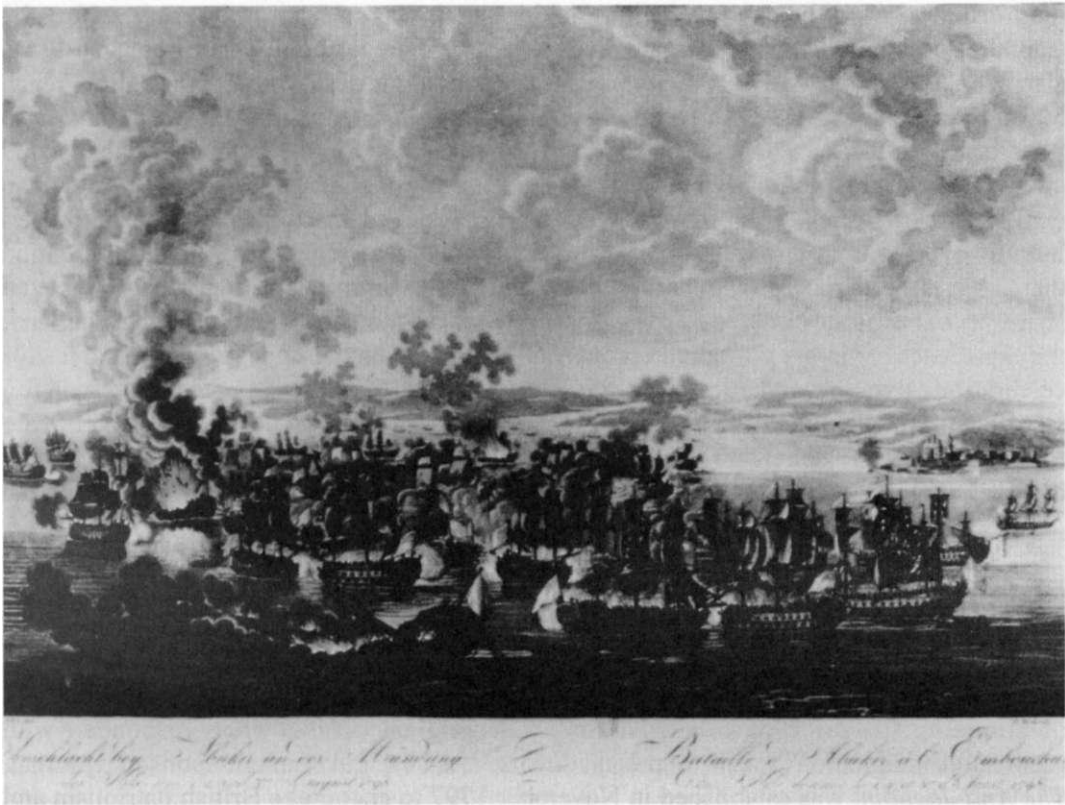


Figure 2: "Bataille d'Aboukir à l'Embouchure du Nil."

Source: See figure 1.

The battle fought between the Mediterranean squadrons of France and England in Aboukir Bay, on 1 August 1798, provides a signal instance of this process of interaction between combat and culture. The battle (of the Nile to English writers, of Aboukir, to the French) has interested historians for its significance to the life and mythology of Horatio Nelson, generally credited with the manoeuvre which resulted in victory.⁸ Tactically, the battle was decided by the ability of Nelson's ships, with Captain Foley's *Goliath* in the lead, to sail between the foremost French vessel and the shore of Aboukir Bay, thereby "doubling" the French line (see figure 1). Other English vessels took advantage of gaps in the French line to isolate and concentrate against the vessels in the van and centre. The action began at 6:30 in the evening and continued as darkness fell, "the whole hemisphere... with intervals, illuminated by the fire of the hostile fleets." The climax of the engagement occurred at 10:00 p.m. when *Orient*, Admiral Bruey's flagship, exploded (figure 2). By then, the five leading French ships had already been mastered. The guns fell silent following *Orient's* destruction, but soon resumed firing until 3:00 a.m., when there was another lull. As dawn broke, the battle reached its final stages, the remaining French vessels either surrendering or running aground. Admiral Villeneuve's *Guillaume Tell* and three other vessels (two of

them frigates) were the only exceptions, making their way to sea in spite of the efforts by Captain Hood in *Zealous* to prevent their escape. The strategic significance of the battle has also been recognized. Not only did the battle bring about the destruction of the entire French Mediterranean squadron, with eleven of thirteen ships burnt, sunk, or captured, but it also transformed the balance of power in Europe by giving impetus to the formation of the second coalition against revolutionary France, and sealed the fate of Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition. In Brian Lavery's words, the battle "changed the balance of world power, literally overnight."¹⁰ The cultural resonance of the battle, however, deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. In both England and France, journalists sought to interpret and shape accounts of the battle in an effort to inform and to mould public opinion. In England, the experience of victory prompted a proliferation of visual images, poems, plays, and festive celebrations evoking and recreating the battle. The images that resulted represented a significant embellishment of the usually laconic accounts provided by the officers who fought in the engagement. Those images are revealing both of official and unofficial discourses on the war as well as of popular mentalities and of the place of the war in the public imagination.

To understand why the battle excited such intense public interest, it is important to recognize that by 1798 Anglo-French hostility had escalated to new heights, even for the revolutionary decade. The previous year, the Treaty of Campo Formio had ended hostilities between France and Austria. As the Directory feted the achievements of the victorious General Bonaparte, it self-consciously defined the purpose of the "Great Nation" to be that of humbling the pride of Great Britain." The English official press responded with predictable indignation to such "impudent threats."¹² A new, government-sponsored journal, *The Anti-Jacobin*, was established in November 1797 to encourage British patriotism and to support the war policy of Pitt's government against the opposition of the peace party, led by Fox and Sheridan. Gillray's satirical prints depicting the *Consequences of a Successful French Invasion* helped to inspire a patriotic resurgence that was remarked upon by observers representing all shades of opinion.¹³ It was against this background of heightened patriotic and bellicose sentiment that Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition was prepared. Although the Directory attempted to maintain secrecy, there was open speculation in both the French and British press concerning the expedition's destination.¹⁴ The possibilities of a descent upon Ireland or England were not discounted. Once the expedition had left Toulon, rumours abounded as to its fate. Reliable news of the French fleet's destruction would not reach Paris and London until a full six weeks after the battle. Anticipation of a battle, however, had been manifest for much longer in both capitals. The *Journal des Hommes Libres*, for example, reported details of a clash between the French and English fleets as early as 7 August 1798, citing journals in Bordeaux and Toulouse as sources.¹⁵ Ten days later, the paper cited a letter from Leghorn which claimed that "the English had accomplished a complete victory" over the French fleet in the sea of Candia. The newspaper disputed the claim, saying that "few people put faith in this account."¹⁶ On 26 August, the *Clef du Cabinet des Souverains* referred to three German and Italian reports of the battle in the sea of Candia, one of which stated that Nelson had cut the French line, surrounding eight vessels, including *Orient*, and had captured Bonaparte; Nelson reputedly had died of his wounds. Once again, the French newspaper was sceptical of the account, treating it as British disinformation.¹⁷



Figure 3: Cruikshank, "Anticipation - Ways and Means - or Buonaparte Really Taken!"

Source: Courtesy of the British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

Similar rumors were manifest in the British press. *The Times* cited a letter from Falmouth, dated 4 July, which provided third-hand news that Bonaparte and five sail of the line had been taken by Nelson.¹⁸ The paper refused to credit the rumour. Further hearsay, this time suggesting a French victory, was dismissed in the issue of 11 August as "decisively absurd."¹⁹ The French reports of a battle in the sea of Candia were brushed aside five days later: "This story has been retailed in all directions, but has not the smallest foundation in truth."²⁰ The *Morning Chronicle* reported rumours of Bonaparte's capture as early as 8 June.²¹ Like *The Times*, the *Chronicle* judged reports from Falmouth as "totally destitute of foundation."²² Despite the wariness of the press, the gossip was avidly related and consumed. A caricature published in Picadilly on 13 August evoked these rumours, depicting a circus sideshow in which Charles James Fox shows the public a large painting of "The Noted Boney-Part from Egypt" (see figure 3). Fox weeps as he announces Bonaparte's capture, belying his words that "I never was so pleased at any event in the whole course of my Life." This proliferation of rumours and images, even before the first authentic accounts of the battle were received, indicates both official concern and public demand for news pertaining to the expedition and any potential clash of French and British arms. Furthermore, although

the British victory was still nothing more than a rumour, its use as a vehicle for mocking the discomfiture and hypocrisy of the Whig opposition was already well established.

The first narratives of the battle, from which subsequent accounts derived, were written by eyewitnesses, either officers or seamen aboard the combatant fleets, or French officials on shore. These narratives provide invaluable insights into the events of the battle, and into the imaginations of those who wrote them. The French marine archives contain accounts by surviving officers from each of the French vessels engaged in the action. These betray the professional mind-set of their authors and document matter-of-factly the relaying of orders from the admiral's flagship, the execution of manoeuvres to prepare for battle and the events of the battle itself, as experienced by each vessel. The officers were naturally concerned to demonstrate that they and their colleagues had done their duty. Above all, this consisted in resisting the enemy with every means and for as long as possible. This did not imply that officers were unwilling to criticize their superiors for faulty dispositions or their colleagues for lapses in discipline. Auguste Lachadenède, an ensign from *Orient*, for example, blamed Admiral Brueys for anchoring the fleet in a position where it could be "doubled" by Nelson's ships. He also criticized the inadequate manpower aboard the French fleet, and the poor morale of both officers and men. What he was not prepared to do, however, was to criticize their fighting spirit: "These men who became Frenchmen again on the day of battle nearly all gave outstanding proof of their courage and *sangfroid*; recalled to their duty by the love of glory, they have acquired the reputation of brave men, but it was too late to save the squadron from the ruin that their carelessness had prepared."²³ Lachadenède emphasized "the bitterness...the length and the obstinacy" with which the French had prolonged "a useless resistance."

Lachadenède's report insisted upon the exemplary courage of Admiral Brueys. The description of the Admiral's death identifies the essential quality required of all officers: a stoic indifference to suffering and death.

At seven o'clock the admiral was wounded in the head and hand; he did not want to be attended to; he simply wiped away the blood that ran from his wounds with his handkerchief. At seven-thirty his left leg was carried off, we surrounded him, the quartermaster took him in his arms; although he could not recover from his wound, we wished to carry him to the aid post, but he told us to leave him; that he wanted to die on the deck; he died with the same tranquility of spirit he had maintained while fighting.²⁴

Just as a commanding officer's role in battle was to inspire the resistance of his men by demonstrating coolness under fire, so the commemoration of that inspiration by his fellow officers became emblematic of the resistance of the entire fleet. Hence, the references to Captain Racord of *Peuple Souverain* who was "gravely wounded in many parts of the body, and carried to the aid post;" to Captain du Petit-Thouars of *Tonnant* who "suffered the loss of a foot and a fractured leg, and was then carried to the aid post;" and to Blanquet Duchayla who, having lost consciousness and come to only to be informed that just three cannon on board *Franklin* were still firing, cried "Keep firing! The last blow is perhaps the one that will bring us victory."²⁵ Of those commanders who survived to write their own reports, Lieutenant Cambon of *Mercur*e noted that his wounds prevented him from standing and he therefore sat on his quarterdeck issuing orders through a megaphone.²⁶ Captain Emériauf of

Spartiate, his arm shattered by a ball, had himself carried from battery to battery to demonstrate to his men that his wound was not fatal.²⁷ In all, four commanding officers were killed and seven gravely wounded.²⁸ Collectively, the officers commanding the French fleet more than upheld the professional code of honour which inspired them and of which, in subsequent narratives, they became the exemplars.

This holocaust in commanding officers illustrates the horrific destruction wrought upon the French fleet by the English squadron. When *Spartiate's* guns finally fell silent, "We...had nine feet of water in the hold, sixty-four dead and about 150 wounded...and the vessel entirely riddled." It was calculated that the ship had been holed by forty-nine balls below the waterline on the starboard bow and by twenty-seven on the port, "of which many traversed the vessel from one side to the other."²⁹ *Peuple Souverain* surrendered at about the same time as *Spartiate*, "having at that moment thirty-five inches of water in the hold, dismasted of all its masts, riddled with shot, and with many dead and wounded." The following day it was discovered that of 573 men, there were ninety-six dead and 150 wounded.³⁰ The ferocity of the attack sustained by the French van is exemplified by the experience of *Aquilon*, which was between *Spartiate* and *Peuple Souverain* in the French line of battle.

Having sustained a terrible fire, our upper decks and the second battery were ruined; the Commander Chevenard gave the order for the few men who remained on the decks to descend to the batteries of thirty-six and eighteen-pounders; this order was immediately carried out. At eight o'clock M. Chevenard had both legs carried off by a shot and died an instant later. M. Confoulou, frigate captain, being wounded in the head, as well as in the chest and shoulders, was out of action. M. Kerseaux, first lieutenant, presented himself on the quarter-deck. At nine o'clock the main mast fell, then the mizzen-mast, and shortly after the foremast.³¹

Several of the English ships also sustained significant damage and losses. Nelson, of course, on *Vanguard* received a head wound and was below decks when the sword of *Spartiate'?*, commander was brought to him.³² *Bellerophon*, the first to engage *Orient*, was severely mauled, as was *Majestic*, engaged by three French ships following the explosion of *Orient*. "We should have had a narrow escape from a watery tomb," recounted a sailor, "had not the *Alexander* come to our assistance." By his estimate, *Majestic* lost seventy-one killed and 143 wounded, including Captain Westcott.³³

Of course, the story was not entirely one of heroic resistance and stoicism. It was also one of chaos and cowardice. Paintings depicting the battle, such as those by Cooper Willyams (figures 4 and 5), do not begin to convey the confusion experienced by many who fought in the two fleets. The engagement took place at night and distinguishing friend from foe was problematic, as Lachadenède admitted: "We could distinguish objects only by the light of cannon flashes."³⁴ *Orient* consequently sent several broadsides into the dismasted and drifting *Peuple Souverain* before recognizing its error. The English vessels carried four horizontal lights on the poop-deck for identification, but this did not prevent *Alexander* and *Swiftsure* from firing on one another. *Mercure* and *Heureux* did the same and the commander of *Timoléon* reported that "we were so incommoded by the fire of the *Généreux* that we were obliged to cut our cable to get away from that vessel."³⁵ He blamed the loss of his rudder on

this "friendly fire." Even those sailors from *Orient* who had survived the destruction of the flagship and who were left clinging to the wreckage were not immune to the wayward fire of the French rear-guard. Lachadenède reported "eight men killed and many wounded" from that fire.³⁷

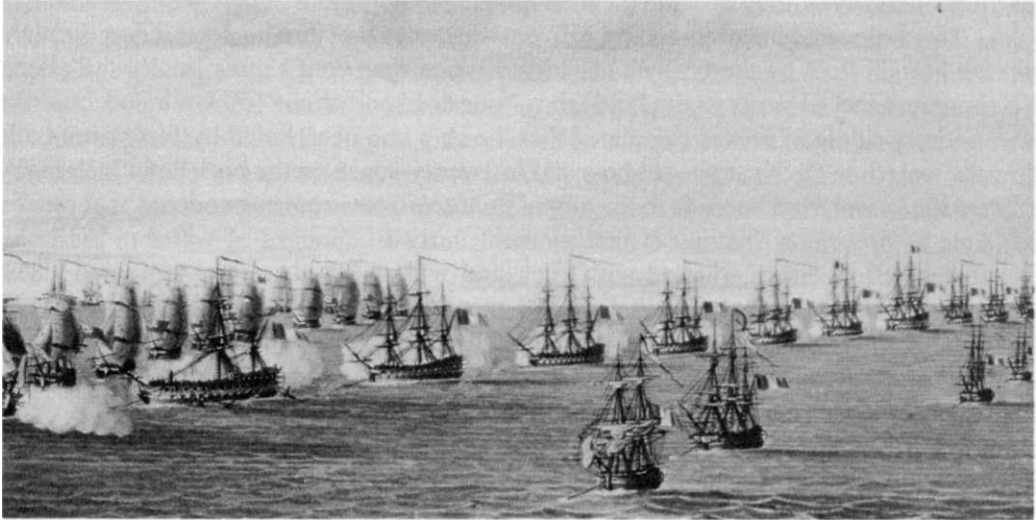


Figure 4: *Watercolour from Rev. Cooper Willyams, A Voyage Up the Mediterranean in His Majesty's Ship Swiftsure.*

Source: Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.



Figure 5: *Watercolour from Rev. Cooper Willyams, A Voyage Up the Mediterranean in His Majesty's Ship the Swiftsure.*

Source: See figure 4.

Regardless of its source, not all the French sailors were prepared to emulate the *sang froid* of their admiral in facing this terrifying hail of musket and artillery fire. The report from *Peuple Souverain* mentioned that "many men...abandoned their posts, saving themselves in the boats."³⁸ That from *Tonnant* similarly noted that several of its boats had been stolen during the battle, which prevented the remaining crew from destroying rather than surrendering the vessel.³⁹ The report from *Spartiate* indicated, rather obliquely, that marines ordered onto the deck to maintain musket fire preferred to disobey rather than to face the "physical certitude" of their destruction.⁴⁰ The report from *Heureux* indicated that the failure to prevent the ship running aground was the consequence of the "reluctance of the crew who dared not man the upper deck in spite of the vigour employed by the officers to make them do so."⁴¹ Finally, Victor Chabert, on board *Orient*, noted that sailors ordered to put out the fires on the decks and in the yards failed to heed "the exhortations and threats" of their officers and "thought only of seeking their safety in the water."⁴²

Notably, the reports in the Marine Archives make no complaint against the conduct of the English. Nor did most English officers comment adversely on the conduct of the French. Edward Berry's *Authentic Narrative* of the battle betrayed a professional respect for the "great firmness and deliberation" with which the English attack had been received. His only criticism was reserved for the "unwarrantable and infamous conduct" of the captain of *Artémise*, whom he accused of running his ship aground *after* striking his colours.⁴³ Captain Hood on *Zealous* noted the stubborn resistance of *Guerrier*, whose commander refused to surrender for three hours, ignoring twenty requests to do so despite his vessel being devastated by English fire and despite an inability to return that fire. There were officers who were less generous toward the French. Captain Miller on *Theseus* described the destruction of *Orient* as "a most grand and awful spectacle, such as formerly would have drawn tears down the victor's cheeks." Remembrance of the atrocities committed by "their unprincipled and blood-thirsty nation," however, caused him to stifle such sentiments of humanity, though he did prevent his crew from cheering the enemy's fate.⁴⁴ Even the Reverend Cooper Willyams, a stern critic of the "godless" French, credited Admiral Brueys with having "sustained the honour of his flag with heroic firmness."⁴⁵ Generally speaking, those who fought in the battle maintained a respect for one another that derived from their mutual adherence to a commonly accepted code of professional and honourable conduct, a code which united them in spite of the animosities generated by revolutionary and counter-revolutionary ideologies.

Journalists in London and Paris, however, who were the first to disseminate news of the battle to their respective publics, were far more politically conscious and their analyses of enemy conduct much less generous. Editors of the official French papers, in particular, were anxious to deny the English any credit for their victory. Instead, they insisted that British victories derived only from "cowardly treasons" and overwhelming numbers; true honour and glory belonged to the French. The analysis of the *Rédacteur* was typical.

Thus Nelson, after being reinforced by the support of all the traitors; after having added even more numerous vessels to his fleet, returned to attack the French upon their ships at anchor, in an open harbour; and puffed up with a stupid superiority, the Briton was bound to vanquish: but the vanquished fought like the three hundred Spartans, and Nelson was merely Xerxes

overwhelming a handful of soldiers with the weight of an army. In the eyes of glory and renown, on which side will we place the heroes?"⁴⁶

Remaining true to the revolutionary principle that love of liberty rather than professional expertise was the essential guarantor of victory, the *Ami des Lois* noted that "without the burning of the *Orient*, our courage making up for numbers and skill at manoeuvres would have sufficed to swallow up the English fleet with us in a common defeat."⁴⁷ Subsequently, the journal reported that even the misfortune of *Orient's* destruction was the consequence of English villainy and the employment of a stratagem "as atrocious as it is unheard of." According to the paper, the English, having captured a Greek ship, packed it with explosives and, with a disguised crew aboard, floated it into the French flagship, ensuring the latter's destruction.⁴⁸ *Le Phénix* reported the story on the same day, stating that "If this method of fighting is confirmed, at the very least it is the most disloyal that the human spirit can imagine, but that is how the English know how to conquer."⁴⁹ *Le Fanal* had published a previous story, accusing the English of contravening "the law of man" by firing heated shot: "It is to this baneful resource...that we owe the loss of our ships."⁵⁰

While French journalists insisted upon the superiority in numbers of the English ships, pointing out that the inability of some of the French vessels to engage rendered more glorious the resistance of those that did, English writers did the opposite.⁵¹ The *True Briton*, for example, provided a detailed calculation of the relative weight of metal in English and French broadsides, concluding that the latter enjoyed a superiority of one third. The patriotic British press was determined that nothing should detract from the quality of the victory. The *True Briton* took *The Times* to task for its suggestion that the French fleet had been poorly positioned: "We will not silently pass over any attempt to detract from the merit of the most brilliant Victory ever achieved."⁵²

Predictably, French and British papers presented contrasting views of the battle's strategic implications. French writers hastened to point out that Brueys's fleet was only destroyed after its strategic mission had been accomplished, and Bonaparte's army delivered to Egypt, from whence it could threaten British trade with India.⁵³ The *Ami des Lois* emphasized that the conquest of Egypt, "one of the finest and richest countries of the world," would provide "incalculable resources" with which to repair the losses to the French fleet.

Think, after all, that we still have vast conquests, iron, supplies in abundance, millions of enterprising and hard-working republicans, to whom a profound indignation will lend renewed strength, a strong government finally, and that it only takes a strong will to give birth to unexampled prodigies and to strike the entire universe with amazement.⁵⁴

The official French press, therefore, invited its public to divert their eyes from the catastrophic scene of battle and to focus their attention, and their energies, upon the global struggle between the Revolution and monarchical Europe. The patriotic British press, although assessing the strategic implications of the battle very differently, asked its readers to do much the same thing. The battle would change the balance of European power as the various states either slipped free of French tutelage or joined the coalition forming against France.

All Europe - nay, it is not too much to observe, that the whole World is likely to experience the most beneficial consequences from this decisive Defeat of the Gallic foe; for he was an Hydra, scattering destruction through the Universe - transporting his plundering hordes to assail peaceable Nations - devastate Provinces and plant Anarchy in every Clime. But the British Lion hath, by this blow, well nigh crushed all the external projects of this Monster.⁵⁵

In this allegorization of the battle, the clash of arms is represented in very much the same way as it was in France, as a clash of ideologies.

There were voices in the press on both sides of the channel that dissented from the official interpretations of the battle. In France, the semi-clandestine, neo-Jacobin journal, the *Journal des Hommes Libres*, levelled cautious criticism at the government and at the naval service, hinting at treason in its analysis of the defeat and citing evidence that the French ships' powder had been tampered with, adversely affecting the range of their guns.⁵⁶ A more trenchant left-wing attack on the French navy was made in a pamphlet, a medium which because of its ephemeral nature provided the means to take greater risks than did newspapers keen to stay in circulation. Gilles Achard's *Détail du Combat Naval* insisted that the "disastrous results" of the battle were "the work of cowardice, the incapacity of our leaders, and of treason." After detailing the faulty deployment of Brueys's squadron, Achard complained that the French fleet was commanded by "the filth of the old navy, from which they have preserved the haughtiness, but not the talents nor the honour."⁵⁷ Achard called for a republican purge of the officer corps.

The Parisian right-wing press also presented a dissident view of the battle, reprinting reports published in British and other foreign newspapers which emphasized the completeness of the English victory. Although pretending to deplore the defeat, newspapers such as the *Messenger des Relations Extérieures* and the *Courrier Universel* were able to lend support to the right-wing criticism of the Directory's aggressive foreign policy and of the harmful consequences of that policy.⁵⁸ The *Courrier*, instead of following the lead of the official press in publishing Villeneuve's account of the situation in Aboukir Bay after the battle - which emphasized the damage done to the English ships - chose to publish a table of the two fleets' losses received from the English minister in Constantinople.⁵⁹ The same issue reported on the joy occasioned in Florence by news of the French defeat and the difficulties thus occasioned for the French minister there as well as for French policy in Italy.⁶⁰

In England, the peace party was to the left, rather than the right, of the political spectrum. Just as right-wing journalists in France sought to dissimulate their glee at the setback to republican arms at Aboukir, so did the English radical press attempt, by paying tribute to Nelson and his sailors, to qualify its disappointment at an event which "though grand and flattering to our hearts as Britons...does not bring with it the cheering prospect of peace."⁶¹ In this respect, the *Morning Chronicle* echoed the opposition leader, Charles James Fox, who, while describing the victory as "the most signal, the most gallant, and in every respect the most glorious, that ever was recorded in the annals of the world," sadly concluded that the prospect for peace was "never more gloomy than it is at the present hour."⁶² Mocked by the *True Briton* for its "whimpering about peace," the *Morning Chronicle* maintained an air of ironic detachment in its treatment of the manifestations of joy occasioned by the victory.⁶³ Its issue of 4 October complained of the "poetic fury" which had

resulted in "torrents of verse" having "little merit but the subject." Describing the illuminations of the night before, which included at the "Androides...a very pretty transparency of Admiral Nelson on the deck of his own ship with his sword drawn, and *l'Orient* in flames near him; the figure of Fame, and the words - *Rule Britannia*," the paper commented that "[f]hough the illuminations last night displayed little taste, there was a hearty good will in the people." Only half-joking, the paper predicted that the battle would have its impact on feminine fashion: "Ladies will dress themselves *à l'Egyptienne*. We shall have the *Mummy shroud* instead of the Tartan plaid, and the head *à la Crocodile* instead of the Cockernony."⁶⁴



Figure 6: Gillray, "Destruction of the French Colossus."

Source: See figure 3.

The *Morning Chronicle's* ironic comments underline the extent to which theatrical, poetic and ephemeral artistic representations of the battle had moved beyond the idealized

and allegorical images manifest in the press to achieve an extreme of trivialization. A pantomime entitled "Harlequin in Egypt" performed at the Royal Circus presents a fine example of this trivialization.

The changes and transformations seem to move, as it were, by magic. The motion of the Crocodile is truly curious and natural; the mechanism of the young one coming out of the egg, is astonishing. Laurent's comic humour in the Clown, keeps the house in a continual roar of laughter; and the whole of the business, with the beautiful representation of the defeat of the French, is got up in great stile.⁶⁵



Figure 7: Humphrey, "Fighting for the Dunghill - or - Jack Tar Settling Buonaparte."

Source: See figure 3.

This preoccupation with exotic special effects betrays a striking insensitivity to the horrific realities of the battle. Other theatrical presentations were in the same vein. As early as 4 October, Astley's Theatre advertised performances of "Nelson's Triumph, or Buonaparte in the Dumps," which consisted of "Song, Dance and Pantomime; a view of the Two Fleets in real Action, off the Mouth of the Nile, and a View of the Egyptian Country."⁶⁶ Thomas Dibdin's play, *The Mouth of the Nile*, performed at Covent Garden at the end of October, also offered a reconstruction of the battle, but sought to appeal to its audience by

caricaturing a French officer and by focussing upon the romance between an English sailor and his sweetheart, the latter having donned men's clothing to follow her man to sea. Dibdin's play dealt in the currency of national stereotypes. The lascivious and cowardly Frenchman was a vehicle for mocking French claims to greatness and freedom ("Eh! vat you say? dat is ver prêt girl, come here ma dear, you can love a Frenchman? we are de plus grand nation. We make free all over de world.").⁶⁷ On the other hand, British sailors, exemplified by Jack Junk, stood for a stalwart patriotism and enthusiasm for the fight.



Figure 8: Humphrey, "Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt."

Source: See figure 1.

English caricaturists best exemplified this passage from idealization through allegory to trivialization. James Gillray's "Destruction of the French Collossus" (figure 6) seems to illustrate the *True Briton's* analysis of the battle as a triumph for Britannia over anarchy and atheism. A hydra-headed monster represents the French republic. The image of Louis XVI on its chest and guillotine in its hand identify the monster with regicide and terror. A more earthy allegory is provided by Humphrey in "Fighting for the Dung Hill" (figure 7). Jack Tar, embodying rude British vigour, thumps an emaciated and tattered Bonaparte on the nose, thereby asserting Britain's right to dominate the globe. Another caricature by Humphrey, "Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt" (figure 8), while displaying knowledge of the battle itself, provided yet another allegorical representation. Nelson, wielding a club of British oak, is depicted tethering eight crocodiles, each representing a French ship. Another

crocodile, representing *Orient*, is shown exploding, vomiting forth many tiny crocodiles. Two others, representing *Guillaume Tell* and *Généreux*, are shown making their escape. Humphrey effectively used the popular crocodile motif to identify the exotic location of the battle, to bestialize the French enemy, and to accuse them of crocodilian hypocrisy in professing allegiance to the principles of the Revolution while actually seeking to establish a global tyranny.

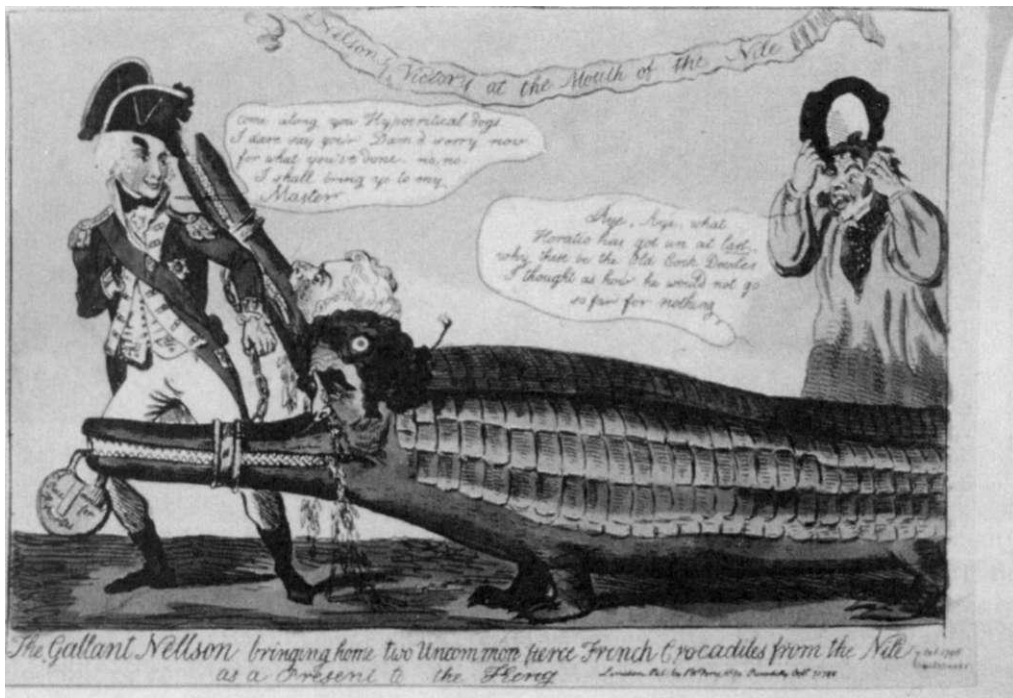


Figure 9: Cruikshank, "The Gallant Nelson Bringing Home Two Uncommon Fierce French Crocodiles [sic] from the Nile."

Source: See figure 3.

Another of these crocodilian images is an engraving by Cruikshank, which depicts Nelson leading home "Two Uncommon Fierce French Crocodiles" - Fox and Sheridan - as a present for the King (figure 9). The image effectively represents Nelson's victory not just over the French but also over the opposition, an opposition identified with crocodilian hypocrisy both in its enthusiasm for French revolutionary principles and in its expressions of pleasure at the victory of the Nile. Other caricatures, such as one by Humphrey, were more direct in their attacks on the opposition. In "Nelson's Victory; - Or - Good-News Operating Upon Loyal Feelings" (figure 10), members of the opposition are shown in despair at the news of the battle. A red-bonneted Fox is depicted hanging himself. The notion that the victory represented a defeat for the Whigs is emphasized in "A Sleepy Dose to the Jacobines" (figure 11), which shows Fox and his associates put to sleep at a meeting of the Whig Club, and in "The Funeral of the Party" (figure 12), where Fox and Sheridan are chief mourners at the funeral of their own party.



Figure 10: Humphrey, "Nelson's Victory - or - Good News Operating upon Loyal Feelings."

Source: See figure 3.



Figure 11: Cruikshank, "A Sleepy Dose to the Jacobites - or the Effects of Nelson's Victory."

Source: See figure 3.



Figure 12: "The Funeral of the Party."

Source: See figure 3.

The proliferation of images of the battle of the Nile ultimately served to trivialize the event, making it the subject of popular amusement. Whether it was the earthy allegory of Humphrey, the popular theatre of Thomas Dibdin, or the classical poetry of Lady Cornelia Knight, these representations of the battle were far removed from the horrifying realities of the carnage in Aboukir Bay.⁶⁸ Their evident popularity is revealing of contemporary attitudes toward military conflict, which such images both reflected and helped to shape. For late-eighteenth-century Britons and Frenchmen did not linger long in considering the horror and the sorrow of war. Instead, they idealized battle as a clash of competing principles, allegorized it as a struggle of rival symbols and trivialized it as a high-spirited frolic. Such values manifested and encouraged a deeply ingrained acceptance of the appropriateness and desirability of military conflict. Unsurprisingly, the cultured Lady Cornelia Knight ends her tribute to the battle of the Nile with a call to arms: "Britannia's palms shall break the guilty charm, Rouse latent valour, and bid Europe arm." Her verse can, in this sense, be taken as representative of a culture which, by representing battle in such positive terms, was itself armed for combat.

The French and English officers who fought in and later recounted the battle in Aboukir Bay were, in the words of Linda Colley, "heroes of their own epic."⁶⁹ Their behaviour was conditioned by the cult of patriotic heroism which had become a prominent feature of both French and British culture. Although unadorned and professional, their reports testifying to the heroic deaths of colleagues, both friend and foe, represented an ideal which they had made real. They thereby contributed powerfully to the sustenance of this cherished tradition of self-sacrifice. Notably, the discourses of heroism in republican France and monarchical Britain were very similar. Perhaps it was their common participation in acting out those discourses that evoked the mutual respect and humanity manifested toward each other by the combatants.⁷⁰ There was a similar pattern, too, to the way publicists in

London and Paris idealized and allegorized the battle as a symbolic conflict of ideologies. Their rival claims to identify their respective nations with "greatness," "virtue" and "freedom" are revealing of the emergence of a common nationalist idiom. Lady Cornelia Knight would have been appalled at the suggestion, but when she wrote of how "virtue has her sails unfurled/to save a sinking deluded world," and to "spread terror round each hostile coast," she echoed the language of the Revolution. Equally revealing, however, is the evidence of voices, in both countries, which declined to recite the officially prescribed litanies. Clearly, the established authorities were troubled by such dissent. Thus, in France, the official press denounced radicals for their cries of "incapacity..., extravagance... [and] treason," while police reports denounced the right-wing papers for the pleasure they took "in proclaiming and even confirming all the news which announces losses to the Republic and advantages for our enemies."⁷¹ In England, the authorities were even more concerned by the threat of internal subversion. The same papers that carried news of Nelson's victory also detailed the rising of the United Irishmen and the trial of several leading figures of that movement at Maidstone. It is this fear of internal subversion which explains why the victory was interpreted as even more a triumph over Fox (who went to Maidstone to speak on behalf of the accused) and the domestic opposition than over the French. In these diverse ways, the responses generated to the battle in England and France are as revealing of the similarities in the cultures, mentalities and political cultures of the two nations as they are of the differences.

NOTES

- * Ian Germani is Associate Professor of History at the University of Regina. He is currently working on a cultural history of the French Revolutionary wars.
1. On this propaganda, see the catalogue by James A. Leith and Andrea Joyce, *Face à Face, French and English Caricatures of the French Revolution and its Aftermath* (Toronto, 1989). See also David Bindman, *In the Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution* (London, 1989).
 2. The best synthesis of the war's impact upon the combatant societies remains Geoffrey Best, *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770-1870* (London, 1982). On the enduring legacy of the ideal of the nation-in-arms, see Hew Strachan, "The Nation in Arms," in Geoffrey Best (ed.), *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789-1989* (London, 1988), 49-73. On Britain, see Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815* (London, 1979).
 3. Adrien-Jacques Renoult, *Souvenirs du Docteur Adrien-Jacques Renoult* (Paris, 1862), 11-12.
 4. Ernest Picard (ed.), *Au Service de la Nation: Lettres de Volontaires (1792-1798) Recueillies et Publiées par le Colonel Ernest Picard* (Paris, 1914), 171.
 5. *Ibid.*, 165-166.
 6. Particularly useful on this is Jean-Paul Bertaud's discussion of the army as a "school for Jacobinism during the Year II," in Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La Révolution Armée: Les soldats-citoyens et la Révolution française* (Paris, 1979), 194-227.
 7. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992), 177-193, is particularly useful on this comparison. On the history of the French cult of military heroism, a useful beginning is André Corvisier, "La mort du soldat français depuis la fin du Moyen-Age," in Corvisier, *Les Hommes, La Guerre et la Mort*, by André Corvisier (Paris, 1985), 367-394.
 8. The most recent account of the campaign is Brian Lavery, *Nelson and the Nile: The Naval War Against Bonaparte, 1798* (London, 1998). This largely supplants Oliver Warner, *The Battle of the*

Nile (New York, 1960). See also Robert Gardiner (ed.), *Nelson against Napoleon* (London, 1997).

9. Sir Edward Berry, *An Authentic Narrative of the Proceedings of His Majesty's Squadron under the Command of... Sir H. Nelson from its Sailing from Gibraltar to the Conclusion of the Battle of the Nile* (NP, 1798), cited in Sir Harris Nicolas (ed.), *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson* (9 vols., London, 1845), III, 51.

10. Lavery, *Nelson and the Nile*, 303.

11. *Moniteur universel*, 22 frimaire, year VI.

12. *The Times*, 8 November 1797.

13. Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars. 1793-1815* (London, 1979), 66-67.

14. This topic is treated at greater length in Ian Germani, "Where is General Bonaparte? Press Reports of Napoleon's Expedition to Egypt," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History: Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting XXIV* (1997), 61-70.

15. *Journal des Hommes Libres*, 20 thermidor, year VI.

16. *Ibid.*, 30 thermidor, year VI.

17. *Clef du Cabinet des Souverains*, 9 and 12 fructidor, year VI.

18. *The Times*, 4, July 1798.

19. *Ibid.*, 11 August 1798.

20. *Ibid.*, 16 August 1798.

21. *Morning Chronicle*, 8 June 1798.

22. *Ibid.*, 9 July 1798.

23. Archives de la Marine (AM), BB/4/124, Auguste Lachadenède, *Détail du combat des Béquiers et de quelques événements qui l'ont précédé*.

24. *Ibid.*

25. AM, BB/4/125, *Extrait du procès-verbal du combat du 14 thermidor an VI. Soutenu par le vaisseau le Peuple Souverain...*; AM, BB/4/125,

Letter from the Bureau de la Marine, 5 frimaire, year VII; and AM, BB/4/125, Marette, Lieutenant de Vaisseau, *Rapport et déclaration relativement à la Journée du 14 au 15 thermidor an 6*. Interestingly, this last report makes no mention of the heroic anecdote that du Petit-Thouars, having lost all his limbs, had himself planted in a sack of bran to staunch the flow of blood so that he might continue to command for a moment longer. See Roland Charmy, *La Vie Héroïque d'Aristide du Petit-Thouars* (Paris, n.d.).

26. AM, BB/4/125, Pierre Cambon, Lieutenant de Vaisseau, *Rapport des mouvements qui eurent lieu à bord du vaisseau de la république le Mercure...*

27. AM, BB/4/125, Emériaux, *Copie du procès-verbal des événements de la journée du quatorze au quinze thermidor, an six, à bord du vaisseau le Spartiate...*

28. AM, BB/4/125, *Rapport de M. Charrier, adjudant [sic] général à bord du Vaisseau le Francklin à Aboukir.*

29. AM, BB/4/125, Emériaux, *Copie du procès-verbal.*

30. AM, BB/4/125, *Extrait du procès-verbal du combat du 14 thermidor an VI. Soutenu par le vaisseau le Peuple Souverain.*

31. AM, BB/4/125, *Aquilon.*

32. Edward Berry, *An Authentic Narrative of the Proceedings of His Majesty's Squadron, under the Command of Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, From its Sailing from Gibraltar to the Conclusion of the Glorious Battle of the Nile...* (3rd ed., London, 1798), 25.

33. Anon., *An Authentic Account of the Important Battle of the Nile, Fought on the first and second of August, 1798, between the British Fleet, commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio, K.B., and the French Fleet, commanded by Vice-Admiral Brueys, in Bequiers Bay, on the Coast of Egypt* (NP, n.d.), 7. These figures vary slightly from those cited in Nicolas (ed.), *Letters and Dispatches*, III, 59.

34. AM, BB/4/124, Lachadenède, *Détail du combat.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. A M, BB/4/125, Frégier, Lieutenant de Vaisseau, *Détail du combat qui a eu lieu le 14 thermidor entre l'escadre française et l'escadre anglaise dans la rade des Bequiers*.
37. A M, BB/4/124, Lachadenède, *Détail du combat*.
38. A M, BB/4/125, Extrait du procès-verbal...
39. A M, BB/4/125, Marette, *Rapport*.
40. A M, BB/4/125, Emériaux, *Copie du procès-verbal*.
41. A M, BB/4/125, Etienne, *Vaisseau Heureux. Procès-verbal*.
42. A M, BB/4/124, Victor Chabert, *Rapport du Combat d'Aboukir*.
43. Berry, *An Authentic Narrative*, 23 and 28.
44. T. Sturges Jackson (éd.), *Logs of the Great Sea Fights* (2 vols., London, 1900), II, 22.
45. Cooper Willyams, *A Voyage Up the Mediterranean in His Majesty's Ship the Swiftsure* (London, 1802), 53.
46. *Le Rédacteur*, 3 vendémiaire, year VII.
47. *L'Ami des Lois*, 5 vendémiaire, year VII.
48. *Ibid.*, 15 vendémiaire, year VII. The disguised seamen supposedly escaped aboard a sloop.
49. *Le Phénix*, 15 vendémiaire, year VII.
50. *Le Fanal*, 3rd complementary day, year VI.
51. *Ibid.*, 4th complementary day, year VI.
52. *True Briton*, 10 and 11 October 1798.
53. *Le Rédacteur*, 3rd complementary day, year VI.
54. *L'Ami des Lois*, 2nd complementary day, year VI.
55. *True Briton*, 4 October 1798.
56. *Journal des Hommes Libres*, 28 vendémiaire, 24 brumaire, year VII.
57. Gilles Achard, *Détail du Combat Naval Qui a eu lieu le 14 thermidor an VI...* (Paris, n.d.), 1 and 13.
58. *Messenger des Relations Extérieures*, 2 brumaire, year VII.
59. A M, BB/4/124. See, for example, *le Moniteur*, 8 vendémiaire, year VII.
60. *Courrier Universel*, 25 vendémiaire, year VII.
61. *Morning Chronicle*, 3 October 1798.
62. *Ibid.*, 11 October 1798.
63. *True Briton*, 4 October 1798.
64. *Morning Chronicle*, 4 October 1798.
65. *Ibid.*, 25 October 1798.
66. *Morning Chronicle*, 4 October 1798.
67. Thomas Dibdin, *The Mouth of the Nile; or, the Glorious First of August, A Musical Entertainment; As Performed at the Theatre-Royal, Covent Garden* (London, 1798), 7.
68. Ellis Cornelia Knight, *The Battle of the Nile, 1 of August 1798. A Pindarick Ode* (Naples, 1798).
69. Colley, *Britons*, 177.
70. The most often cited example of such fellow feeling is identified with the English efforts to rescue French sailors who survived the wreck of the *Orient*. See, for example, Willyams, *A Voyage Up the Mediterranean*, 54.
71. *Le Fanal*, 2nd complementary day, year VI; and Alphonse Aulard, *Paris Pendant la Réaction Thermidorienne et sous le Directoire* (5 vols., Paris, 1902), V, 193.