

# Interacting Identities: Sophie Cottin's *Malvina* (1800)

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Women of all social classes were extremely proactive in the French Revolution (1789-1799). They participated in the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, and in the October Days of the same year. Through historical accounts and official records we know much about how women asserted their identity, and how they wished their collective identity to develop. Women such as the writer Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) were very vocal in the first few years of the Revolution, calling for equal rights regardless of gender.<sup>1</sup> Women's initial optimism and hope for equality were, however, replaced by anger and disappointment when they were banned from political involvement by the Jacobin government in October 1793. Increasingly, between this exclusion and the rise to power of Napoleon as Emperor in 1801, 'political' women, including Olympe de Gouges and Manon Roland (1754-1793)<sup>2</sup> were highlighted as being a major cause of the growing anarchy in public life.<sup>3</sup> Women were often categorised as either ruthless, manipulative, often politically motivated seductresses, or ladies of leisure, willingly ignorant of the unhappiness and destitution in others' lives.<sup>4</sup>

Some critical attention has been paid to literary political women such as de Gouges, Roland, and the famously political aristocrat Germaine de Staël (1766-1817). Though these women defied the afore-mentioned categories in aligning themselves with the new patriotism, thus rejecting the Ancien Régime woman in all her forms, they still represent a 'public elite', as they witnessed many key revolutionary events in person. Much less written information is available on those women who were not openly involved in public life, but who produced written works between the executions of Queen Marie-Antoinette and Olympe de Gouges in the autumn of 1793, and the creation of the Code Napoléon in 1804.<sup>5</sup> Writing by women in this period is therefore vital to our understanding of the effect that post-1793 events had on the social and legal status of French women. One such figure, who has as yet attracted little critical attention, is Sophie Cottin (1770-1807).<sup>6</sup> Her case epitomises the challenges that faced a woman writer of this era:

Rationing as a result of revolutionary wars, and a lack of disposable income for the majority, would have narrowed

publishers' choices to those books that guaranteed profit.

- The resulting fall in the amount of original literature published by female novelists during the Revolution, especially 1794-1800,<sup>7</sup> defines those who were published – including Cottin – as important.
- Severe censorship in France at this time further limited the freedoms of political and social expression, particularly for women.
- Thus, women writers had to make use of market forces (harnessing the social and literary conventions of the time) *and* evade censorship if they chose to challenge these conventions.

Cottin, as a young widow on the edge of the French nobility, would have had to take all of the above into account, not only from a commercial perspective, but also in order to remain socially secure. *Malvina*, published in 1800, but produced between 1798 and 1799, offers a window on these challenges, and further investigation into the structure of this novel encourages the thesis that women writers during the revolutionary decade were using the 'conventional' novel for often subversive social and political commentary. The exploration of this concept is the basis of this article.

## Eighteenth-century literary traditions

Little had transformed women's novel writing since Mme de Lafayette's influential *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). This novel of sensibility, "viewed through the prism of moral and literary conventions of the period – and all literary conventions must of necessity be the faithful reflection of prevailing moral conventions"<sup>8</sup> was an aspiration for women writers throughout the eighteenth century. Although politics and society were changing, morality (or at least the feminine moral sphere) was not. The morally-instructive characters of the callous libertine and vulnerable ingénue, adopted early in the tradition of novel writing, were thus employed throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The hero and heroine in *Malvina* initially appear very much to fit this mould. It is in this tradition of libertinism that we are meant to view Sir Edmond (the hero) when we first meet him. When we are introduced to Malvina, she is lonely and grieving and dresses to hide her sexuality, having been widowed at twenty-one.

This introduction is deceptive, however. As this paper shall argue, Cottin's two characters can also be viewed as going against the literary formulae of the era, as Cottin uses her writing to problematise their social categorisation. In subverting expectations, she opens up other 'traditions,' be they social or political, to redefinition. To aid in explaining these redefinitions two specific passages shall be analysed.

1. For information on de Gouges, see Candice E. Proctor, *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution* (New York: Greenwood, 1990).

2. For information on Manon Roland, see Lucy Moore, *Liberty: the Lives and Times of Six Women in Revolutionary France* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

3. For the reaction of the French government post-1793 to women's public involvement, see Proctor, *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution*, 169-171.

4. For the revolutionary reaction against the political mobilisation of women, see Proctor, Chapter 8, 131-153. And Chapter 10, 169-188.

5. Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001) gives a breakdown of the genres being published by women during the French Revolution, but does not analyse any genre in particular. Dominique Godineau focuses on the working-class 'citoyenne' in *The women of Paris and their French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), and claims that, "after the failure of the Prairial insurrection, there was no longer a mass women's movement." (364), as it no longer served a political purpose. It is this assumed apathy that I wish to deny through literary analysis.

6. With the exception of Michael J. Call, *Infertility and the Novels of Sophie Cottin* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002).

7. See Hesse, chapter two for more information.

8. Eva Jacobs et.al (eds.) *Woman and Society in eighteenth-century France: essays in honour of John Stephenson Spink* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), 209.

9. This is most famously depicted through Choderlos de Laclos' novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Paris: Durand Neveu, 1782), also highlighting the adoption of the tradition among male novelists.

Though short, they epitomise the idea of redefining identity through interaction and raise some problematic questions about this redefinition. These passages describe the first meeting of Malvina and Sir Edmond. Malvina meets Sir Edmond after others have given her strong opinions on his character; her reaction to him unnerves and excites her at the same time. Sir Edmond is aware that Malvina will have been fed (possibly false) information about him, but is intrigued to meet the mysterious woman who never attends their host's dinner table. The interest in this passage lies not only in the sentimental importance of this moment in the plot, but also in the subtext implicated in this chapter's subtitle, "Une Entrevue": a meeting. A meeting of what, however? Of minds? Of souls? Of polar opposites? To begin uncovering this subtext, an analysis of literary traditions is crucial. These conventions of eighteenth-century writing are no less important, as they use the traditional to implement the political.

### Malvina meets her 'hero'

1 C'était une de ces physionomies où tout le feu de  
l'esprit s'unit au charme de  
2 la sensibilité et qu'il ne faut pas regarder deux  
fois quand on veut conserver sa  
3 tranquillité. – L'innocente Malvina ignorait ce  
danger et ce qui aurait dû  
4 l'engager à fuir fut précisément ce qui la fit rester."<sup>10</sup>

1 It was one of those faces where all the fire of the  
spirit unites with the charms of  
2 sensibility, and that one should not look at  
twice, if one wishes to keep their  
3 peace of mind. - The innocent Malvina ignored this  
danger, and what should have  
4 made her flee was precisely what made her stay."<sup>11</sup>

This passage opens with the juxtaposition of the demonic "le feu"<sup>12</sup> and the godly "l'esprit",<sup>13</sup> highlighting the natural conflict within the individual. This serves as a reminder that even heroes and heroines have flaws: a lesson that the French had learnt well by the year of the book's publication.<sup>14</sup> The verb choice of "s'unit"<sup>15</sup> evokes connotations of marriage and (in this context) the idea that opposites complement each other and can be united to create a new whole. The idealised view of womanhood is also implicated:<sup>16</sup> in 'uniting,' a woman ceases to hold any right to independence, be it in thought or deed. Her role changes to that of 'devoir',<sup>17</sup> a word frequently repeated by Malvina in Cottin's novel. (Interestingly, this 'devoir'<sup>18</sup> relates to motherhood and not to the supplication

required through marriage). Cottin's language choice in this passage is telling of contemporary eighteenth-century attitudes to women, such as their lack of official identity (other than the one given to them by a patriarchal society). In this instance, the identity is given to her through marriage, though previously she would have been the property of her father. This legal status for women did not change with the Revolution and was cemented in the Code Napoléon.<sup>19</sup>

Cottin follows this evocation of marriage with a quasi-feminine description of Sir Edmond as possessing the "charme de la sensibilité."<sup>20</sup> This creates some confusion over his identity. Is Sir Edmond in touch with his emotions, like Rousseau's eponymous hero in *Émile* (1762)?<sup>21</sup> Or was this sensitivity considered a mostly feminine trait during the Revolution, when the active 'citoyen'<sup>22</sup> was defined as placing patriotic duty before personal feeling? This confusion of gender traits, and the question of whether they remain positive when attributed to the opposite sex, serves as a reminder that though gender identities were being redefined throughout the revolutionary decade, these redefinitions could not entirely erase previous social behaviours. It is, therefore, not only Malvina who is struggling to fit into a new societal mould, but also Sir Edmond.

The initial "charme"<sup>23</sup> that strikes Malvina is then tempered by the revelation "qu'il ne faut pas regarder deux fois":<sup>24</sup> This links Edmond with Classical mythology, evoking the image of the Greek Gorgon Medusa, with whom the danger of looking was associated. Edmond appears to be set up here as a Greek figure, capable of both extreme benevolence and dangerous acts, to be both idolised and feared.<sup>25</sup> This initial note of caution is further emphasised by the use of the verb "conserver",<sup>26</sup> suggesting that Malvina needs to protect herself from Sir Edmond, though we have just been informed that he possesses "sensibilité".<sup>27</sup> These competing emotions reflect the reaction of many to the Revolution. Cottin has achieved this through the use of emotive language and imagery, rather than direct reference, in order to evoke the confusion surrounding revolutionary identity; a key technique in safeguarding her text from censorship.

Though Cottin has used this passage to highlight Sir Edmond's possible dangerous nature, the final sentence states that "l'innocente Malvina ignorait ce danger".<sup>28</sup> This phrase problematizes Malvina, as the choice of "innocente" and "ignorait" returns to the figure of the Ancien Régime

10. Sophie Cottin, *Malvina* (Paris: Maradan, 1800), 116-117.

11. Translations are my own.

12. "Fire". Line 1 in this passage.

13. "Spirit". Line 1.

14. By 1800 there was a mounting feeling that the French Revolution had failed; in particular, that the revolutionaries had failed the people and that society was "blasé and beleaguered". See Moore, *Liberty*, 367.

15. "to unite". Line 1.

16. Rey-Debove, Josette and Alain Rey, eds. *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1993) defines 's'unir' as "Ne plus former qu'un tout": "No longer forming anything but a whole" (2342). This epitomises the loss of individual identity that a woman in the late-eighteenth century suffered through marriage.

17. Defined as both "Être dans l'obligation de (faire qqch.)": "To be under obligation to (do something)" and "L'obligation morale considérée en elle-même, et indépendamment de son application particulière.": "The consideration in itself of moral obligation, independently of its particular application." (Rey-Debove and Rey, eds., *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, 633).

18. "Duty" in English.

19. The Code Napoléon, created in 1804, was a civil code that replaced former feudal laws. The code left women with even less rights than before the Revolution, giving them the same legal status as children and servants, and quashing any remaining hope that French women may have harboured for gender equality.

20. "Charm of sensibility". Lines 1-2.

21. *Émile* was considered among many contemporaries as the model for the new 'citizen': both emotionally and intellectually educated, sensitive to nature, religion and the feelings of others, yet never neglectful of his societal (and patriotic) duty.

22. "Citizen" in English.

23. "Charm". Line 1.

24. "One should not look at [it] twice". Line 2.

25. Although Medusa herself was considered a monster in Classical mythology, her image was used after her death to ward off evil spirits: thus, she became capable of benevolence as well as being a feared creature.

26. "To keep". Line 2.

27. "Sensibility" in English.

28. "The innocent Malvina ignored this danger". Line 3.

ingénue:<sup>29</sup> the innocent and vulnerable virgin. Yet Malvina is a widow, and thus the interpretation of her as an ingénue is tempered by the existence of her sexual knowledge. This highlights the problematic social status of the young widow; as Cottin's heroine is complicated through having the age and appearance of an ingénue, mixed with the independence and sexual awareness of an older woman. How, therefore, did these young widows fit into the Revolution's social redefinition of female identity?

The last sentence of this passage highlights Malvina's exceptional nature; she believes that the reasons why anyone else might have fled from Sir Edmond are precisely why she should stay.<sup>30</sup> This dedication to a duty that needs fulfilling, no matter the danger or difficulty, is tempered by the alternative interpretation of her naïve femininity, which makes her vulnerable to a man like Sir Edmond. Is Cottin depicting only one of these possibilities, or both? In acknowledging the link that a contemporary woman's virtue had to her moral duty, Cottin has made Malvina no less vulnerable, as she is still prey to the male sex on both a social and legal level. This reflects the problem of women's social identity once again: for Malvina, obeying her duties (to her adoptive daughter Fanny, and to Fanny's dead mother) is not the same as obeying her husband. Which one should define her according to the politics of the Revolution?

### Sir Edmond's ideal of womanhood

1 Mais si l'aspect de sir Edmond Seymour l'avait  
surprise agréablement,  
2 comment peindre ce qu'il éprouva en la voyant?  
3 Il entend de loin Malvina, il s'approche, écoute, et  
cette voix retentit  
4 jusqu'à son cœur et lui apprend qu'il en a un ; il  
entre, elle se retourne, et  
5 le charme s'achève – Ces beaux cheveux blonds,  
dont les boucles  
6 ondoyantes tombent sans art sur ses épaules; ce  
teint semblable à ces roses  
7 blanches qui, nuancées d'un léger incarnat, laissent  
l'œil incertain sur leur  
8 véritable couleur ; ce cou d'albâtre, que relève  
encore la robe lugubre dont  
9 elle est habillée ; ces yeux noirs bordés de longues  
paupières de soie, et  
10 dont le regard tendre et prolongé va toujours  
frapper au cœur ; cette  
11 contenance modeste et timide, tout l'étonne,  
tout l'enchanté ; l'univers  
12 qu'il a connu disparaît, un nouveau monde  
vient de s'ouvrir pour lui, il s'y  
13 précipite sans examen, il y vivra avec délices,  
si Malvina veut l'habiter  
14 avec lui.<sup>31</sup>

1 But if the appearance of Sir Edmond Seymour had  
pleasantly surprised her,  
2 how does one paint what he felt on seeing her?

29. For more information on the literary traditions of the French novel, see Unwin, Timothy (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to the French novel, from 1800 to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

30. Lines 3-4.

31. Cottin, *Malvina*, 117-118.

3 He heard Malvina from afar, he approached her,  
listening, and that voice resounded  
4 in his heart, teaching him that he has one, he  
entered, she turned towards him, and  
5 the charm was complete - The beautiful blond  
hair, whose  
6 rippling curls fall over her shoulders artlessly;  
the complexion resembling white roses  
7 which, tinged with a slight blush, left the eye  
uncertain about their  
8 true colour; this alabaster neck, which was  
further emphasised by the mournful dress;  
9 those black eyes fringed with long silky  
lashes, and  
10 whose tender and lingering gaze always  
strikes the heart;  
11 the modest and shy countenance, all sur-  
prised and enchanted him; the universe  
12 that he knew disappeared, a new world was  
opening up to him, he  
13 would unquestioningly throw himself in, and  
live there with pleasure, if Malvina wanted to  
live  
14 there with him.<sup>32</sup>

The choice of "l'aspect"<sup>33</sup> reflects Sir Edmond's idealised interpretation of Malvina, based on her physical appearance. This interpretation is key to understanding Sir Edmond's reaction, as what he sees is more than a beautiful woman; it is an assumption of idealised womanhood. Cottin goes on to describe Malvina as the purest, most innocent and virtuous of women. Yet this innocence and virtue is being projected onto Malvina by Sir Edmond, thereby portraying a male ideal of female perfection that is long-standing but ultimately deceptive. Is Cottin, therefore, questioning who is responsible for the need to redefine women's social identity?

Malvina is depicted in this passage as a Classical figure, with her "boucles ondoyantes", "teint semblable à ces roses blanches qui, nuancées d'un léger incarnat, laissent l'œil incertain sur leur véritable couleur", and "cou d'albâtre".<sup>34</sup> Cottin's adoption of the Classical figure, also used by the revolutionaries through the figure of Marianne,<sup>35</sup> portrays Malvina as willing to adhere to the newly-defined female ideal. This description, however, also highlights the rupture in revolutionary France between the ideal and the reality: Malvina's pure revolutionary appearance contrasts with her "robe lugubre"<sup>36</sup> of mourning, thereby linking her with loss. This loss is practically explained as that of her husband, proving this projected purity to be tainted by sexual knowledge. Could Malvina also be mourning the loss of an 'ancien'<sup>37</sup> social identity? This is not beyond explanation, as the novel opens with Malvina alone following the death of her only female friend, so positioning her as cut off from society: a marginalisation that was increasingly widened to include all women by the date of *Malvina's* publication.

32. Translation is my own.

33. "Appearance". Line 1.

34. "Rippling curls", "complexion resembling white roses which, tinged with a slight blush, left the eye uncertain about their true colour" and "alabaster neck". Lines 5-8.

35. For a history of Marianne, see Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into battle: Republican imagery and symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

36. "Mournful dress". Line 8.

37. "Former" in English.

Malvina's beauty is such that it shines through her pale, luminous skin and bright eyes, and is thus "relève encore la robe lugubre"<sup>38</sup> concealing her. It is this physical modesty that attracts Sir Edmond to Malvina, as he sees a reflection of idealised womanhood. Religious devotion is implied, using dress to hide sexuality, thereby evoking nuns and linking the ideal woman to her 'proper sphere.' She is the moral guardian of her children – exactly what Malvina has promised to be for her adoptive daughter Fanny. Cottin also endows Malvina with two of the key female 'virtues', according to religious teachings, Rousseau's *Émile* and the revolutionary Jacobin government: she is "modeste et timide".<sup>39</sup> This once again places Malvina firmly within an accepted female social identity. Her status as a young widow with an adopted daughter, however, disturbs this model for Sir Edmond later in the narrative: he cannot reconcile Malvina as the obedient, pure and timid woman with the strong mother who resists sacrificing her duties to marry. A forewarning by Cottin to women against the influence of men is given at the end of this passage, as Sir Edmond sees "un nouveau monde vient de s'ouvrir pour lui, il s'y précipite sans examen, il y vivra avec délices, si Malvina veut l'habiter avec lui."<sup>40</sup> Note that this "nouveau monde" mentions "habiter"<sup>41</sup>, but not marriage: despite Malvina's portrayal as the ideal of redefined womanhood, Sir Edmond's first thought is of a lover, not a wife.

It is important to remember that at this pivotal moment Malvina and Sir Edmond have not yet spoken to one another. Cottin's reminder is in the first lines, when she asks "comment peindre ce qu'il éprouva *en la voyant?*".<sup>42</sup> Sir Edmond's interpretation of Malvina has her 'regard'<sup>43</sup> strongly affect those she meets: "le regard tendre et prolongé va toujours frapper au cœur."<sup>44</sup> This infers that Malvina has no need to speak in order to influence others for the better. This again places her firmly within the domestic ideal of womanhood: using example rather than her voice to guide those around her, while driven by benevolent motives rather than personal ambition. Yet Malvina changes later in the narrative, as she becomes more aware of the necessity to defend herself against the attacks and falsehoods of others. This switch from passive to assertive subverts the idealised view of womanhood. Cottin never radicalises Malvina, however, as her later repentance returns her to the conventions of womanhood, and her death at the end of the novel makes her a true revolutionary woman. Malvina sacrifices herself as a warning against un-virtuous behaviour, specifying to Mistriss Clare "apprenez sur tout à Fanny à ne jamais sacrifier le devoir à l'amour."<sup>45</sup>

### Redefining female identity

These two passages demonstrate Cottin's manipulation and redefinition of social models through the unattainable imagining of idealised womanhood. The very fact that Edmond's description of Malvina is so long – at least in

comparison with the portrait Malvina paints of him - is indicative of the importance that Edmond gives to this initial impression. At this point in the narrative the reader knows Malvina better than Edmond does, and thus is aware that she is not as "modeste et timide"<sup>46</sup> as Edmond would believe.

This key moment depicts the redefinition of identity through initial interaction, and the individual's reaction to this interaction. Yet Cottin insinuates a subversive element through her choice of language, thereby questioning this redefinition. In writing a heroine who appears as the ideal of revolutionary womanhood and then placing her in a social situation that prevents her from fulfilling the associated expectations, Cottin appears to be questioning the reality of idealised womanhood for those who cannot be easily categorised, such as the young widow.

As this article illustrates, this research is so far raising more questions than it is answering. This is why the problem of changing political and social identities for women during the French Revolution - and particularly in its aftermath - is so interesting. Writing in the period 1794-1804, particularly by women, is a valuable window on the highly complex, often hidden, socio-political agendas of - and for - women. Though the revolutionary government abolished official religion, its values were expected to be retained and upheld by women as moral guardians of the home. Though obscured by a lack of contemporary reception and in-print authors, this writing begins to illuminate how French women novelists approached politics during the revolutionary era, as Cottin highlights those women who were finding it difficult to fit into the categories defined by the Jacobin government. Through this, she begins to interrogate the newly-defined positioning of women. The redefinition of identity through interaction will always hold subversive potential, and, in uncovering the elements of this subversion, hopefully some of the murkiness surrounding women of the French Revolution will begin to clear.

38. "Further emphasised by the mournful dress". Line 8.

39. "Modest and timid". Line 11.

40. "a new world was opening up to him, he would unquestioningly throw himself in, and live there with pleasure, if Malvina wanted to live there with him.." Lines 12-14.

41. "New world" and "to live" in English respectively.

42. "How does one paint what he felt *in seeing her?*" Line 2: Emphasis added.

43. "Look" in English.

44. "Tender and lingering gaze always strikes the heart". Line 10.

45. Cottin, *Malvina*, 4:233. "Above all, teach Fanny never to sacrifice duty for love".

46. "Modest and timid". Line 11.

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