

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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17. Marie Sophie Risteau Cottin

22 March 1770–25 August 1807



Fig. 17. Marie Sophie Risteau Cottin, by P.-F. Bertonnier. Photo by William C. Minor (2008). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0f/Sophie_Cottin.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Claire d'Albe

Préface de l'auteur.

Le dégoût, le danger ou l'effroi du monde ayant fait naître en moi le besoin de me retirer dans un monde idéal, déjà j'embrassais un vaste plan qui devait m'y retenir longtemps, lorsqu'une circonstance imprévue, m'arrachant à ma solitude et à mes nouveaux amis, me transporta sur les bords de la Seine, aux environs de Rouen, dans une superbe campagne, au milieu d'une société nombreuse.

Ce n'est pas là où je pouvais travailler, je le savais ; aussi avais-je laissé derrière moi tous mes essais. Cependant la beauté de l'habitation, le charme puissant des bois et des eaux, éveillèrent mon imagination et remuèrent mon cœur ; il ne me fallait qu'un mot pour tracer un nouveau plan ; ce mot me fut dit par une personne de la société, et qui a joué elle-même un rôle assez important dans cette histoire. Je lui demandai

la permission d'écrire son récit, elle me l'accorda ; j'obtins celle de l'imprimer, et je me hâte d'en profiter. Je me hâte est le mot, car ayant écrit tout d'un trait, et en moins de quinze jours, l'ouvrage qu'on va lire, je ne me suis donné ni le temps, ni la peine d'y retoucher. Je sais bien que, pour le public, le temps ne fait rien à l'affaire ; aussi il fera bien de dire du mal de mon ouvrage s'il l'ennuie ; mais s'il m'ennuyait encore plus de le corriger, j'ai bien fait de le laisser tel qu'il est.

Quant à moi, je sens si bien tout ce qui lui manque, que je ne m'attends pas que mon âge, ni mon sexe, me mettent à l'abri des critiques, et mon amour-propre serait assez mal à son aise, s'il n'avait une sorte de pressentiment que l'histoire que je médite le dédommagera peut-être de l'anecdote qui vient de m'échapper.¹

Marie Sophie Risteau Cottin was born and died in Paris, daughter of Anne Suzanne Lecourt and Jacques François Risteau, a Bordeaux merchant and former director of the Compagnie des Indes, in a Calvinist family. She was raised by her uncle. Her mother was passionate about literature and art and Sophie shared that passion. In May 1789, she married Jean Paul Marie Cottin, a successful banker who had left Bordeaux to live in the capital. Cottin lived a retired life amid the revolutionary ferment. During the Terror, Jean Paul Marie Cottin was denounced as an aristocrat. On 13 September 1793, those who came for him found him lifeless in his bed. His wife was widowed at twenty-three

1 Marie Sophie Risteau Cottin, *Claire d'Albe* (Paris: Lebègue, 1820), pp. 5–8.

Translation: Disgust, danger or the fear of the world having given rise in me to the need to retire into an ideal world, already I was embracing a vast plan which would keep me there for a long time, when an unexpected circumstance, tearing me from my solitude and my new friends, transported me to the banks of the Seine, in the neighborhood of Rouen, in a superb countryside, amid a numerous society.

It is not here that I could work, I knew it; thus, I had left behind me all my essays. Yet the beauty of the habitation, the charm of the woods and the waters, awoke my imagination and moved my heart; I needed only a word to trace a new project; this word was said to me by a person of this society, and who herself played a fairly important role in this story. I asked for permission to write her story, she granted it to me; I received that of printing it; and I take haste to take advantage of that. I take haste is the word, for having written all in a rush, and in less than two weeks, the work one is about to read, I gave myself neither the time, nor the effort to retouch it. I know well that, for the public, time has no bearing on the matter; thus, it will do well to speak ill of my work if it finds it boring; but if it bored me still more to correct it, I did well to leave it as it is.

As for me, I feel so well all that it is lacking, that I expect neither my age, nor my sex, to shelter me from criticisms, and my vanity would be fairly ill at ease, if it did not have a sort of presentiment that the story I am meditating will perhaps recompense it for the anecdote that has just escaped me.

and nearly ruined: she had paid a large part of their fortune to Fouquier-Tinville in a vain attempt to save two family members. She retired to Champlan, where she hid Vincent Marie de Vaublanc, condemned to death by the revolutionary tribunal. An accident of health—early menopause—prevented Cottin from having children. When in 1798 a friend was obliged to leave France, Cottin wrote *Claire d'Albe* (1799) in two weeks, published anonymously, and gave him the proceeds. She was removed from the list of émigrés that same year, visiting England and Italy. Her later works were headed “par l’auteur de *Claire d'Albe*,” though the great success of *Malvina* (1800) and of *Amélie Mansfield* (1802) revealed her identity. She declined to publish her lyric pieces, which she considered less useful than her novels; she was no admirer of woman authors *per se*. Her poem *La Prise de Jéricho* with its Jewish heroine was first published posthumously by Suard in 1811. *Élisabeth ou les Exilés de Sibérie* (1806) meanwhile continued her success. *Mathilde ou Mémoires tirées de l’histoire des croisades* (1805) was more ambitious, but she died two years later at thirty-seven, of breast cancer, after months of suffering. She is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery. Genlis found it necessary to attack her style and her character, but Lady Morgan visited Champlan in hope of meeting her.

Sophie Cottin had a short, hard life, dying at thirty-seven after early amenorrhea. Her husband died during the Terror; Cottin nearly ruined herself bribing the public prosecutor. She published her books anonymously. Let us look at the preface to her first published work.

“Le dégoût, le danger ou l’effroi du monde,” she begins. This may seem after the fact—Robespierre had died in July 1794, four years earlier—but trauma takes its time, and four years is not so very long. Cottin was on French soil, but far from Paris, as she wrote in 1798; she was not caught up in the whirl of the days’ events, the play of coup and counter coup that defined the Directoire. And so, she notes her retreat into an ideal world. This now—isolation and dream—is quite in keeping with a thousand Romantic novels across the West, it is already the theme of Rousseau’s *Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire* (1782). But this is not where Cottin’s story begins; she instead describes her trip to Rouen, amid a “société nombreuse” and the superb natural scenery a Romantic reader might value. Here, a stranger says the word on which her novel rests, and after asking for permission from that person to write and then publish it, Cottin is ready to present her work to the world.