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**A Revolution in Emotion: Madame Roland
and the Politics of Feeling**



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*'[the morning paper] was brought to me, and there it was, the fatal news: an order of arrest had been issued against the Twenty-Two deputies. The paper slipped from my hands and I cried out in despair 'France is lost!''*¹

Marie-Jeanne Roland, captive in the Abbaye Prison in June 1793, wept for the fate of the French Revolution. If alive today she might well weep for her legacy. The Girondin faction, in which she and her husband, Jean-Marie Roland, were leading figures, had been overthrown by the National Convention. In just eighteen months, they had endured a fall that resulted in them being denounced as a threat to the Republic that they had helped to build. But the anguish she felt was not merely political: this was personal, too. Amongst the twenty-two deputies were friends, her husband of thirteen years, and a man with whom she had a meaningful, if unconsummated, affair. In the French Revolution, where leading figures were part of the same social circles, and, in many instances, had been friends for years, it was impossible to separate the emotional from the political. Yet often, this connection has been neglected in its many histories. This dissertation will seek to recover the emotional element of Madame Roland's experience, in order to shed light on (I) the emotional environment that the leading revolutionaries operated in and (II) Mme. Roland as an individual, who, so often characterised as an almighty revolutionary heroine, was also a young woman navigating an unfamiliar, unstable, and exciting world. It will argue that she was, at once, a revolutionary who espoused the importance of virtue; and a woman who needed more than that which it would allow her.

Throughout the nineteenth century, famed Romantic writers such as Thomas Carlyle, Jules Michelet, and Alphonse de Lamartine wrote dramatic narratives of the twists and turns of the Revolution, with the individuals who were embroiled in the revolutionary drama occupying centre stage.² In such accounts, the private lives of these figures were essential in explaining the events of the Revolution, with much inference and presupposition due to the nature of the available documents. In opposition to this approach, the political Marxist historians of the twentieth century, such as Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul, focussed wholly on the public lives of such individuals.³ Emotions and private lives were deemed separate to ideology and rationality; they instead considered economic factors to argue that the revolutionaries were predestined to act according to their class status. The cultural revisionists of the 1980s explicitly attacked this approach: François Furet highlighted representations and social practices as essential to explaining revolutionaries' public commitments. However, even Furet's

¹ Marie-Jeanne Roland (née Phlipon), *The Memoirs of Madame Roland*, ed. and trans. Evelyn Shuckburgh (Rhode Island: Moyer Bell, 1989), 48.

² Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1837); Jules Michelet, *History of France*, trans. by G.H. Smith (New York: D. Appleton, 1847); Alphonse de Lamartine, *History of the Girondists* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848).

³ See, amongst other works, Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. R.R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1972).

approach limited revolutionaries to mere ‘mouthpieces of revolutionary discourse’⁴; there was still little emphasis put on the agency of the revolutionaries themselves.

It is only since the bicentenary of the Revolution that questions of agency and ‘the self’ have been re-examined, with renewed interest in assessing human motivation, and particularly the role of emotions in shaping revolutionary actors’ written records. In an historiographical assessment, Sofia Rosenfeld observed that ‘how people in different moments and places felt- what scared them, what made them joyful or proud or disgusted or compassionate- has become fundamental to understanding what those same people decided and did’.⁵ The most notable of these early attempts came from Timothy Tackett, using methods from both the Marxist and cultural revisionist approaches to ask how and why the deputies of the National Assembly became “revolutionaries”. Crucially, he went further than both of these classic approaches in examining how it would have *felt* to take part in such a momentous event, and how this contributed to an entirely new mindset he termed ‘revolutionary psychology’.⁶ It was William Reddy who first suggested that work on emotions within the French Revolution, and history in general, needed theorising. He developed a theory of ‘emotives’, which he used to demonstrate how the emotional environment of the Revolution, which he termed ‘sentimentalism’, became impossible to navigate. He argued the revolutionaries’ obsession with proving their own virtue through ‘natural’ sentiment, popularised by philosophers of the Enlightenment, led them down the path of mutual destruction: the impossibility of proving one was always acting out of benevolence and self-sacrifice bred paranoia, suspicion and, ultimately, terror.⁷ Reddy inspired a host of historians to embark on similarly ambitious ventures: Marisa Linton considered the role of emotions and personal relationships in what she termed the ‘politicians’ Terror’; arguing that revolutionaries became obsessed with scrutinising virtue within others and themselves because of the fear of ‘what was really in someone else’s heart’.⁸ David Andress studied the career of the leading Jacobin, Maximilien Robespierre, to show how the historical moment of ‘*sensibilite*’ shaped his self-conception with ‘profound emotional and political consequences’.⁹ Together, these works and others have shown that the concepts of virtue and sentimentalism created an emotional environment whereby people were obsessed with proving their own sincerity and authenticity, which, ironically, bred only suspicion and

⁴ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (1978: this edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 60-61.

⁵ Sophia Rosenfeld, ‘Thinking About Feeling, 1789-1799’, *French Historical Studies*, 32.4 (2009): 697-706, 698.

⁶ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789-1790* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 307.

⁷ William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 155-161.

⁸ Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Friendship, Virtue and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12.

⁹ David Andress, ‘Living the Revolutionary Melodrama: Robespierre’s Sensibility and the Construction of Political Commitment in the French Revolution’, *Representations*, 114.1 (2001): 103-128, 103.

distrust. This dissertation will use this approach to show how the memoirs of Mme. Roland confirm and develop this work: despite her profound belief in virtue, and her efforts to demonstrate it, it will be shown that she too was a victim of the emotional environment of the Revolution.

Mme. Roland is the best-documented female of the Revolution, having left behind extensive correspondence and, of course, her memoirs, following her execution on 8th November 1793.¹⁰ The narrative historians of the nineteenth century tended to portray her favourably: Carlyle described her as the 'noblest of all living Frenchwomen'.¹¹ Michelet wrote that 'her manner was that of a woman, but her masculine mind, and stoical heart, was that of a man'.¹² They praised such virility, but emphasised that it was only acceptable because she maintained a feminine profile whilst engaging in masculine affairs. Interest in Mme. Roland was renewed in the late twentieth century as part of the development of women's history. Unsurprisingly, it was for these same reasons that feminist writers and historians took issue with her. Marie-Paule Duhet stated that 'Madame Roland speaks of women as of a foreign race to her'¹³, whilst Candice E. Proctor believed that Madame Roland simply 'lacked courage' to challenge the revolutionary concept of femininity.¹⁴ Some historians have sought to rescue Mme. Roland from such judgements: Lesley Walker argued for a reading of the memoirs that did not simply reduce her to a failure 'according to contemporary standards of "successful" womanhood'¹⁵, whilst Brigitte Szymanek argued that her seeming ambivalence towards other women was an elaborate hoax: Mme. Roland had merely adopted the male voice in order to participate in the Revolution, the success of which would eventually bring liberation for all women.¹⁶

In all of these works, however, an appreciation of the role of emotions is lacking. The debates over Mme. Roland's deliberate intentions have often been wide of the mark, because they attribute all agency to the author and fail to appreciate the all-encompassing and turbulent emotional environment in which she was writing. Linton wrote that more recent general approaches to the French Revolution have called into question 'the assumption that political ideas and actions inhabited an objectified and rational world and were somehow divorced from the private lives of the people who lived through the Revolution and participated in it'.¹⁷ It is time to examine the memoirs of Mme. Roland in this

¹⁰ Claude Perroud published two volumes of Mme. Roland's correspondence dating from 1777 until her death. See, for example: Marie-Jeanne Roland, *Lettres de Madame Roland: 1780-1793*, ed. Claude Perroud (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902).

¹¹ Carlyle, 308.

¹² Jules Michelet, *The Women of the Revolution*, (Philadelphia: Baird, 1855) 179.

¹³ Marie-Paule Duhet, *Le femmes et la Révolution* (Paris: Juliard, 1971), 78.

¹⁴ Candice E. Proctor, *Women, Equality and the French Revolution* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 181.

¹⁵ Lesley Walker, 'Sweet and Consoling Virtue: The Memoirs of Madame Roland', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 34.3 (2001), 403-419, 405.

¹⁶ Brigitte Szymanek, French Women's Revolutionary Writings: Madame Roland or the Pleasure of the Mask', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 15.1 (1996), 99-122, 110.

¹⁷ Marisa Linton, 'Fatal Friendships: The Politics of Jacobin Friendships', *French Historical Studies*, 31.1 (2008): 51-76, 53.

particular light. In so doing, it will rescue Mme. Roland from the condescension of latter-day historians, who on the one hand have reduced her to a traitor to her own gender, and on the other have argued that she was in fact a feminist in disguise who simply exploited the patriarchal language of the Revolution. It will instead reveal a much more complex and conflicted individual: like all of her revolutionary counterparts, she was convinced of the importance of virtue, but as a strong-minded woman who found self-validation in her own capabilities, she needed much more agency than that which it would allow her.

Methodology

In analysing the memoirs, specific attention has been paid to the performative aspect of the narrative in order to highlight the distinction between Mme. Roland's two different "voices". Firstly, the voice that espoused the rhetoric of virtue that was characteristic of late 18th-century France: this is mostly evident in *Notices Historiques*, where Mme. Roland provided her perspective of the events of the Revolution in order to defend the actions of herself and the Girondins. She termed this her 'political and moral testament', and believed that it would redeem her reputation as a woman of virtue.¹⁸ This is the voice that historians have been correct in highlighting as strategic: here, Mme. Roland wrote with the deliberate intention of portraying herself as a figure of feminine virtue. However, the voice of female rebellion, saturated with emotion, and mostly present in the *Memoires Particuliers*, has been ignored or misinterpreted. Two months in prison, coupled with the crushing (false) news that her *Notices Historiques*, had been destroyed, had eroded all hope, and with it, Mme. Roland's motivation for strategic writing. She resigned herself to 'retracing the past', as it was 'the utmost [she could] do to distract [her] attention from the unbearable present'.¹⁹ This disparity between her incentives for writing is what allows the reader to realise the emotional subtext present in the second voice undermines the adherence to virtue of the first voice. This is not to say that Mme. Roland lied about her belief in virtue: she was a woman of her time who was convinced of its importance. What the emotional subtext indicates, instead, is a more complex conclusion: she simultaneously believed in virtue, and displayed instinctive resistance to its restraints.

The memoirs themselves have been edited and republished several times: they were initially published by a good friend of the Rolands', the 'estimable' Louis Augustin Guillaume Bosc, in 1795.²⁰ Bosc removed any details that he viewed as dangerous to her reputation, including her having fallen in love with another man, although there were rumours.²¹ It was not until 1864, that it became widely known that Mme. Roland had fallen for Buzot.²² In 1905 the complete, uncensored text was published for the

¹⁸ Roland, 75.

¹⁹ Roland, 215.

²⁰ Roland, 189.

²¹ For a description of such rumours, see Siân Reynolds, *Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 261-2.

²² Madame Roland, *Mémoires de Madame Roland* ed. Armand Prosper Faugère (Paris: L. Hachette, 1864).

first time.²³ The edition used in this study is the Paul de Roux edition (1966) which was translated by Evelyn Shuckburgh. This edition ‘brought together all that survives of what Mme. Roland wrote during her incarceration in the Abbaye and Sainte-Pelagie prisons between 1st June 1793 and her execution on 8th November of the same year’.²⁴

It should be made clear that the written words of Mme. Roland will never allow the historian to access the unconscious; as Rosenfeld explains, ‘no amount of empathy on the part of the historian can ever lead to the recovery of some kind of pure, unmediated experiential realm, in good part because such a realm did not and cannot exist.’²⁵ However, in highlighting these two voices, the contrast reveals (I) how Mme. Roland sought to construct her identity as a virtuous heroine within the Revolution and (II) how the emotions, both explicit and implicit, indicate that she was, at once, less and more than the woman that virtue dictated.

Dissertation structure

In order to analyse the emotional subtext of the memoirs, the triple lens of her friendships; her relationship with her mother and father; and her marriage and relationship with her lover will be employed. The first chapter demonstrates how Mme. Roland’s desire to be virtuous led her to obscure the importance of her private friendships, and, subsequently, the emotional fulfilment that they provided her with. The second chapter will display the disparity between expectations within the virtuous family structure and Mme. Roland’s emotions concerning her mother, her father, and herself. Finally, the third chapter will examine the wide gulf between 18th-century perceptions of romantic love and marriage with Mme. Roland’s conduct as a wife and her later affair. The memoirs will show how she simultaneously bought into the importance of virtue, whilst betraying an instinctive and uncomfortable desire to rebel against it. Captured by the Revolution and captured by history, Mme. Roland deserves greater understanding.

²³ Madame Roland, *Mémoires de Madame Roland* ed. Claude Perroud (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1905).

²⁴ Roland, 16 (Shuckburgh, introduction)

²⁵ Rosenfeld, 704.

Chapter 1

Friendship

*'The fugitive deputies, have they been able at last to escape this inhospitable land which devours its noblest sons and drinks the blood of the virtuous?'*²⁶

Such was the fear of Mme. Roland on 28th August 1793. Resigned to her own fate after two months of imprisonment, she hoped fervently that the Girondin deputies' plan to escape to America had gone smoothly. These men were Mme. Roland's friends; she worried for their safety. And yet, for those who professed to be virtuous, there was no place for the prioritisation of personal connections over the good of the *patrie*. The resultant tone of the memoirs is one of contradiction: whilst consumed with worry for the fate of her friends, she simultaneously claimed to have no personal attachment to them. This chapter will first demonstrate how Mme. Roland constructed an image of friendship within the confines of republican virtue: friendship was honourable, yet something that must not be elevated above the benefit of the *patrie*. It will then argue that that Mme. Roland's despair for the fate of her friends indicates that this was not something she was capable of doing, despite her attempts to prove so.

For the revolutionary politicians, who were 'obsessed with the model of the Roman Republic', the teachings of classical antiquity provided the foundation for models of virtuous friendship.²⁷ Classical figures such as Cicero depicted friendship and virtue as being irrevocably bound: he stated that 'friendship can exist only between good men', with 'good men' being those whose 'actions and lives leave no question as to their honour, purity, equity, and liberality'. With the exception of wisdom, 'nothing better than [friendship] ha[d] been given to man by the immortal gods'.²⁸ These ideas were promoted by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, for whom friendship was indicative of natural sentiment and sensibility. According to Linton, friendship was regarded as 'a transparent manifestation of natural virtue, sincere feeling, and sympathy for others'.²⁹ The most influential of these philosophers was Rousseau, who wrote that he had been 'born for friendship'.³⁰ In particular,

²⁶ Roland, 156.

²⁷ Simon Schama, *Citizens* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 140.

²⁸ *Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero, with his treatises on friendship and old age* trans. Evelyn Shuckburgh, *The Ancient History Sourcebook* [<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/cicero-friendship.asp>] [accessed 09/04/2019].

²⁹ Linton, *Fatal Friendships*, 56.

³⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, ed. and trans. Christopher Kelly et al., (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), 301.

the friendships between the protagonists of his novels provided examples for virtuous exchange.³¹ He also alluded to friendship's importance in politics, calling it 'the most sacred' of social exchanges and that the loss of 'sincere friendships' was a cause of 'political instability'.³² In these terms, friendship provided a moral guide and a route to virtue. These ideas carried over into the revolutionary principle of fraternity, a public form of universal brotherhood which existed between all *citoyens* of the *patrie*. As an abstract principle, fraternity was utilised in public references to "friends", such as the phrase "friends of the constitution" (the official name of the Jacobins).

However, these forms of friendship were exclusively public in nature, and revolved around symbolism rather than practice. Private friendship and personal connections within politics were regarded with great ambivalence. Some scepticism was borne out of ideological inconsistency: whilst classical republicanism taught that the virtuous valued friendship, this idea existed alongside the overriding belief that virtue entailed self-sacrifice. Steven B. Smith described this as 'devotion to the general will at the expense of private interests' which 'elevated the virtue of the citizen over and above those of the private man'.³³ Montesquieu defined virtue as 'the love of the laws and of the *patrie*', a love which required 'a continual preference for the public good over one's own good'.³⁴ He reinforced the idea that a truly virtuous citizen would sever all personal ties for the good of their beloved country. This partly stemmed from the desire to banish all remnants of the Old Regime, where members of the court had vied for power through personal links and venality. Allan Silver describes the 'aversion to exchange in friendship' as originating from 'the counter-culture...of the late *Ancien Regime*'.³⁵ In order to create a virtuous republic with a new model of transparent politics, friendship could not be the key indicator of power. It is this sentiment that explains the otherwise bizarre outbursts during the Revolution where individuals tried to convince others of their willingness to cast aside personal loyalties. For example, in defending himself at the Jacobin Club in 1793, Desmoulins protested

³¹ See the relationship between Claire and Julie, and Saint-Preux and Milord Edouard, in Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, trans. Phillip Stewart and Jean Vache, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997).

³² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger and Judith Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 38.

³³ Steven B. Smith, 'Hegel and the French Revolution: An Epitaph for Republicanism' in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* ed. Ferenc Fehér (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 228.

³⁴ Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu*, 4 vols (London: T. Evans, 1777), I, 43.

³⁵ Allan Silver, 'Friendship and Trust as Moral Ideals: An Historical Approach', *European Journal of Sociology*, 30.2 (1989): 274-297, 291.

‘I was always the first to denounce my own friends; from the moment that I realised they were conducting themselves badly, I resisted the most dazzling offers, and I stifled the voice of friendship that their great talents had inspired in me’.³⁶

The contradictions between friendship and virtue were difficult to reconcile, and, as such, the Jacobins increasingly regarded friendship as a cause for suspicion.

The tension between public and private friendship was true for all male revolutionary politicians. For a woman, however, the situation was even more volatile. Dorinda Outram stated ‘Virtue, far from being the linchpin of a monolithic ‘discourse of the Revolution,’ in fact bisected the apparently universalistic discourse of the general will into distinct political destinies, one male and one female’.³⁷ The female political destiny was passive, whilst the male was active: the extent of women’s involvement was playing ‘an important social role in uniting and regenerating society’ through their moral goodness.³⁸ As a woman, Mme. Roland could be denounced not just for mixing friendship with politics, but also overstepping the boundaries of feminine virtue.

Therefore, Mme. Roland obscured the importance of her personal relationships for two reasons: the desire to be seen as (I) a virtuous revolutionary, and (II) a virtuous woman. She acknowledged the delicate nature of friendship within politics, stating that ‘virtue in the true sense of the word comes into effect only in a man’s relation with his fellow men’.³⁹ To deny any wrongdoing, she depicted her relationships as having been based purely on mutual respect and intention, rather than personal esteem. Her love for such individuals was filtered through the language of virtuous credentials: friends were defended as excellent revolutionaries. For example, she described Buzot as a man who ‘never failed to raise his voice against perverse systems harmful to liberty’.⁴⁰ He ‘love[d] his fellow men and [was] a devout republican’⁴¹. Mme. Roland was particularly dispassionate in her descriptions of the friends who had been appointed by Roland, as Minister of the Interior, to the ministry. Accusations had been made against the Girondins about key positions being handed out based on personal connection; Robespierre had called this ‘a scandal in the eyes of all honest people’.⁴² In particular, Roland was accused of using his access to 100,000 *livres* in public funds to publish the

³⁶ François Aulard, *Société des Jacobins: Recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris* (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1889-97), V, 559.

³⁷ Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), 126.

³⁸ Marisa Linton, ‘Virtue Rewarded? Women and the Politics of Virtue in 18th century France. Part II’, *History of European Ideas*, 26.1 (2000): 51-65, 58.

³⁹ Roland, 175.

⁴⁰ Roland, 77.

⁴¹ Roland, 76.

⁴² Maximilien Robespierre, *Le défenseur de la Constitution*, no. 3, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marc Bouloiseau et al., 10 vols. (Paris, 1910–67), IV, 92–93, quoted in Linton, ‘Fatal Friendships’, 62.

work of his friends and to fund the press circles associated with the Girondins.⁴³ Mme. Roland dismissed these claims, in her memoirs. She described Gabriel-Etienne Le Camus, a friend of the Rolands' from Lyon who was appointed head of a division in the ministry by Roland in August 1792, as 'active and straightforward,' and labelled the appointment a success irrespective of their personal ties to him.⁴⁴ Luc-Antoine de Champagneux was a friend of the Rolands from Lyon who was appointed to a post in the Ministry of the Interior in 1792. Mme. Roland referred to him as 'a staunch believer in liberty' who 'upheld the principles of the Revolution from the very beginning'.⁴⁵ In all accounts, Mme. Roland is careful to emphasise that personal relations played no part in their appointments.

The more credible the accusations of the abuse of power were, the more fervently Mme. Roland sought to dissociate herself from her friends in order to prove her own virtue. She was highly critical of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who was one of her closest revolutionary associates. Linton states that of the several friendship circles which constituted the Girondins, the 'overlapping point...was a common association with Brissot'.⁴⁶ They had enjoyed a correspondence dating back to 1787, and upon their first meeting in 1791, a close friendship and revolutionary alliance had developed. However, Mme. Roland had good reason to understate this friendship: damning evidence had been widely-circulated in the form of a letter sent from Brissot, in which he had apologised for missing dinner but sent her 'a list of patriots for posts'.⁴⁷ Therefore, Mme. Roland was critical of Brissot's character: she had always detected a 'sort of lightness, both of intellect and of character', which, despite his 'plain manners' and 'openness', had 'always pained [her]'.⁴⁸ He was virtuous but easily confounded, because he was 'aware that evil exists but cannot believe that anyone who looks him straight in the eye can be a villain'.⁴⁹ In order to convince her audience of her virtue, she needed to distance herself from personal involvement with him and to portray all friendships as having been based only on mutual desire for the success of the Revolution.

This was not true. Mme. Roland denied that relationships between her and fellow revolutionaries were guided by feeling for one another, but the memoirs are saturated with emotion and concern for those revolutionaries, who were, despite her protestations, her closest friends. For example, she described experiencing intense 'fluctuations of hope and fear' during her first month in the Abbaye prison.⁵⁰ These fluctuations corresponded to news of her friends that Mme. Roland received. The news that her

⁴³ Reynolds, 239.

⁴⁴ Roland, 52.

⁴⁵ Roland, 52.

⁴⁶ Linton, 'Fatal Friendships', 61.

⁴⁷ J. P. Brissot, *Correspondance et papiers*, ed. Perroud (Paris, 1911), 292-3, quoted in Linton, Fatal Friendships, 67.

⁴⁸ Roland, 79.

⁴⁹ Roland, 80.

⁵⁰ Roland, 116.

friends 'who had taken refuge in Caen, were supported by a respectable force' was enough to make her happy, because 'happiness depends less on external conditions than on one's state of mind and feeling'.⁵¹ This happiness dissipated when Mme. Roland learnt that all her friends were 'proscribed, fled or under arrest'.⁵² For all her efforts to prove that personal relationships had no connection to the politics of the Revolution, her anguish and despair shows that friendships were, of course, important.

The need to deny the emotional value of friendship continued with Mme. Roland's description of the political salon hosted at her house on the Rue Guenegard. Here, many deputies, including Buzot, Robespierre, and Petion, met four times weekly, following sessions of the National Assembly, and before the meetings of the Jacobins, to engage in intellectual debate; it was a 'political salon with a spartan flavour'.⁵³ The salon was used in accusations against Mme. Roland and the Girondins as an arena for false patriots to conspire to use the Revolution for personal gain, rather than the benefit of the nation. They were linked to the corrupt practices of the *Ancien Regime* in a series of damaging attacks. The revolutionary journalist and editor of the radical newspaper *Le Père Duchesne* Hébert named the supposed conspirators and likened Mme. Roland to the mistresses of King Louis XV:

'The tender other half of the virtuous Roland now has France on leading strings, like the Pompadours and Du Barrys of the past. Brissot is the grand *écuyer* of this new queen, Louvet her chamberlain, Buzot her chancellor, Fauchet her almoner, Barbaroux her captain of the guard, Vergniaud the master of ceremonies, Guadet the cup bearer, Lanthenas the herald; [this is] the new court which dictates rain or fair weather in the Convention and the *départements*. It is held every night, at the twilight hour. Like the ci-devant queen, Mme Coco, reclining on a sofa, surrounded by her favourite wits, discourses unendingly on war, politics, subsistence, etc.'⁵⁴

Attacks such as these, which invoked both Mme. Roland's gender and her friendships, were damaging because they violated the pillars of virtue in not just one way, but two. The salon as a meeting place for the Girondins smacked of conspiracy in itself, without the damaging allegations that Mme. Roland, a woman, stood at the helm of it. She sought to downplay both the importance of the salon and the role that she played. She wrote:

'I knew the proper role of my sex and never exceeded it. The conferences took place in my presence but I played no part in them. I sat at a separate table, outside the men's circle, and I always had some work at my hands or wrote letters while they were talking'.⁵⁵

Of the meetings that occurred during her husband's second term in office, she states that

⁵¹ Roland, 116.

⁵² Roland, 117.

⁵³ Gita May, *Madame Roland and the Age of Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 184-5.

⁵⁴ *Le Père Duchesne*, no. 202, quoted in Sian Reynolds, 226.

⁵⁵ Roland, 58.

‘I have never had a very extensive circle of acquaintances and women have never played a large part in it. Apart from my closest relations the only people I saw were those whose tastes or occupations interest my husband’.⁵⁶

These descriptions were an attempt to prove her own authenticity and virtue to combat the accusations of conspiracy and deceit.

But in her efforts to deny all inappropriate behaviour at the salon Mme. Roland had to deny the positive aspects of it too, and the emotional fulfilment it provided. Recovering her personal experience and emotions during this time reminds us that for the revolutionaries, belonging to a movement as important and exciting as the Revolution provided an important sense of purpose. Few historians have recognised this when considering the revolutionaries’ motives, although Linton observed that ‘the early years of the Revolution were personally, as well as politically, liberating: there was a sense of common purpose and linked emotions’.⁵⁷ The personal importance of the salon is evidenced in a quote from Mme. Roland’s lifelong friend, Sophie Cannel. She recalled how Mme. Roland had been extremely unwell and was contemplating ending her life. But on the day that Roland was appointed as a minister, this changed, and Mme. Roland regained her enthusiasm for life with the promise of new opportunities. She went to visit her and found an altogether different scene:

‘I thought I was dreaming as I entered the salon. My friend, who had been on the point of death that morning, had recovered her freshness and graces; she was surrounded by a numerous circle of people who loaded her with praises; Roland shared in the homage and seemed quite satisfied. I threw myself into an armchair near the fireplace, and there observed attentively the new personages; all the ministers, the chiefs of State, the principal deputies, crowded out the room.’⁵⁸

As dramatic as this near-death experience sounds, it indicates the personal value that belonging to a shared experience as all-encompassing as the Revolution held for figures like Mme. Roland. This value could not be replaced with the satisfaction of denying friendship in the name of virtue.

This is the first example of Mme. Roland simultaneously promoting the importance of virtue and displaying instinctive emotional resistance to it. In her attempts to present herself and her friends as innocent virtuous citizens, she denied personal connections bore any influence on her defence of them. Similarly, the diminishment of her salon, and the hours spent surrounded by friends discussing the Revolution, was to counter those who labelled her involvement unvirtuous. She attempted to present friendship in the guise of Republican virtue akin to Brutus and Julius Caesar: noble and to be sacrificed when in conflict with the Republic; but her unmistakeable distress at the fate of her friends

⁵⁶ Roland, 103.

⁵⁷ Linton, *Fatal Friendships*, pp. 53-54

⁵⁸ Sophie Grandchamps, ‘Souvenirs de Sophie Grandchamps’, in *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. Perroud, II, 475-8, quoted in Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 126-127.

betrays the carefully constructed version of the revolutionary heroine, and allows a glimpse of the far more interesting, human woman in extremis.





Image 1: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, 'The Well-Beloved Mother', *The Art Gallery of New South Wales* (1775)

Chapter 2

Family

*'I opened and reclosed those eyes that would never look at me again, called to her, threw myself on the bed, pressed my lips on hers, half opened them and tried to breathe life into the dead. I wanted to die myself.'*⁵⁹

The second example of Mme. Roland's emotions betraying her image will be explored through the prism of her familial relationships. The death of Mme. Roland's mother is the most emotional experience described in the memoirs. She recalled that she experienced such acute grief that she suffered a nervous breakdown and was confined to bed for two weeks. Historians have debated the significance of the emotive description: many have argued that the language is performative, intended to further signal Mme. Roland's virtue. However, this chapter will use this emotional display to suggest a different interpretation: her anguish and despair indicate a deep-rooted anxiety about conforming to a "virtuous" lifestyle, which in her case, meant becoming a wife and a mother. As in

⁵⁹ Roland, 214.

the last chapter, two different voices are illuminated: the voice which espoused virtuous teachings, and the voice that reveals resistance.

Virtue was a gendered concept: men occupied the public sphere, whilst women were confined to the private in order to be mother and wife. Linton ascribes this to the popular contemporary belief that ‘women and men differed in the essential characteristics of their minds as well as their bodies by reason of their difficult natural functions’.⁶⁰ This belief was communicated through the teachings of classical republicanism, which did not provide a model of public virtue for females to emulate, but instead ‘fostered a hearty embrace of the fundamentally domestic role these authors envisioned for women’.⁶¹ This teaching was echoed in 18th-century novels, plays, and paintings. For example, Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s *The Well-Beloved Mother* (1775) depicted perfect domestic life: the devoted mother is surrounded by adoring children, whilst the father, removed from this immediate scene of love and affection, looks on proudly. This work was praised by Diderot as ‘excellent on two counts: as a work of art and as an example of the good life. It preaches population and depicts with great feeling the inestimable happiness and value of domestic felicity’.⁶²

These teachings were repeated, with vehemence, by Mme. Roland. She argued that women should practise the fine arts because ‘that is the way to escape boredom, the cruellest scourge of anyone in society’, and that ‘that is the way to preserve oneself from the perils of sin and- worse still- of temptation’.⁶³ However, she is careful to emphasise that women must not practise such activities to the extent that they neglect ‘the duties of [their] sex’, which she defines as being a good wife and mother. It was very important that her daughter, who was eleven at the time of her writing, should abide by these values:

‘I want my Eudora to accompany herself gracefully on the harp...I want her to know enough about drawing to be able to appreciate the works of the great masters....and to apply simple good taste and elegance in her attire. I should not like to see her talents excite undue admiration in others or undue vanity in herself. I want her to create a generally agreeable impression but not make too striking an impact at first sight, and I should rather see her attract friends with her character than impress people with her accomplishments.’⁶⁴

The official requirements of feminine virtue are clear: women should present themselves well and display a pleasing amount of talent, but not so much that they make a spectacle of themselves.

⁶⁰ Linton, ‘Virtue Rewarded?’, 61.

⁶¹ Szymanek, 101.

⁶² Denis Diderot quoted in Jean Seznec, *The Salons of Denis Diderot*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975): II, 155, quoted in Schama, 128.

⁶³ Roland, 114.

⁶⁴ Roland, 115.

Such pronouncements are numerous: she recited the expectations of virtuous women very well. However, there are other indicators showing Mme. Roland did not wholly subscribe to these teachings. Instinctive resistance to the expectation that women should perform the duties of wife and mother without reservation underwrite the description of her childhood. Mme. Roland was accustomed to a greater level of education than most girls of her lower-bourgeois background. She had enjoyed an unusual arrangement whilst growing up- being able to study at length, she spent her days 'reading alone, making notes, amusing myself, thinking'.⁶⁵ This imbued Mme. Roland with the belief that she was capable of far more than members of her sex were usually afforded. Furthermore, the dynamic with her parents represents a subversion of the patriarchal family structure. She held her mother in great esteem, almost elevating her to the status of sainthood, whilst she considered her father to have far less personal worth. Her mother is described as a woman with 'good sense and kindness', who had an ascendancy over her daughter 'which she never exploited except for [her] good'.⁶⁶ Her father is presented as a man with a great deal of pride, who 'led a well-regulated life so long as his ambition was held in check and things went smoothly for him'. She stated that he was not a virtuous man, but 'he had a great sense of honour'.⁶⁷ That Mme. Roland was willing to criticise her father, even if in a subtle manner, is the first indication that her relationship with her parents deviated from the virtuous standard that she had aligned herself with earlier.

Her parent's marriage was the seedbed of this deviation. Szymanek highlights the subliminal anger and resentment directed towards men in the *Memoires Particuliers*, stating that her words are full of 'confessions of feminine pain and anger'.⁶⁸ These confessions begin with the loss of respect for her father that occurred during her late adolescence. He became less hardworking; turned to gambling, embarked on risky commercial ventures, and was increasingly absent. In a display of female solidarity, Mme. Roland bound herself to her mother in the suffering they experienced. They 'wept silently' together, and her mother became 'silent and thoughtful, and occasionally she half-revealed her anxiety to [Mme. Roland]'.⁶⁹ Mme. Roland and her mother allying with one another signals dissent against the model of the virtuous family. She correctly identified that this was a situation 'which neither of us could do anything about',⁷⁰ but in the face of such helplessness, the very act of them seeking comfort in one another was a form of rebellion.

The resentment that Mme. Roland felt towards her father later went beyond passive dislike: she began to intervene in disagreements between her mother and father, becoming a 'watchdog' for her

⁶⁵ Roland, 166.

⁶⁶ Roland, 128.

⁶⁷ Roland, 127.

⁶⁸ Szymanek, 110.

⁶⁹ Roland, 211.

⁷⁰ Roland, 212.

mother.⁷¹ However, she stopped short of permanently ridding herself of her father's authority, stating that 'I defended her with the power of reason and persuasion but would never say a word about what had passed once we were alone. He was still my father and he must not be criticised'.⁷² Marilyn Yalom characterised Mme. Roland as a woman who 'dealt with being female in contradictory ways'.⁷³ In this dynamic, Mme. Roland conveyed both a residual commitment to the virtuous teachings she was brought up on, and a rebellious instinct that arose from the injustice she felt as a daughter and for her mother.

Nevertheless, her desire to be virtuous did not stop the spiral of concerns that this episode had started. The stoicism that Mme. Roland observed in her mother's reaction to her father's absence led her to reflect on the practice of marriage. She stated that she had always known how much her parents' qualities had differed, but she 'had never stopped to think how [her mother] must have suffered during her marriage'.⁷⁴ Her concerns about the role of the wife came to a head with her mother's death on 7th June 1775. She described her devastation: 'I stood stock still at the foot of the bed holding a candlestick, refusing to speak or to move, staring at my darling mother as she died, lost in an ocean of feeling that drowned all my faculties'.⁷⁵ The anguish was due not merely to grief, but to the uncertainty that this life-altering event plunged the young Mme. Roland into. Walker argued that such emotional language is merely performative: in her view, Mme. Phlipon's death is deployed as a literary turning point that 'marks the beginning of her odyssey from virtuous daughter to revolutionary heroine'.⁷⁶ Walker argues that Mme. Roland was writing for posterity- the memoirs are a strategically constructed ode to virtue. However, she fails to recognise that when Mme. Roland wrote of her mother's death, she was no longer writing for posterity. By this point she was convinced not just of her own imminent execution, but of the inevitable persecution of her loved ones, too: the terribleness of this realisation had eroded all remaining hope. From then on, she wrote for herself: 'I shall now write my memoirs. I think it will help distract me, at a time when I am particularly distressed, if I talk a little about myself'.⁷⁷ The shift in her intentions show that the account of her mother's death, amongst other events, must be read as an authentic expression of Mme. Roland's emotions, rather than a tactical demonstration of her virtue.

In this interpretation, the reader is guided naturally towards questioning why Mme. Roland felt, so intensely, the emotions which she described. It is little surprise that Mme. Roland would have felt

⁷¹ Roland, 211.

⁷² Roland, 211.

⁷³ Marilyn Yalom, *Blood Sisters: The French Revolution in Women's History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970) 94.

⁷⁴ Roland, 210.

⁷⁵ Roland, 214.

⁷⁶ Walker, 412.

⁷⁷ Roland, 126.

anguish at the untimely loss of her mother, but what is interesting is the deep sense of anxiety she recalls, eighteen years later from her prison cell, at the prospect of a future without her. This anxiety was related directly to becoming a wife and mother. For example, in the foreshadowing of her mother's death, Mme. Roland described an argument in which her mother criticised her for not having accepted the marriage proposal of an 'honest jeweller'. She recalled her mother proclaiming 'How much happier I should be if I could see you united to a good man before I leave this world!'. She reflected after this that 'my mother seemed to be lifting a veil from a dark and frightening future which I had never even suspected'.⁷⁸ Mme. Roland, despite having professed commitment to virtue earlier in the memoirs, considered the future 'dark and frightening' for several reasons. Firstly, she might have to endure an unequal marriage, as her mother had. Secondly, any form of marriage would likely mean sacrificing her own identity as a self-governing, intelligent woman. She worried about losing this aspect of herself: 'How was I to reconcile [her father's] world, the arts, the images they evoked, my feminine desire to please, my religious devotion, my studies, my reason and my faith- all these conflicting aims and impulses?'.⁷⁹

This suggests that the 'ocean of feeling' was made up of not just grief, but an overwhelming sense of bewilderment when she considered that she would now have to navigate the world without her closest female confidant. The loss of her mother ushered in a new world in which she would have to compromise her own freedom to become a woman of virtue. She stated that with her mother's death, so ended 'those happy, sunny years of childhood...of carefree affection, of devoted study'.⁸⁰ Indeed, the passing of her mother led her to declare herself an 'orphan'.⁸¹ These comments are telling: whilst her mother was still alive, Mme. Roland retained the identity of 'child' and was thus protected from confronting her future as a wife and mother. With the departure of her mother, Mme. Roland realised her intellectual development would cease; a prospect that filled her with dread. She would now assume the restrictive domestic roles instead; and what's worse, she would have to do it alone. That Mme. Roland recalled this anxiety so many years later indicates that her identity as a woman of considerable capability and intellectual independence was of the utmost importance to her.

This chapter has examined the emotions related to her parent's marriage and her mother's death to reveal a side to Mme. Roland that has been obscured by the romantic, Marxist and feminist orthodoxies of the last two centuries. Recognising that there are two voices present in the memoir, once again, demonstrates how the image of Mme. Roland as an exemplar of virtue is continually undercut by the very real and human emotions that she expressed as she neared her execution. Her endeavour to be virtuous never quelled her anxieties about how her role would change when the

⁷⁸ Roland, 210.

⁷⁹ Roland, 166.

⁸⁰ Roland, 216.

⁸¹ Roland, 215.

demands of feminine virtue required her to abandon her love of learning. By suggesting that the memoirs were not merely an appeal to posterity, but a form of emotional catharsis for the imprisoned revolutionary, it is once again shown that Mme. Roland was a complex individual who held conflicting beliefs about who she was, and who it was important to be.



Chapter 3

Romance

'But though [Rousseau] may have fortified me against the usual run of weaknesses, he could hardly warn me effectively against falling in love!'.⁸²

The above outburst was not written in reference to the man that Mme. Roland did end up marrying. After twelve years of marriage to Roland, she had fallen helplessly in love with another man. This chapter will demonstrate that the image of the virtuous wife as a domestic figure who sacrificed her own happiness for her husband was not something that Mme. Roland could completely conform to. Second, that Mme. Roland gave her life to participate in the Revolution because, at least partly, her actions reaffirmed her identity as an independent-minded and capable individual, which she had believed herself to be since childhood. Third, that the satisfaction from submitting to a marriage for propriety, believing this would amount to virtue, did not compare to the onslaught of feeling Mme. Roland experienced when she fell in love, most likely for the first time in her life, with Buzot.

Ideas about the virtuous wife were prevalent in the culture of late 18th-century France. Rousseau emphasised the central importance of chastity within virtue. In the popular novel *Emile*, he wrote that 'it is important...not only that a woman be faithful by her husband, by those near her, by everyone. It is important that she be modest, attentive, reserved, and that she give evidence of her virtue to the eyes of others as well as to her own conscious...These are the reasons which put even appearances among the duties of women'.⁸³

Particularly influential for Mme. Roland was the novel of *Julie, or the New Heloise*, which was given to her by a family friend following the death of her mother. She credited this book with lifting her out of her depression, because 'Rousseau was exactly the nourishment I needed. He interpreted feelings which I had had myself before I read him but which he alone could explain'.⁸⁴ Novels such as these provided examples of virtuous women that Mme. Roland drew great inspiration from. For example, Julie was depicted as a virtuous heroine, despite having lost her chastity at a young age, to her tutor, Saint-Preux. That Julie was unconventional in her virtue was of great interest to Mme. Roland whilst she struggled to reconcile the different aspects of her own personality. However, Julie's character was still firmly entrenched within the patriarchal confines of society: to later redeem herself, Julie had to marry Wolmar, the man suggested to her by her father. Linton details the theory behind this: 'in submitting to patriarchal authority Julie gave up her own individual autonomy, but received in exchange moral power, as the virtuous wife and mother'.⁸⁵ Thus, Mme. Roland's dilemma remained

⁸² Roland, 217.

⁸³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 361.

⁸⁴ Roland, 217.

⁸⁵ Linton, 'Virtue Rewarded?', 55.

unresolved: there was still little to satiate her needs for autonomy and the freedom to speak her mind. Within the principles of virtue, women enjoyed moral stature within the family, but never any tangible political power.

Nevertheless, Mme. Roland echoed the view that the role of the woman in the marriage was to look after the husband and to provide happiness for him. For her, marriage was 'a very serious tie, in which the women usually has to take responsibility for the happiness of both parties'.⁸⁶ Naturally, this would involve sacrifice on her part, but this was part of virtue. In her descriptions of her marriage to Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière it is evident that Mme. Roland sought to emulate the model of the dutiful and devoted wife. Upon meeting him for the first time in 1776, she was not attracted to him, but she did not expect to be; what mattered was that she respected him:

'I saw before me a man in his forties, tall, careless in posture and with the stiff look of one who sits long at a desk. His thinness, his rather yellow complexion and the prominence of his brow, from which the hair was already receding, did not detract from the regularity of his features but made them more respectable than seductive.'⁸⁷

Despite the lack of enthusiasm or passion, Mme. Roland entered this marriage believing it was the right thing to do: 'I became the wife of a truly honourable man, who loved me more the better he knew me. I married in a spirit of solemn rationalism, without reservation, and devoted myself completely to the role.'⁸⁸ Mme. Roland's steadfast belief in marrying for reasons of practicality and propriety demonstrate the power of virtuous doctrine: for her, there could be no better reason for marrying than to confirm her own virtue.

However, studying the emotions described by Mme. Roland in the years following her marriage to Roland reveal that this did not account for other hopes, needs, and ambitions that she possessed. The image of the virtuous wife stood at odds with who she was: an opinionated person who was accustomed to being listened to, who enjoyed learning and reading for her own pleasure, who was not content to let her mind be idle whilst she tended to the menial domestic tasks of everyday life. Szymanek summarised this dilemma as 'the deep conflict of a woman with powerful, individual needs for expression but with conservative social instincts born of the culture of her time'.⁸⁹ This was a conflict which she had long wrestled with. At the age of twenty, she had worried that if she married a merchant, as her father wished her to, she would find life unbearably dull:

'I shall find myself burned with all the duties and troubles of a married woman and mother of a family, but also of a shopkeeper, sitting all day behind a counter, dealing with the trade in precious

⁸⁶ Roland, 245.

⁸⁷ Roland, 234.

⁸⁸ Roland, 246.

⁸⁹ Szymanek, 117.

stones or silver, as well as the household...thinking it to be the one for which Providence has destined me, I will carry out these duties [...but] if I followed my own inclination for tranquillity, and thought about what happens in marriage, I would never enter into it.’⁹⁰

Mme. Roland was torn in two opposing directions: she desired greatly to conform to the restrictive gender conventions of her time, but her character wanted more than that which these conventions would allow.

In many ways, Jean-Marie seemed an ideal solution to this dilemma at their time of marriage. He was not simply a well-off inspector of manufacturing; he matched her capability for intellectual discussion and shared her love of books. In theory, this should have been enough to provide Mme. Roland with satisfaction within marriage: he was a man of equal intellect, who was wealthy enough so that she would not have to devote her energies to a mundane life in commerce. However, it is clear that Mme. Roland sought from the beginning to overstep the boundaries of her role as wife. Early in the Revolution, letters that she wrote to Brissot were published in his newspaper, *Le Patriote Francais*.⁹¹ While Roland was Minister of the Interior, she controlled his correspondence and drafted papers. According to her, the only reason for taking a leading role in such matters was because she had ‘more leisure than he’.⁹² However, that cannot account for her role in drafting the pivotal letter to the King which triggered the sacking of the Girondin ministry.⁹³ Of this letter, Mme. Roland could not help but write in the memoirs that ‘I am convinced, and I think the event has confirmed, this letter did much to enlighten France’.⁹⁴ The self-validation that these challenges provided her with is evident in her writing, despite her explicit attempts to deny it: she wrote that she ‘was passionate for the Revolution....I burned with zeal for the prosperity of my country. Public affairs had become a torment to me, a moral fever which left me no rest’.⁹⁵ Taken together, Mme. Roland’s involvement in the Revolution through the shadow of her husband reveals a woman who, struggling with the constraints of marriage, sought to regain her identity as an independent-minded and capable individual.

Mme. Roland found self-fulfilment through the concealed influence she had over her husband’s work in the Revolution. In doing so, she had avoided the lacklustre lifestyle which she dreaded. However, the other looming threat within a marriage based solely on rationalism and subservience could not be banished so effectively. Despite their union having been a ‘love match’ by *ancien regime* standards, Mme. Roland was not in love with her husband; this she had known from the beginning of their

⁹⁰ Roland, *Lettres de Madame. Roland: 1776-1780*, ed. Perroud, (Paris: National Printing, 1915), quoted in Reynolds, 21.

⁹¹ Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 173.

⁹² Roland, 92.

⁹³ ‘A Girondin View: Roland Calls on the King to Declare War,’ *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/423> [accessed 16/04/2019].

⁹⁴ Roland, 92.

⁹⁵ Roland, 89.

courtship.⁹⁶ This was by no means uncommon in marriages in *ancien regime* France, where the majority of marriages were ‘arranged among families for the transmission of property, economic advantages and social considerations’.⁹⁷ She did not expect much from marriage, stating that ‘it is very wise to be able to lower one’s expectations. Happiness is rarer than one thinks, but the consolations of virtue never fail’.⁹⁸ There is nothing to suggest that she believed this to have been an error in judgement, but after describing her actions, she admits that ‘in the process of considering my partner’s happiness I became aware that there was something missing in my own’.⁹⁹ Mme. Roland had fallen in love with another man: ‘I honour and cherish my husband as an affectionate daughter loves a virtuous father to whom she would sacrifice even her lover. But I have now found the man who might be my lover’¹⁰⁰. This sentence displays the void between virtue, which Mme. Roland so desperately wanted to achieve, and the emotional reality that she found herself faced with. Despite her best efforts to lead a life of virtue, Mme. Roland’s description of her feelings for Buzot reveal that, inevitably, a marriage based solely on propriety and respect was simply not enough.

That Mme. Roland never consummated her affair with Buzot indicates that she couldn’t break completely from the conventions of her time. As a virtuous wife, she could not help her feelings, but she would put them away for her wounded husband: ‘If I was at liberty today I would follow [Roland] to the ends of the earth to soften his misery and console him in his old age; a character of mine does not leave sacrifices half done’.¹⁰¹ This course of action is described by Gita May: ‘For Mme. Roland, as for her literary models, the need to conform to an interior ideal of virtue became so imperious that it ended up by triumphing over the aspiration toward happiness and even the instinct for self-preservation’¹⁰². Virtue was not compatible with her lived experience as a woman whose feelings threatened to take her away from her husband, even if she promised to stow such feelings away. When Bosc removed all mention of her love for Buzot, he knew that he was taking a necessary step to protect Mme. Roland’s claims to virtue. The very reason for publishing the memoirs would be rendered futile if he were to leave these details in. They were simply not befitting of a woman who sought through her writing to prove her own virtue, but could not, when it came to it, dissemble her overwhelming passion for Buzot.

This chapter has examined the disparity between 18th-century expectations of the virtuous wife and the character of Mme. Roland. It has shown that Mme. Roland echoed the importance of these

⁹⁶ Reynolds, 2.

⁹⁷ Ruth P. Thomas, ‘Arranged Marriages and Marriage Arrangements in Eighteenth-Century French Novels by Women’, *Women in French Studies*, 14 (2006): 37-49, 37.

⁹⁸ Roland, 127.

⁹⁹ Roland, 246.

¹⁰⁰ Roland, 246.

¹⁰¹ Roland, 246.

¹⁰² May, 213.

expectations, but in practice, she violated them. Her involvement in the Revolution through her husband's position overstepped the boundaries of feminine virtue. Furthermore, the feelings that she developed for Buzot threatened her claims to honour and loyalty, despite how fervently she tried to suppress them. We are left with a woman in dire conflict: at once attempting to conform to the role she believed was virtuous, yet in rebellion against it. A republican yes, a romantic yes, a proto-feminist maybe, a liberal certainly; but above all, it shows us a real, human woman crushed by both tradition and revolution.



College Essay

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the ways in which Mme. Roland simultaneously espoused virtue but harboured an uncomfortable resistance against it. The tenets of republican virtue are recited without error in her writing: she promotes the belief that to be a virtuous citizen, the good of the nation must be placed above personal loyalties; she concedes that her own political destiny, as a woman, should be passive. The prevalence of such virtuous doctrine in her writing is unsurprising: Mme. Roland had begun her memoirs with the aim of redeeming her reputation as a woman of virtue amongst posterity. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that Mme. Roland's propagation of these values was merely performative. She was a woman of her time, whose residual belief in the importance of virtue was evident up until her final days.

However, the memoirs do reveal that she instinctively fought back against the restrictions that virtue placed on her. That Mme. Roland could simultaneously believe in virtue and rebel against it suggests a far more complex character than has oft been presented by historians. Instead of trying to place a label on what type of revolutionary she was, this dissertation has shown, through an analysis of her emotions, that Mme. Roland was a conflicted individual who resists being reduced neatly into a single category. She was a loving mother, a dutiful wife, and a propagator of virtue: the allegations that she had violated these boundaries in her conduct during the Revolution caused her severe distress. But she was also a woman who fiercely loved her friends; who had fallen in love with another man; and who spent the happiest afternoons of her life in her salon, basking in conversations about the future of the Republic which she and her friends had built together. If this rendered her unvirtuous, there was little she could do about it. But therein lies the problem with the culture to which Mme. Roland so vehemently clung. To be authentic, to live without fear for one's life, to disregard all concern for one's closest friends, to forget all personal ambition, was impossible. Mme. Roland is but one revolutionary who could not sustain her commitment to this politics of feeling. This dissertation has sought to reveal a more rounded picture of a much storied and misunderstood figure. Others await similar rescue.

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