Measuring Up: Infertility and "Plénitude" in Sophie Cottin's *Claire d'Albe*

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> Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write.[1]
>
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Sophie Cottin's story, little known to modern readers on either side of the Atlantic, may nevertheless be a perfect case study in gender role conflict and a woman's coming to writing in post-revolutionary France. Out of her struggle to reconcile Rousseauian notions of femininity and the realities of her own infertility arose a novel, *Claire d'Albe* (1799), condemned by at least one prominent female contemporary for its "immoralité révoltante."[2] The novel inscribed both Cottin's anguish as a barren woman in a pronatalistic culture which valorized women according to their fertility and productivity, and the difficulty she faced in constructing a counter-identity for herself and women like her.

Like other French women novelists of her time, Cottin was appreciated by a wide and diverse reading audience and enjoyed a popularity

1 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1957), p. 68.

2 Madame de Genlis, "Madame Cotin [sic]," *De l'influence des femmes sur la littérature française comme protectrices des lettres et comme auteurs; ou précis de l'histoire des femmes françaises les plus célèbres* (Paris: Maradan, 1811), p. 346.

which endured long after her death in 1807. Her works, for instance, were translated into English, Dutch, Romanian, Croatian, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.[3] Fourteen editions of her complete works in French were published between 1817 and 1856 and translations of selected works were being published for her American reading audience as late as 1873 in New York.[4] In spite of this evident popularity, Cottin's novels have received little critical attention in either Europe or America since the mid-nineteenth century. Early twentieth-century assessments of her works as "inferior" by critics such as André Le Breton served to dissuade serious scholarship on Cottin for many years.[5] L.C. Sykes's *Madame Cottin* (1949) has been the only book-length scholarly study devoted exclusively to her life and works in the twentieth century.[6] In the years since the appearance of Sykes's book, an occasional journal article has attempted to draw attention to Cottin without, it appears, reviving any sustained scholarly interest in her.[7] Probably as a consequence of feminist criticism's emphasis on rewriting the canon, her name has begun to appear with greater frequency in recent literary histories, grouped with other women writers of her period, but the crucial connection between Cottin's infertility and her writing, and the significance of her struggle with her self-

3 L.C. Sykes, *Madame Cottin* (Basil, Blackwell, and Mott: Oxford, 1949), pp. 412–16.

4 Sykes, pp. 415–46.

5 André Le Breton, describing Cottin's novels as a whole, writes: "Elle a eu cet honneur et cette infortune que chacun de ses romans a été refait en tout ou en partie par quelque écrivain plus habile qu'elle et qui l'a fait oublier." *Le Roman français au dix-neuvième siècle. Première partie: avant Balzac* (Paris: Société française d'imprimerie et de librairie, 1901; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), p. 93.

6 Sykes's work includes the most accurate biographical data currently available and extensive, though often edited, excerpts from her correspondence. This invaluable source has provided the factual information from which I have summarized Cottin's biography here, unless otherwise noted. Samia Spencer's summary of Cottin's life which appears in *French Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book* (New York: Greenwood, 1991, pp. 90–98) poses a problem in that Spencer neither quotes from Sykes's work nor includes his study in the bibliography accompanying the article and hence must be used with caution.

7 Scholarship on Cottin since the publication of Sykes's work has been spotty. Jean Gaulmier's two articles, "Sophie et ses malheurs ou le Romantisme du pathétique," *Romantisme* 3 (1970), 3–16, and "Roman et connotations sociales: *Mathilde* de Mme Cottin," *Roman et société* (Paris: Colin, 1973), pp. 7–17, helped to keep her name from disappearing altogether. Gaulmier was also responsible in large part for the only twentieth-century reprinting of a Cottin work, the 1976 Régine Deforges edition of *Claire d'Albe*, for which Gaulmier also wrote the introductory notes. Paul Pelckmans, in "L'Impasse imaginaire: notes sur la sensibilité familiale dans le roman français sous le Premier Empire," *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies* 34 (1979), 33–52, includes Cottin as part of his psychocritical study of the sentimental novel of the Napoleonic era. Janine Rossard devotes the first chapter of her book *Pudeur et romantisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1982) to an examination of the problem of chastity and female emancipation in *Claire d'Albe*. See also David J. Denby, "Le Thème des croisades et l'héritage des lumières au début du 19e siècle," *Dix-huitième siècle* 19 (1987), 411–21; T.M. Pratt, "The Widow and the Crown: Madame Cottin and the Limits of Neoclassical Epic," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9:2 (1986), 197–203; Colette Cazenobe, "Une Préromantique méconnue, Mme Cottin," *Travaux de littérature* 1 (1988), 175–202.

perceived "defectiveness," have yet to receive the critical attention they deserve.[8]

In relating Sophie Cottin's life, the literary historians who have mentioned her have not seen anything particularly unusual about her story, and they are in large part correct; she led a very private existence, preferring the seclusion of a country home to the salons of Paris. She was by choice a minor player in the events of the period. Born in 1770 to a rich Protestant bourgeois family, Cottin was wed at age nineteen to the son of an ennobled Parisian banker. In this, she may have been more fortunate than many of her peers; her husband, by virtue of his youth, actually aroused romantic affection in his new wife. Because they were both Protestant, the couple were married in a ceremony in the Swedish Embassy in Paris in May, 1789, with little inkling of what was to transpire in the months immediately following. The outbreak of the Revolution found the Cottin family as a whole aligned with the aristocracy. As the danger mounted in Paris, Cottin and her husband were forced to leave the country, first to England in 1791 for two or three months, then to Spain in 1792 for another five months. Her husband succumbed to a lingering illness in September, 1793 and Cottin, at age twenty-three, was left a widow without children and, because she had left the country after the beginning of hostilities, officially classified an émigrée by the Revolutionary government. She relocated to the small town of Champlan, outside Paris, and invited her cousin and best friend, Julie Verdier, to bring her three girls and set up housekeeping with her.

Cottin had been for many years an avowed disciple of Rousseau, and the situation at Champlan appears at first glance to be conducive to carrying out Rousseau's plan of female domesticity.[9] From her correspondence, we can determine the importance of Rousseau's definition of

8 Frank Paul Bowman's summary of *Claire d'Albe* in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), and his recognition of Cottin's importance as a "portrayer of the plight of women" (p. 602) are encouraging signs of a growing awareness of her work. Lynn Hunt in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) also uses *Claire d'Albe* as an example of post-revolutionary women's writing depicting the wife who is "a tragic victim of the incompatibility between the demands of a conventional marriage and the impulses of a generous and true passion" (p. 170). Here, as in the Bowman piece, the treatment of the novel and Cottin's work as a whole is very brief. Catherine Cusset's "Sophie Cottin ou l'écriture du déni," *Romantisme* 3:77 (1992), 25–31, signals a renewed interest in Cottin's importance as a woman writing in "contradiction" with herself and her time, focusing on her struggle with the contradictions between sensuality and purity and between writing and mothering. Cusset spends little time, however, on *Claire d'Albe* and does not remark any significant difference between Cottin's first anonymously published novel and her subsequent novels, a difference which I attempt to demarcate in this essay.

9 For a general treatment of Rousseau's ideas on domesticity, see Barbara Corrado Pope, "The Influence of Rousseau's Ideology of Domesticity," in *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to Present*, ed. Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 136–45.

feminine nature to Cottin's imaging of her role as a woman in French society. In a letter dated 11 December 1789, addressed to Julie, she writes: "J'aime Rousseau: ses ouvrages, ce me semble, sont dictés par la vertu, et il y a trop de naturel et de sentiment pour que son cœur n'est [sic] pas autant travaillé que son imagination." In another letter written sometime in 1790 to Julie, she defended Rousseau and the usefulness of his doctrine in raising children: "Je soutiens Rousseau comme je soutiendrais mon meilleur ami; il mérite bien ce titre, par le bien et le plaisir qu'il m'a faits, et je t'avertis que si ta Delphine est élevée suivant mes principes, qu'à seize ans je suis sûre de la pureté de ses idées, de l'honnêteté, de la sensibilité de son cœur."[10]

The reference to Rousseau's principles for child-rearing indicates Cottin's familiarity with the master's famous treatise on education, *Emile*. At one point in her correspondence, she mentions she is writing a book on the education of children based on its principles.[11] She could not have assimilated the text's teachings on children and education without at the same time confronting Rousseau's definitions of womanhood, all centred on woman's role and destiny as mother, as the following passage from *Emile* clearly indicates: "Les femmes, dites-vous, ne font pas toujours des enfans! Non, mais leur destination propre est d'en faire."[12] Rousseau emphasized that proper women, women of the countryside and small village, were obligated, for the sheer survival of the nation, to right the wrongs committed by those women of the big cities who had chosen to deny this role: "Quoi! parce qu'il y a dans l'univers une centaine de grandes villes où les femmes vivant dans la licence font peu d'enfans, vous prétendez que l'état des femmes est d'en faire peu! Et que deviendraient vos villes, si les campagnes éloignées, où les femmes vivent plus simplement et plus chastement, ne réparaient la stérilité des Dames?"[13] The undeniable fact remained—undeniable because nature had assigned woman her role according to her physical and emotional endowments—that woman had a particular mission: "Enfin que telle ou telle femme fasse peu d'enfans, qu'importe? L'état de la femme est-il moins d'être mère...?"[14]

Jean Elshtain points out that Rousseau's notion of female predestination to maternity, based on biological "difference," followed quite logically from his theory on the evolution of human society:

10 Sykes, pp. 279, 280.

11 Sykes, pp. 279–80.

12 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile ou de l'éducation*, vol. 4, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 698.

13 Rousseau, p. 698.

14 Rousseau, p. 699.

Rousseau argues that sex distinctions arise and occur in nature prior to the pressures of civilization. Within the epoch of savage society, men and women established a division of labor that made biological sense given their respective reproductive roles. It was actual sex distinctions, then, occurring in nature, that set the basis for later socially constituted and buttressed distinctions. Distinctions between the sexes, both social and natural, are not for Rousseau 'the result of mere prejudice, but of reason.' Emile's and Sophie's education is, then, 'natural': it builds on a biological base; it is anchored in centuries of historic tradition; and it is morally preferable as the best means to preserve the public and private spheres alike.[15]

The concept of woman's predestination as mother, presented so self-assuredly by Rousseau, received a powerful boost from contemporary scientific discourse, as Yvonne Knibiehler has shown.[16] Typical of the kinds of medical and scientific texts which, in the late eighteenth century, had tremendous influence was Pierre Roussel's *Système physique et moral de la femme*. Published first in 1775, this extremely popular and influential medical reader was re-edited five times between 1775 and 1809. In it readers could find elements borrowed from three domains of knowledge separated up to that point: the field of the naturalists because Roussel is a doctor and he sees in woman "la femelle de l'homme"; the social domain begun by Rousseau, who defined woman by her role in society as wife and mother; and finally the field of the "moralistes," who include among others Jean de Meung, Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Molière, and Thomas.

Roussel's system, for the first time, spoke of a "nature féminine," total and separate from man's, and emphasized "la spécificité féminine." Roussel's discourse refers more often to authority than to observed facts: Rousseau is abundantly quoted, especially book 5 of *Emile* on the education of Sophie. Helvétius and Condorcet, proponents of sexual equality, are always implicit as the subtext against which Roussel's discourse opposes itself.

Knibiehler classifies Roussel a "finaliste" because of his insistence that woman's body, by the presence of particular physical characteristics, destines her to a predetermined end or "fin." These "spécificités" are essentially two: "la faiblesse" and the predestination to maternity. Woman's "faiblesse" condemned her to a life of passivity, characterized by limited activity and concentration on the life of the interior. A woman, however, may find consolation for this weakness in the idea of

15 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 161.

16 Yvonne Knibiehler, "Les Médecins et la 'nature féminine' au temps du Code civil," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 4 (1976), 824–45.

her beauty, but here again beauty is considered relative. Roussel maintains that a beautiful woman is a woman whose health and radiance promise fertility. Beauty is thus only a ruse of nature to achieve her ends.

The womb or uterus is the organ which attributes "spécificité féminine" to the woman more than any other, proving, as Roussel contended, woman's evident predestination for maternity. Knibiehler points out: "il y a chez la femme collusion étroite entre le physique et le moral, plus encore que chez l'homme: *tota mulier in utero* [all of woman is in the womb], répètent la plupart des auteurs après Hippocrate." The *Encyclopédie* corroborated this stand: "Tous ces faits prouvent que la destination de la femme est d'avoir des enfants et de les nourrir."[17] The body of woman is apt for maternity; from the fact that she can be a mother, the rationalism of the time concludes that she must be one and that she must be only that.[18]

The problem for Sophie Cottin, adamant and publicly avowed disciple of Rousseau, was that she was childless, a consequence of persistent amenorrhoea (absence of menstruation) from which she suffered almost all of her mature life.[19] We must skip forward several years, to an important letter written in 1805, to discover the facts about her condition as she herself described them.[20] In his biography of Cottin, Sykes published excerpts from this letter and acknowledged that it dealt with Cottin's childlessness but stopped short of offering any explanation for her barrenness, though Cottin herself had addressed the problem of causation directly in the letter. We can perhaps attribute this lacuna to Sykes's own sense of propriety. Fortunately, the rules were different in 1830 when Henri de Latouche published a more complete version of this letter. It is the best evidence we have of Cottin's view of herself as a "defective" female and a key to understanding forces at work in her textual production which critical readings, including Sykes's, have failed to take adequately into account.

In 1804, Cottin made a trip to Bagnères, a town located in the Pyrenees well known for the therapeutic properties of its mineral hot springs. While there, evidently for the first time since the early years of her marriage, she

17 Knibiehler, pp. 829, 830.

18 Knibiehler, pp. 830–31.

19 For a general overview of the causes of amenorrhoea, see Machelle M. Seibel, *Infertility: A Comprehensive Text* (Norwalk, Conn.: Appleton and Lange, 1990), pp. 54–59.

20 Henri de Latouche, "Lettres inédites de Mme Cottin," *Revue de Paris* 18 (1830), 148–50.

began to menstruate normally. Why menstruation resumed during the trip to Bagnères is unclear. It is possible that the change in altitude, the bath treatments in the spa, and distance from the pressures of Paris, family, and Parisian society all contributed to this return of "normality." Cottin herself was convinced that it was evidence of the hand of God in her life. In her approach to fertility, she represents well the commonly held notions of her contemporaries, who, as Jean-Louis Flandrin has pointed out, believed that fertility was not a matter of one's own will but rather God's:

> It is true that western society had known for millennia that procreation is a result of sexual union. However, because people did not know the details, nor even the fundamental organs of the process of generation, and because it had been observed that sexual relations were not always fertile, one could believe that conception depended immediately on the will of God. By their sexual union, the parents provided the raw material for the future child, but it was God himself who decided whether or not to make a child from this seminal material, and who, in any case, introduced the soul at a particular moment in the process of gestation. This could not be doubted by married couples who waited for years for a conception that never occurred; nor by those who, living a normal sexual life, were, to a greater extent than others, overburdened with children. God sent children to whomsoever He wished, and in such numbers as He wished, and the spouses generally did not imagine that it depended on them to increase or diminish their fertility.[21]

In Sophie Cottin's case, she perceived the presence or absence of menstruation as a similar sign of God's will; without menstruation, she knew she had no hope of fertility and thus considered herself defective, lacking the very thing which she as a woman needed to bring to a marriage. After being widowed, she steadfastly refused to accept any marriage proposals, considering herself, as her correspondence reveals, an unworthy candidate. The return of menstruation in Bagnères was then welcomed as a miracle, a sign of her election by God as a vessel worthy at last to bear children.

We might never have known about Cottin's condition had not the return of menstruation coincided with an attraction to a self-made philosopher named Azaïs who was then living in Bagnères. Their relationship had evidently been strictly a platonic one, founded on intellectual compatibility, but with the return of menstruation, Cottin had let herself believe marriage was possible. Upon her return to her home near Paris, the hope

21 Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality in Early Modern France*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 179–80.

endured, and she wrote to Azaïs who had stayed behind in Bagnères about the new fullness, "cette plénitude," she felt in her life:

Tous les enthousiasmes sont revenus se placer dans mon cœur. Est-ce votre amour qui les a produits? Est-ce à vous que je dois cette plénitude de vie qui quelquefois m'oppresse jusqu'à crier, jusqu'à mourir? Comment vous expliquer ces instants où mon cœur se gonfle d'une joie dont il ignore la cause, mais qui mêle quelque chose de divin à tous les sentiments qu'il éprouve? Je bénis le ciel de ce que ma jeunesse s'en va, car sans cela je serais effrayée de tout ce qu'on me dit et des efforts que j'aurais à faire pour proportionner l'expression de mes sentiments dans le monde. ... Je suis à vous comme le monde est à Dieu, je suis votre ouvrage et votre propriété.[22]

Cottin, however, soon relapsed into her former amenorrhoeic condition. Knowing that Azaïs believed the creation of children the only viable condition for marriage, she felt compelled to tell him the truth about her infertility and eliminate herself from consideration. The conventions of modesty had never allowed her to speak of the very thing which preoccupied her thoughts constantly. But now, in light of this new development, duty required her to make her confession and she implored him to avert his eyes but to listen: "Je lis dans votre dernière lettre: 'Sans l'espérance de voir naître une famille, ce serait un devoir pour nous de ne pas nous unir sur cette terre.'—Mon ami, mon tendre ami, je ne l'ai pas, cette espérance."[23]

Azaïs appears to have been little touched by Cottin's confession, seeing it as his own misfortune to have loved a woman incapable of being a mother. The alternative to losing her was to lose the possibility of creating beings who could thank him for their very existence. This was of course too great a sacrifice to ask of the eminent thinker and Azaïs consequently ended the relationship.

We have focused on this incident at length in an attempt to understand better the dilemma of barren women such as Sophie Cottin in late eighteenth-century France. In the face of her culture's pronatalism—its insistence on female fertility and production—she could only feel more acutely the problem of her own sterility. If one is female only by virtue of one's fertility, what is left when the possibility of motherhood is excluded?[24] Cottin's initial attempt to reclaim her self-worth

22 Sykes, p. 363.

23 Latouche, p. 148.

24 The problem was not confined to eighteenth-century France; modern psychologists have pointed out that infertility can lead to a questioning of one's sexual identity and self-worth, regardless of historical or cultural context: "The infertility experience deals with the very essence of male and female sexuality and identity and thus may threaten a man or woman's basic concept of their masculinity or femininity. ... [T]he infertility experience ... may be prolonged over time and

and identity as a female with value was to consider adoptive motherhood. Long before the Bagnères episode, she asked in a letter addressed to her friend Gramignac that he send her the most recent laws on adoption of children. In order to "remplir le vide de son cœur," she had asked Julie to give her "entièrement un de ses enfants." She continued: "je puis chérir cet enfant, je puis m'oublier pour lui. Oui, je crois être sûre de pouvoir devenir la mère de l'enfant de mon amie, je crois pouvoir remplir tous les devoirs que ce titre m'impose, je suis sûre de mes sentiments actuels, je crois pouvoir répondre du reste de ma vie."[25]

This effort to adopt one of Julie's children apparently failed, but it is evident that Cottin regarded herself as equal participant in the mothering process. When Julie gave birth to her third daughter, Mathilde, Cottin announced in a letter, "*Nous* voilà mères d'une troisième fille."[26] No other social role appears to have tempted her, judging from the following comment made in a letter written in 1795: "La situation où je suis est la seule qui me convienne. L'indépendance et la paix, voilà les seuls biens où j'aspire; j'en jouis et je ne veux pas les risquer, quand même je le pourrais. ... Il n'est aucun état dans la vie, aucune situation, qui puisse remplir l'idée du bonheur que je me fais."[27] The terms "état" and "situation" used here refer to professional and social station. True to her word, Cottin systematically shunned Parisian high society, always preferring the intimate familial association with Julie and her daughters. She adamantly defended this choice based on her concept of female duty and responsibility to the State in another letter addressed to Jacques Lafargue:

Le bien qu'une femme peut faire à son pays, ce n'est pas de s'occuper de ce qui s'y passe et de donner son avis sur ce qui s'y fait, mais de pratiquer dans son petit entourage le plus de vertus qu'elle peut, de tâcher d'y donner l'exemple des bonnes mœurs, de l'amour du travail, de s'y adonner aux occupations de son ressort, tels que les soins domestiques et l'éducation de ses enfants. Les femmes doivent se borner à faire le bien en détail, et leurs facultés ne peuvent guère s'étendre plus loin que leur petit monde; mais que chacune y remplisse bien ses devoirs, et de cette multitude de bonnes choses naîtra un ensemble bien ordonné. C'est aux hommes qu'appartiennent les grandes idées, c'est à eux à établir le gouvernement et les lois; c'est à nous à en faciliter l'exécution, en faisant ce que nous devons faire, et pas autre chose.[28]

may adversely affect all aspects of the infertile individual's intrapersonal and interpersonal life." Judith Daniluk, Arthur Leader, and Patrick J. Taylor, "The Psychological Sequelae of Infertility" in *The Psychiatric Implications of Menstruation*, ed. Judith H. Gold (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1985), pp. 78–79.

25 Sykes, pp. 292–93.

26 Sykes, p. 19.

27 Sykes, p. 296.

28 Sykes, pp. 301–2.

Letters from the following year, however, reveal that Cottin's surrogate mother role was not without its problems. In a revealing passage, Cottin described her situation: "A présent me voici arrivée à 25 ans, n'ayant presque connu des passions que les douleurs qu'elles causent et le vide qu'elles laissent. J'ai vu autour de moi les illusions s'écrouler, l'amour s'enfuir, et les espérances desséchées décolorer le reste de mon existence." Her dilemma was clear: unable to present herself as a suitable marriage candidate, she could not encourage the advances of any possible suitors. She was therefore cut off from the possibilities of male emotional attachments. At a young age, then, she saw her illusions about life and love disintegrating. Nevertheless, so powerful was the need to find her identity through the mother role that, as she explained to Julie in another letter, if given a choice between remarriage—which would entail separation from Julie and her household—and continued widowhood, she would choose the latter because it provided her the only opportunity to mother in some way: "Je regarde mon amitié pour toi, et mon indépendance, attachées l'une à l'autre. En perdant cette dernière, en donnant à un être quelconque un droit sur mes actions, ma personne et ma fortune, je ne suis plus sûre de vivre avec toi, tes enfants ne sont plus les miens, mon sort est changé."[29]

Significantly, it was during this period that she turned more and more to writing. As Sykes has pointed out, writing was not new to her: she had written some poetry and a short story previously, but now the writing project took on much greater urgency. In a letter dated 10 April 1797, she explained her reasons: "je suis veuve, je n'ai point d'enfants, je n'ai que 25 ans, et je ne vais jamais au bal. Cela me donne un loisir extrême; je l'emploie quelquefois à faire des vers, de peur de plus mal l'employer encore." She admitted that the world of the imagination might not provide the happiness she sought but it did give her at least a measure of peace she did not find in the real world: "Quand l'imagination travaille, le cœur repose, et dans le calcul, si la nature murmure, la prudence applaudit, et si le bonheur n'y trouve pas son compte, la tranquillité y trouve le sien." Her first novel, *Claire d'Albe*, was written most likely during the summer of 1797, as her correspondence reveals: "seule à la campagne, dans les plus beaux, les plus longs jours de l'année, tourmentée par des souvenirs et par le regret de certaines illusions, je m'amusai à mettre sur le papier une histoire dont le fond est tout d'imagination, mais dont certains sentiments ne me furent pas étrangers." Her confession about the autobiographical nature of the feelings, the "regret de certaines illusions,"

29 Sykes, pp. 309, 315.

expressed in the novel is perhaps reason enough to explain her decision to have the work published anonymously. The manuscript when finished was turned over to her cousin Lemarcis, who then, acting as her agent, sold it to a bookseller; the book was in the printer's hands by December 1798 but did not appear in bookstores until the following May. It was an immediate success.[30]

Claire d'Albe, the story of a young mother of two who succumbs to an illicit passion, experiencing for the first time in her life the "plénitude" she has desperately sought, inscribed Cottin's search for an identity outside the pronatalistic norms of eighteenth-century French culture. To this end, she needed to create a radically different male gaze which values her for her attributes and not for her reproductive potentiality.

The epistolary novel begins with a letter in which the heroine, Claire, describes her situation to her best friend Elise.[31] In the course of the letter, she discloses that, as a result of a death-bed request of her father, she had been married seven years earlier, at age fifteen, to a man nearly forty years her elder. She is now twenty-two years old and the mother of two children, Adolphe and Laure. In the third letter of the series, one Cottin transcribed directly into the novel from a letter she herself wrote to a friend, we find that Claire is far from being happy: "O mon Elise! je ne te tromperai pas, et tu m'as devinée: oui, il est des moments ... où je soupçonne que mon sort n'est pas rempli comme il aurait pu l'être: ce sentiment, qu'on dit être le plus délicieux de tous, et dont le germe était peut-être dans mon cœur, ne s'y développera pas, et y mourra vierge" (p. 398).

Locked into a loveless marriage, Claire feels her situation now precludes any hope of finding this passion which would transform her present unfulfilled life into the ideal: "Ah! laisse-moi sous mes ombrages; c'est là qu'en rêvant un mieux idéal, je trouve le bonheur que le ciel m'a refusé" (p. 398).

Little does she suspect the fate that awaits her; her husband's seemingly harmless invitation to a cousin to stay with them introduces the serpent into the garden. This cousin, Frédéric, who is nineteen, has been raised far from civilization; in her description of him to Elise, Claire portrays him as a true child of nature: "le séjour des montagnes a donné

30 Sykes, pp. 314, 314, 329, 43.

31 Sophie Cottin, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: A. Ledentu, 1844). References to *Claire d'Albe* are to this edition.

autant de souplesse et d'agilité à son corps, que d'originalité à son esprit et de candeur à son caractère. Il ignore jusqu'aux moindres usages ... j'aime ce caractère neuf qui se montre sans voile et sans détour, cette franchise crue. ... Je n'ai point encore vu une physionomie plus expressive" (p. 399). She casts him in the role of the newly created Adam, just entering the world: "C'est un caractère neuf, qui n'a point été émoussé encore par le frottement des usages. Aussi présente-t-il toute la piquante originalité de la nature. On y retrouve ces touches larges et vigoureuses dont l'homme dut être formé en sortant des mains de la Divinité; on y pressent ces nobles et grandes passions qui peuvent égarer sans doute, mais qui, seules, élèvent à la gloire et à la vertu" (pp. 401–2). Claire proves prophetic here: this character, who unlike other men has capacity for great passion, has the capability of great crime as well, but Claire feels drawn to him as to a revelation: "Je l'étudie avec cette curiosité qu'on porte à tout ce qui sort des mains de la nature. ... La vérité n'est pas au fond du puits, mon Elise, elle est dans le cœur de Frédéric" (p. 403).

Through the character of Frédéric, Cottin constructs a non-patriarchal male gaze, that is, a gaze other than that of the husband, which measures the flesh-and-blood Claire against an avowed ideal. Frédéric, like Adam, is anxious to find his Eve, the woman whose image he, not God, has created mentally, as he tells Claire: "Dans les premiers beaux jours de ma jeunesse, aussitôt que l'idée du bonheur eut fait palpiter mon sein, je me créai l'image d'une femme telle qu'il la fallait à mon cœur. Cette chimère enchanteresse m'accompagnait partout; je n'en trouvais le modèle nulle part" (p. 407). The mountain manchild had but one religion: the worship of his phantom woman: "C'est dans ces pays sauvages et sublimes que l'imagination s'exalte et allume dans le cœur un feu qui finit par le dévorer; c'est là que je me créai un fantôme auquel je me plaisais à rendre une sorte de culte" (pp. 426–27).

Cottin demonstrates the "natural" male gaze at work in several crucial scenes in the novel. One of the most important of these episodes occurs when Frédéric happens upon Claire as she is attending to her old nurse, who has suffered an attack of apoplexy. Claire, in describing the event to Elise, relates how the scene affected Frédéric: "Pendant que j'en étais occupée, j'ai entendu une exclamation, et, levant la tête, j'ai vu Frédéric. ... Frédéric en extase: il revenait de la promenade, et, voyant du monde devant la chaumière, il y était entré. Depuis un moment il était là; il contemplait, non plus sa cousine, m'a-t-il dit, non plus une femme belle autant qu'aimable, mais un ange!" (p. 407).

Claire must confront this new and discomforting gaze at every turn with Frédéric: "Assis près de moi, il me regardait fixement, trop fixement;

c'est là son seul défaut, car son regard a une expression qu'il est difficile ... j'ai presque dit dangereux de soutenir" (p. 412). She is painfully aware of being evaluated against the strictest of standards.

Significantly, however, none of these crucial evaluation scenes display Claire in her mothering duties, and, even more important, when Frédéric openly praises her virtues as a woman, he makes no direct mention of her role as a mother. This is in direct contrast to M. d'Albe, who, whenever discussing his wife with Frédéric in their man-to-man conversations, never once fails to emphasize Claire's maternal skills. Frédéric, then, the young man born and reared in the mountains and hence ignorant of the cultural norms of the dominating class, ascribes value to Claire based on her abilities to inspire devotion *outside* the aspect of maternity.

As a corollary, Frédéric steadfastly downplays Claire's physical attributes in favour of her moral virtues. When asked to comment on a portrait recently painted of Claire, he insists: "Non, non, des traits sans vie ne rendront jamais Claire; et là où je ne vois point d'âme, je ne puis la reconnaître" (p. 418). If outward appearance had mattered most for him, he tells Claire, he would have chosen the more beautiful Adèle over her, but his attraction to her is based on his love of goodness: "Je veux t'aimer, parce que tu es ce qu'il y a de meilleur au monde" (p. 430).

The portrait episode in *Claire d'Albe* appears to be a direct subversion or rewriting of a similar episode in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in which Saint-Preux, like Frédéric, is shown a portrait of the beloved. Saint-Preux, like Frédéric, rejects the portrait as being unfaithful to the original (in this case, Julie) but then turns the moment to erotic advantage by carefully cataloguing each precise physical detail of Julie's anatomy that had been left out of the artist's rendering and was so well known to him, her admirer. Nowhere in Rousseau's text is the male gaze more blatantly obvious than in this episode. Cottin's Frédéric is in sharp contrast to Saint-Preux; when he looks at Claire, his gaze refuses to stop at surface details but penetrates to revel in the sight of the beauty of her soul: "Peu à peu je découvris en vous ... une âme plus élevée, plus tendre et plus délicate; je vous vis alternativement douce, sublime, touchante, irrésistible; tout ce qu'il y a de beau et de grand vous est si naturel, qu'il faut vous voir de près pour vous apprécier" (p. 427). And for Frédéric, seeing Claire "de près" means watching her benevolence at work in her interactions with others.

This is but the first of Cottin's major intertextual confrontations in *Claire d'Albe* with Rousseau's novel. Another and perhaps more significant one is her subversion of an ideological position central to Rousseau's text, that is, the primacy of Father's law and its concomitant notions of "devoir" which translate into the subjugation and control of female

passion. Cottin makes the parallels too obvious to ignore: Claire, like Rousseau's Julie, has married her father's friend. In M. d'Albe's case, he resembles Claire's father so much in both age and demeanour as to be almost his double. To further strengthen the image, Frédéric is considered the adopted son of M. d'Albe and he literally refers to him as his father. Claire's horror at the thought of an illicit passion for Frédéric stems in large part from her Phèdre-like realization that she is guilty of an incestuous attraction: "Quoi! sous les yeux du plus respectable des hommes, mon époux, parjure à mes serments, j'aimerais le fils de son adoption? ... O honte! chaque mot que je trace est un crime, et j'en détourne la vue en frémissant" (p. 432).

Thus the crime against the husband becomes, for the two young people, also a crime against Father. Claire exclaims to Frédéric: "Malheureux! me suis-je écriée, oublies-tu que ton bienfaiteur, que ton père est l'époux de celle que tu oses aimer? Tu serais un perfide, toi!" (p. 422). When Claire at last confesses to Frédéric, "oui, je t'aime avec ardeur, avec violence" (p. 437), she knows full well the depth of her treason but nevertheless chooses to act to fulfil her own ardent desire. Describing the moment of the first forbidden kiss, she writes: "A ce moment, tout a disparu, devoirs, époux, honneur; Frédéric était l'univers, et l'amour, le délicieux amour, mon unique pensée" (p. 437).

The plot takes an interesting turn at this juncture in the novel. The fear of sinning against Father is strong enough to make Claire ask Frédéric to leave her home and live with Elise, which he does grudgingly. Elise and M. d'Albe, hoping to kill Claire's attraction to Frédéric, inform her that Frédéric has renewed his relationship with Adèle. She refuses then to correspond with Frédéric; he from his side takes her silence to mean that she no longer loves him. Both begin to weaken physically. When Frédéric finally uncovers the conspiracy, he races to find Claire to explain all and discovers her near death on the steps of her father's tomb. In explaining what has happened, they realize the extent of the husband-father's deception: "on nous faisait mourir victimes l'un de l'autre, on voulait que nous enfonçassions mutuellement le poignard dans nos cœurs" (p. 467).

Frédéric then offers Claire a completely different paradigm for living, antithetical to Father's cultural law, passionately declaring:

> Crois-moi, Claire, amitié, foi, honneur, tout est faux dans le monde; il n'y a de vrai que l'amour, il n'y a de réel que ce sentiment puissant et indestructible qui m'attache à ton être, et qui, dans ce moment même, te domine ainsi que moi: ne le combats plus, ô mon âme! livre-toi à ton amant; partage ses transports, et, sur les bornes de la vie où nous touchons l'un et l'autre, goûtons, avant de la quitter, cette félicité suprême qui nous attend dans l'éternité. (p. 467)

The Adamic male thus sanctions Claire's pursuit of plenitude as a woman in her own right. In direct contrast to Rousseau's Julie, who submits to Father's notions of female maternal "devoir," obediently repressing the love for Saint-Preux she knows to be her only true happiness, Cottin's heroine chooses Frédéric over Father. Instead of dying together as human sacrifices before the urn of the dead Father, they consummate their love on the very steps of his tomb in the ultimate act of rebellion against his will. Significantly, Cottin turns the description of this moment over to Elise, who, as a corroborating witness to ecstasy, summarizes rather matter-of-factly: "Elle l'a goûté dans toute sa plénitude cet éclair de délice qu'il n'appartient qu'à l'amour de sentir; elle l'a connue cette jouissance délicieuse et unique, rare et divine comme le sentiment qui l'a créée: son âme, confondue dans celle de son amant, nage dans un torrent de volupté" (p. 467). The change of narrative voice used here by Cottin moves us outside of Claire herself to reinforce the textual truth of her experience; the witness voice thus validates the achievement of "plénitude" so ardently desired.

In the end, however, Father is still strong enough to demand that Frédéric be sacrificed. As Claire lies dying, she confesses her sin to her husband and tells him: "ce fut alors que, cessant d'être moi-même, je cessai d'exister pour vous" (p. 471). Only too true. Claire then passes out from under Father's domination forever, whispering the forbidden name of Frédéric with her last breath.

Significantly, Elise records the culmination of the tale so that it may be read to Claire's daughter after her mother's death. For what purpose? Ostensibly to demonstrate the consequences of illicit passion. But the fervour of the telling betrays the fascination with and attraction of the great moment of "plénitude." No other passage in the narrative is told with such persuasive energy. The double-edged tale speaks both against and for heterodoxy, its didactic intention subverted by the impassioned voice of Elise. So what does mother *really* want daughter to learn through the telling?

Some contemporary women readers detected immediately the double-barrelled message of Cottin's novel. Mme de Genlis, herself a well-established novelist, dismissed it as "un mauvais ouvrage, sans intérêt, sans imagination, sans vraisemblance et d'une immoralité révoltante; ...[I]l est le premier [roman] où l'on ait représenté l'amour délirant, furieux et féroce, et une héroïne *vertueuse, religieuse, angélique*, et se livrant sans mesure et sans pudeur à tous les emportemens d'un amour effréné et criminel." Genlis, in her commentary on Cottin, gave a synopsis of the novel for her readers but stopped short of quoting Elise's tantalizing description of the love scene, which she found scandalous:

"Il faut s'arrêter.... Non-seulement une femme, mais un homme qui auroit quelque respect pour le public, n'oseroit transcrire la page infâme et dégoûtante qui suit ... dont l'extravagance et l'impiété font toute l'énergie." After quoting Claire's deathbed request—"Que [ma fille] sache que ce qui m'a perdue est d'avoir coloré le vice du charme de la vertu"—Genlis asks perspicaciously: "à quoi servent quelques lignes raisonnables, lorsque, dans le cours de l'ouvrage, on n'a cherché qu'à *colorer le vice du charme de la vertu*?" And what other supposedly edifying images, Genlis asks, are placed before the reader of this "coupable et misérable production"? The list is damning: sinners discussing virtue, wise men admiring adulterous lovers, illicit passions made into a religion, and finally suicide promoted as an honourable act.[32]

For Genlis, the greatest of Claire's (and Cottin's) transgressions was her infidelity to the principles of motherhood. Claire leads her daughter towards crime through the snare-like narrative she insists be told. In addition, Claire's devotion to her lover is antithetical to maternal instinct. To illustrate, Genlis cites Claire's passionate declaration to Frédéric—"c'est par toi seul que j'existe, et pour toi seul que je respire"—to which she attaches this acid footnote: "Cette sensible Claire a des enfans."[33] The blasphemy against motherhood is all too apparent for Genlis and unforgivable coming from a woman writer as it does.

Genlis blames the appearance of *Claire d'Albe* on the time period from which it sprang; it is a product fit only for consumption by revolutionaries and their breed. She finds it in her heart to pardon the revolutionary extravagances of Cottin's first novel on the evidence of a return to morality in her later novels, such as *Elizabeth ou les Exilés de Sibérie* (1806), which portrayed, Genlis could happily report, "les sentimens les plus purs, l'amour maternel, l'amour filial."[34]

Cottin's later novels, as Genlis rightly pointed out, were indeed more orthodox in tenor. But this "return to purity" which Genlis applauded was more the result of Cottin's loss of anonymity as an author than a sign of repentance on Cottin's part. Cottin, writing to a friend about the loss of what she called the "cloak" of anonymity, explained her motives for writing her second published novel, *Malvina*:

l'entière certitude que j'avais, en écrivant [*Claire d'Albe*], que jamais on n'en soupçonnerait l'auteur, m'y avait fait répandre des couleurs un peu voluptueuses, des passions un peu vives. Aussi une des plus vives contrariétés que j'aie éprouvées en ma vie, est d'avoir été reconnue lorsque je m'y attendais si peu,

32 Genlis, pp. 346, 354–55, 356, 357.

33 Genlis, p. 350.

34 Genlis, p. 365.

et qu'il me semblait avoir pris toutes les précautions nécessaires pour éviter ce chagrin.—Mais alors, me direz-vous, pourquoi publiez-vous un autre roman?—D'abord parce que celui-ci [*Malvina*] est un peu *la correction de l'autre*, que le motif qui m'engage à le livrer à l'impression pallie à mes yeux presque tous les inconvénients, que d'ailleurs ces inconvénients étaient presque tous pour le premier, et puisque j'ai souffert tout ce que j'en pouvais souffrir, je ne vois pas pourquoi je me priverais désormais de l'occupation la plus amusante que j'aie trouvée encore, et de la douce destination que je lui ai donnée.[35]

The revelation of her authorship of *Claire d'Albe*, as she admitted, forced Cottin to confront once more the Rousseauian model of female domesticity she had espoused. Her writing after *Claire d'Albe* became increasingly centred on the themes Genlis and other women novelists considered proper for a woman writer who took seriously her role as public guardian of morality and mentor of the nation's children. Claire, the rebellious wife-mother heroine, was thus succeeded by Malvina, the chaste adoptive mother of a dead friend's daughter who refuses to yield to an impassioned lover's advances because it would separate her from the child she has sworn to protect and raise.

And so, the first "jaillissement" of Cottin's heart, the anonymous *Claire d'Albe*, was read as revolutionary and morally subversive. That may just be the point. *Claire d'Albe* was the portrait of a woman trying to live from the model she created for herself, not the image imposed on her from outside. This heroine seeking fulfilment outside the ascribed norms of fertility and maternity was indeed culturally (and perhaps politically) anarchical in her attempt to escape the control of the father-dominated culture in which she lived. Her rebellion even in death, dying with her lover's name on her lips, provides us with a striking example of a woman rewriting the "old plot," as Nancy Miller has suggested for other women novelists, as "a critique of the available cultural solutions."[36] Sophie Cottin incorporated into this text her struggle as a barren woman, living in a culture that refused to grant her value without motherhood. Though she continued to subscribe publicly to the role expected of her sex, *Claire d'Albe* bears the traces of the war of liberation being fought within herself.

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35 Sykes, p. 330, emphasis added.

36 Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 127.