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Siân Reynolds. *Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xv + 326 pp. \$125.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-956042-4.

Reviw by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

Siân Reynolds's dual biography of Madame Roland and her husband admirably succeeds in using the lives of her two protagonists to provide what she calls "a privileged combination of public and private," (p. 9) giving readers an illuminating study of both the relationship between the French Revolution's most celebrated power couple and the dynamics of revolutionary politics. As Reynolds says, Madame Roland, thanks to her eloquent memoirs and the present-day interest in women's history, has become a major if controversial figure in revolutionary and feminist studies. Her husband, Jean-Marie Roland, has remained much more obscure, in part because of historians' neglect of the importance of government ministers during the Revolution, but also because of the negative way in which his wife depicted their marriage in her memoirs, written at a moment when she had become obsessed with her love for the younger revolutionary politician François Buzot. Reynolds, known for her contributions to feminist scholarship, thus finds herself in the somewhat unexpected position of arguing that Madame Roland's own depiction of her life with her husband obscures the reality of a relationship in which each partner enabled the other to achieve things that neither could have accomplished on their own.

In the context of the Old Regime, the Rolands' marriage was an unusual one. She was the bright and bookish daughter of a Parisian artisan, and should have been destined for a life managing a husband's small business. He came from a poor family, but one with pretensions to nobility. Roland was twenty years older than his wife, and most of her biographers have accepted her retrospective insistence that the union was largely one of convenience. In fact, Reynolds concludes, on the basis of surviving correspondence, they were strongly attracted to each other and worked hard to overcome family resistance to their marriage, which took place in 1780. Madame Roland immediately began contributing to her husband's work, especially to the volumes on manufacturing that he was compiling for the *Encyclopédie méthodique*. In the years just prior to the Revolution, they were living in the rural Beaujolais, where Roland's family owned some property, and trying to raise their daughter, who disappointed her parents because of her apparent lack of intellectual interests. Roland was well enough known to enter into correspondence with various figures active in Paris intellectual circles, including the future Girondin leader Jacques-Pierre Brissot, but nothing appeared to destine the Rolands for national notoriety.

The Revolution "came as a breathtaking surprise" to both Rolands (p. 107). He threw himself into local politics in nearby Lyon, distinguishing himself both by his sympathy for the city's underpaid silk workers and by his determination in pushing the municipality's case for aid from the national government to pay off the staggering debt it had incurred before 1789. Somewhat discouraged by the course of the Revolution in 1790, the Rolands and some of their Paris friends spent a good deal of energy planning a utopian rural community, in which they would enlighten the surrounding peasants. The plan for this phalanstery *avant la lettre* never materialized. Instead, the pair went to Paris in early 1791, where Roland lobbied on behalf of Lyon. In the capital, they were quickly drawn into the network of Brissot's friends, and began hosting regular dinners at their apartment, which later accounts

magnified into a veritable “salon.” In Reynolds’s view, these gatherings were much less formal than the term “salon” suggests, but they gave both Rolands a chance to meet rising stars in the revolutionary firmament, including some, such as Robespierre, who would later turn on them and help bring about their deaths.

The Rolands’ stay in Paris in 1791 lasted only a few months, but they returned again by the end of the year. It was in the spring of 1792 that “the provincial couple really entered history,” when Roland was suddenly and unexpectedly named Minister of the Interior in the “Girondin” ministry dominated by General Charles François Dumouriez (p. 168). In revolutionary historiography, ministers have never been studied as closely as the more vocal deputies, but, as Reynolds shows, the Ministry of the Interior remained a powerful part of the government machinery. Roland’s job put him in touch with local officials all over the country, and while his ability to affect events remained limited, his position made him vulnerable to accusations that he was seeking to build up personal power. His first stretch as minister lasted less than three months due to the undiplomatic letter he wrote to Louis XVI in June 1792. The king had refused to sign several laws supported by the Jacobin movement, precipitating a crisis that Brissot, for one, had hoped to avoid.

The overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792 brought Roland back to office for another tumultuous five months, and embroiled him in conflict with the more radical Jacobins. It was during this period that Madame Roland’s role became a public issue: Danton accused her of being the real power in the ministry. The Rolands continued to dine with other politicians, but their home was hardly the only place where like-minded activists came together to discuss current affairs. There is no doubt that Madame Roland helped draft some of Roland’s correspondence and memoranda, and that she freely offered advice on government appointments. Reynolds concludes, however, that there was nothing particularly sinister about this. The two Rolands shared the same political views, and when they differed, he proved to be “probably the man she could least persuade to change his mind” (p. 297). As Roland became increasingly identified with the Brissot faction, however, and as the animosity between that group and the Montagnards intensified, her supposed behind-the-scenes influence became more of an issue.

As Reynolds shows, 1793 was a tragic year for the Rolands. Although Roland resigned his ministerial post immediately after the execution of the king, he and his wife had been so extensively demonized by the Montagnards that they could not escape inclusion in the dragnet aimed at the Girondins. At the same time, their relationship disintegrated, as Madame Roland insisted on telling her husband that her heart now belonged to Buzot. During the riots of 31 May—2 June 1793, Roland succeeded in escaping from Paris and going into hiding, but Madame Roland was arrested. At first, no one expected her to be put on trial, but in the aftermath of the federalist uprisings, she came to be seen as part of Brissot’s “conspiracy.” During the months in which her fate hung in the balance, she wrote furiously, producing her memoirs and a number of other pieces about the Revolution. These heartfelt pages assured her future fame, but they also helped shape a negative image of the husband from whom she now felt estranged. Nevertheless, their fates remained inseparable. When he learned that she was about to stand trial in early November 1793, Roland committed suicide.

As Reynolds explains, the feminist historiography of the past few decades has tended to draw an unfavorable contrast between Madame Roland, who chose to limit herself to the role of her husband’s confidante and collaborator, and militants such as Olympe de Gouges, who campaigned openly for women’s rights. In contrast, Reynolds sees Madame Roland as a devoted supporter of the Revolution who recognized that she could best promote her own ideals by working with her husband. Although this may make her something less than a heroine to feminist activists, the Roland marriage, which made them an “academic couple *avant la lettre*” (p. 291), provides an example of a partnership that looks very different from the patriarchal model of the Old Regime.

Thoroughly researched and clearly written, *Marriage and Revolution* is an important contribution to our understanding of the interaction between private lives and public affairs in the revolutionary era. It also offers new insights into the nature of the “Brissotin” movement and the way in which the revolutionary government functioned prior to the establishment of the Committee of Public Safety in mid-1793. Reynolds’s book also demonstrates the possibilities of “dual biography” since she convincingly shows that neither of the Rolands can be understood without taking into account the relationship between them. Among other things, her portrayal of the Roland marriage makes one wonder what she might have to say about the relationship between the members of that other, even more consequential “power couple” caught up in the revolutionary drama, Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.

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