CHAPTER 1

The Painful Birth of the Romantic Heroine
Staël as Political Animal, 1786–1821

> Depuis la révolution, les hommes ont pensé qu'il étoit politiquement et moralement utile de réduire les femmes à la plus absurde médiocrité.
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 328

> On a raison d'exclure les femmes des affaires politiques et civiles.
>
> Staël, *DA* [1810], IV 369[1]

These extracts offer two very different verdicts about the place of women in society, yet both are the words of Staël. What is going on? This introductory chapter seeks to answer that question, arguing that Staël came to focus on art and Europe only when banned by men from politics and France. The figure of the "romantic heroine" attributed to her, drawing from her life and works, was in fact her fallback position, a stance adopted by a woman exiled from the revolutionary stage. This is made clear through Staël's complete works, which can be split into four epochs, as follows:

Old Regime

Born in 1766, Staël is known to Europe by the age of twelve for a short moral comedy, *Les Inconvénients de la vie de Paris*. In 1786, she marries and turns twenty, and her output now slowly pushes the envelope of discourse expected by society of a very young *salonnière*: outlines of novels; portraits and *éloges*; *synonymes*, a remarkable *folle*, and *vers de circonstance* published in Friedrich Melchior von Grimm's *Correspondance* for Europe's royal courts. In 1786–1787, she completes two plays, *Sophie ou les sentiments secrets* and *Jane Grey*, and prepares her *Lettres sur Rousseau*. This output may seem prepolitical, but it is already breaking the hermetic seal of

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Versailles and of women's private art, moving toward Paris and the citizen's public arena. *Jane Grey* is the first of Staël's five Voltairean political tragedies produced between 1787 and 1797. Jacques Domenech has brilliantly shown how Staël uses Jean-Jacques Rousseau in her 1788 *Lettres sur Rousseau* as a straw man for her father Jacques Necker, famous throughout Europe, thus giving him free publicity on the eve of the Estates General – a diversionary strategy she will repeat throughout her career. Staël's correspondence shows this same move toward politics, linked to her growing maturity, a change of mood in France, Necker's role as *premier ministre*, and her own marriage to the Swedish ambassador, Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein.[2]

Revolution

Staël's most familiar works in this decade again seem at first largely private and apolitical, consisting of *Zulma* and the *Recueil de morceaux détachés* (1794–1795) and *De l'influence des passions* (1796). But three elements destroy that first impression.

The first element is the politics in these fine and understudied works. *Mirza* and *Zulma* from the *Recueil* are tragic heroines with a *public* voice; its *Epître au malheur* and her book on the passions explicitly discuss the effects of the Terror, title of her lover Benjamin Constant's later brochure. Staël adds that her volume's three *nouvelles* date from before 1786, but *Mirza* and *Pauline* already attack the slave trade, another constant of Staël's life up to her work with William Wilberforce in 1814. Often, in Staël's case, full titles reveal our misleading shorthand: thus, *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*.

The second element is other published material: her 1790 *Eloge* of the strategist Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte de Guibert; her 1791 tract on public opinion; her series, begun in exile from France, of three *Réflexions* (1793–1795), on the queen's trial, on peace – her first signed work – and on domestic peace; and her 1798 treatise on how to establish the Republic. These texts are little studied. Like Charles de Gaulle, Guibert had warned of mobile armies amid a caste who favored fortifications; Staël's lover Louis de Narbonne faces that same resistance as minister for war in 1791–1792. Her tract on how to identify a national majority pinpoints the way extremists could hijack a revolution once desired by the entire nation. Her thorough series of *Réflexions* appeal for common sense from the French government and people, and practical solutions to civil unrest – mud in the eye for those who dismiss her as irrational.

And her 300-page tract on how to ground the Republic continues these themes, including the elements of a draft constitution.

Finally, the third element is unknown material. *Cahier staëlien* 46 (1994–1995) contains 29 unknown Staël texts, including 10 short political pieces, with my 163-item repertoire of her complete works, roughly twice the length of previous bibliographies. Three anonymous prefaces Staël adds to her short volumes of Necker extracts show the continuity of her method – she uses Necker as shield and springboard in six publications over thirty years. A new preface in 1798 stresses the politics in her *Lettres sur Rousseau*, beside drafts of memoirs for Narbonne and Adolph Ribbing (1793–1795) and her 1795 Republican declaration. Chapter 3 in this book reviews Narbonne's speeches to the Législative in 1791–1792, on the eve of Europe's twenty-three-year war. It argues that Staël and Narbonne divided their efforts – he preparing France for invasion and she adding a populist agenda to his speeches before the wary *députés*. In short, she cowrote his speeches. Here is their desperate bid to save France from invasion at a bleak moment in its history. From all these texts, the same clear political ideal emerges: a centrist government of notables and conciliation, empowered by the silent nation. Living and collaborating with Staël, Constant in his turn reworks this Staëlian model in 1796–1797. Finally, the *Cahier* publishes three possible collaborations with Charles Maurice de Talleyrand: notably, evidence that Staël helped to write his famous 1791 *Rapport* on the education of women – spur to Mary Wollstonecraft in England, who dedicated to him her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* the next year.[3]

Seen as a unit, this bloc of material radically changes our grasp of Staël's place in revolutionary France. But the story of the *Rapport* merits special attention, focusing as it does on the woman question at the heart of this chapter.

Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication* attacks Staël for accepting Rousseau's demeaning view of women in 1788. Oddly, she claims that Staël's text was "*accidentally* put into my hands," though she had reviewed it in 1789; she may not want hints of intellectual debt. This also seems unfair to a text that talks in 1788 of *esclavage domestique* (*LR* 46), rejects marriage as doomed, and defends women writers amid a long and subtle discussion. Madelyn Gutwirth crisply reviews Staël's evolving thought on women's fate, putting in brilliant relief a series of four brief "manifesti," from the Bastille to Waterloo. Staël's other feminist texts confirm Gutwirth's conclusions: the chapters on vanity, friendship, love, and tenderness in her book on the passions; her articles on Aspasia, Cleopatra, and her mother

for Louis-Gabriel Michaud's *Biographie universelle* (1811–1813); almost all her fictions. *Corinne* and *Delphine* are forceful arias in this symphonic development. It seems only fitting, if Staël did indeed help to write Talleyrand's *Rapport*, that Wollstonecraft should inadvertently dedicate her *Vindication* to a fellow authoress and precursor whom she misrepresents in its pages.[4]

Throughout this development, Staël offers women a loser's choice between marriage and public existence. Certain from Rousseau's *Julie* onward that love in marriage is a dream, she gives it in 1796 one paragraph in her chapter on the subject. Public life meanwhile is a fool's gamble, requiring one to brave slander, hatred, and abandonment for an ersatz reward, the "deuil éclatant du bonheur." As Gutwirth shows, Staël is happier with both options by 1814, shrugging off not only her own lived sorrows but the dead weight of her father, blissfully married, and outspoken against women authors. Yet this is largely a rich woman's dilemma; Staël's works say little of poorer women's burdens and the new choice capitalism offers them between home as a prison or life on the streets. The *Rapport* fills that gap.

Staël, Talleyrand, and Narbonne shared an agenda in 1791. Besides circumstantial evidence of Staël's help with this *Rapport*, the text also speaks. Its detailed review of women in society, ignored throughout Talleyrand's subsequent career, precisely echoes Staël's own idiosyncratic views and her bizarre mix of feminist polemic and resignation. For a man agreeing with his male colleagues that they are right to want women at home, its immediate appeal to the Pandora's box of women's rights is a jolt: "On ne peut d'abord séparer ici les questions relatives à leur éducation de l'examen de leurs droits politiques." If, says the text, we grant women the same rights as men, we must give them the same means to apply them; it continues with a tableau: "La moitié du genre humain exclue par l'autre de toute participation au gouvernement; des personnes indigènes par le fait et étrangères par la loi sur le sol qui les a vu naître; des propriétaires sans influence directe et sans représentation: ce sont-là des phénomènes politiques, qu'en principe abstrait, il paroît impossible d'expliquer."[5]

Rereading this government plan for French women's future, a shocking absence gradually appears; despite an appeal to men and women's "bonheur commun," despite much talk about mothers and daughters, marriage receives not one word. Is this a fate too horrible to contemplate? Senseless for Talleyrand, the lacuna is natural for Staël, whose feelings are clear. Indeed, the whole tract is written beneath the sign of sacrifice: "[Q]ue sont un petit nombre d'exceptions brillantes? Autorisent-elles à déranger le plan

général de la nature?" Such women, it argues, must sacrifice their talents to the good of the Benthamite majority, show themselves "au-dessus de leur sexe en le jugeant, en lui marquant sa véritable place, et ne pas demander qu'en livrant les femmes aux mêmes études que nous, on les sacrifie toutes pour avoir peut-être dans un siècle quelques hommes de plus." Why does this appeal to exceptional women fill almost half a legislative proposal for poor women's vocational schools? Why does it ask such women to *mark* their sex's place, when it is itself doing just that? This odd sequence no longer seems so bizarre if Staël's sad hand lies behind it, resigning "de chimériques espérances" before the hard facts of sexism. An eternal pragmatist, Staël unlike Olympe de Gouges or Théroigne de Méricourt here seeks little gains for women: a little public space; "des ressources pour les exceptions et des remèdes pour le malheur"; and, above all, "les moyens de subsister *indépendantes*, par le produit de leur travail."[6]

Consulat and Empire: Coming to Europe

Under Napoleon, Staël could keep her public voice only by using code, in artistic fictions. The break is clear: Staël after Brumaire in 1799 locks away her nearly completed treatise on grounding the Republic to publish *De la littérature* instead. The Revolution had early pushed women off the political stage, and we have seen Staël's own complicity with some of these tenets, but Napoleon will be more systematic. As late as 1798, Staël offers no excuse when she talks politics; for the rest of her life, excuses are given. Even in 1817, at the age of fifty, she still pretends that her considerations on the French Revolution are but a daughter's memoirs of her father's illustrious career.[7]

A book "on literature" may sound innocuous, but four facts inflect that judgment. Staël's *full* title is *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*; its scope is European; modern critics see it as the inventor of sociocriticism; and, finally, like almost all her works, it faced a barrage of controversy in the press. François-René de Chateaubriand launched his career with a long attack on the work as too liberal, which he signed two years early as "by the author of the *Génie du christianisme*." For the next decade, Staël signed and published just five texts: the novels *Delphine* and *Corinne ou l'Italie*; a private biography of her father; a volume of extracts from the prince de Ligne; and her pulped masterpiece on Germany, *De l'Allemagne*, in 1810. Whatever Staël's actual agenda, her *labels* announce women's private sphere, as defined in France since at least Mademoiselle de Scudéry: novels; literature; inspiring her men friends. It is

no coincidence that a bestseller here was the prince de Ligne text: the Emperor's reviewers must have sighed with relief to see this woman at last shut up about politics and publish a man's jottings. Many men still label Staël an *egérie* today.[8]

Nor is Staël's *unpublished* work in this period explicitly political: Around 1805, she even tried verse. In 1805–1811, she returned to the theater, staging several plays at her château in Coppet and writing at least seven more: experimental Romantic dramas like *Agar*, *Geneviève de Brabant*, *Sapho*, and *La Sunamite*, and very funny comedies, which may have influenced Musset: *La Signora Fantastici*, *Le Mannequin*, *Le Capitaine Kernadec*. In *Le Mannequin*, a man who wants a pliable wife ends up married to a tailor's dummy – precisely as in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*.

Has Staël then accepted the muzzle, like her tailor's dummy, in the face of bitter male hostility to what the language still calls a *femme publique*? Her titles certainly suggest it. And yet, once again, behind this docile mask her politics survive. Staël was born with a political voice: it resurfaces throughout her life, behind her wide range of alleged subjects. Simone Balayé offers an elegant series of *lectures politiques* for *Delphine*, *Corinne*, and *De l'Allemagne*. Staël's talk of her father, *vainqueur de la Bastille*, is another excuse for Revolution, and even the Austrian prince de Ligne speaks for a defeated Europe. Titles are again deceitful: Staël's *Réflexions sur le suicide*, of all things, contains her fierce indictment of Germany's political quietism before 1813, neatly sidestepped in *De l'Allemagne* itself. *De l'Allemagne*'s own pulping simply made such politics explicit.[9]

Yet despite the politics that inflects all of Staël's thought, her focus has now subtly shifted, reflecting both her new experience and the iron hand of patriarchy. Muzzled by the imperial government, Staël takes her Romantic heroine – who before 1800 appears only in counterpoint to her political treatises – and situates her on the European stage. In a sense, these are all the same heroine, Staël's eternal feminine, reaching from *Pauline*, *Mirza*, and the *Folle* of 1786 up to her own posthumous persona in the *Dix années d'exil*. Many have complained that this heroine is Staël herself, in different costumes. That much is obvious; but she is also any woman, before or since, who has felt her talent crushed by the dead weight of patriarchy. This is a vast subject, after all.

There are some splendid studies of Staël's Romantic heroine, unhappy witness to male needs for a silent and servile companion buried within the private sphere. What deserves further study is the massive impact this heroine evidently had on her readers, especially women: Margaret Fuller

named herself "the Yankee Corinna," and both Corinne and Delphine are still standard names in France today. At the height of French Romanticism, 1830–1848, France published seventeen editions of *Corinne ou l'Italie*, in an age flooded with novels; 1850–1870 saw another fifteen editions. Before George Sand, I contend that almost nowhere else in European literature could Romantic readers find heroines with a *public* voice. And, in fact, almost no work before *Corinne* had put *any* creative genius, man or woman, so gloriously center stage: Ossian hints at it, Byron completes the process – but Byron wrote in 1812, after *Corinne*. Did Staël then invent Europe's Romantic hero, and do so in the feminine?[10]

Corinne ou l'Italie and *De l'Allemagne*, like several subsequent projects – Staël's collaboration on John Rocca's Spanish memoir, her articles for the *Biblioteca italiana*, her posthumous *Considérations sur la Révolution française* and *Dix années d'exil* with their extended commentaries on England and Russia – also point to a sustained new project: They map Europe explicitly as an *international* network. If Europe is nothing but a series of crowned heads, then Napoleon can simply replace one ruler with another drawn from his large family; Klemens von Metternich can put monarchs on thrones long abolished or newly created (like the Netherlands or Belgium) without a peep from the nations thus subjugated. Staël thereby opposes a living Europe of the imagination, a concert of nations foreshadowing Robert Schuman's vision, to Napoleon's dead and univocal imperial hegemony.

Restoration

After 1814, having fled Napoleonic Europe via unburned Moscow in 1812, Staël at last escapes the muzzle; she is free to speak again in public, to influence the state. In 1804, she had hinted at politics by reviewing her father. Her new works – *De l'Allemagne*'s new preface, some short pieces gathered in *Cahier staëlien* 46, and her two political testaments, *Dix années d'exil* and the *Considérations sur la Révolution française* – use that same excuse, with Staël carefully guarding her "political virginity" by telling men what they want to hear: that she had never had a political role (this while Wellington, Tsar Alexander, and the duc d'Orléans visit her salon). But a bizarre new element separates these texts from her talk of politics in the 1790s: Suddenly, Staël's Romantic heroine has stepped through fiction's mirror and entered her political discourse. Staël is reinventing herself as one of her own heroines, a Delphine-like victim longing for the private sphere. Above all, she is a victim; indeed, she is the Emperor's victim. And

clearly this is more than a mere excuse to publish. In inventing the Romantic heroine, and perhaps in watching her friend Byron at work, Staël has glimpsed this suffering figure's enormous power; here is the electric, indeed *female* link with that ocean of Romantic readers she has sought throughout her career. Ironically, she had used it already, as Georges Poulet remarks, in her first great work, on Rousseau, before feeling the call of discursive objectivity for two decades thereafter.[11]

It is also ironic that Staël's modest lie was not enough for her male heirs, who heavily censored both posthumous texts. One incident will illustrate their methods: Every edition of the *Considérations* carries a note from Staël's son Auguste saying that her chapter on the French constitution was unfinished. That chapter sat in manuscript for 200 years, as fully revised as her manuscript constitution of 1798, waiting for a time when women could again speak in public. Staël's life and work, in short, from childhood to deathbed – indeed, on through her posthumous career – bear eloquent witness to her age's sexual contract, and to its pressing desire to ban all women, mothers included, from the public arena.[12]