

Men with Muskets, Women with Lyres: Nationality, Citizenship, and Gender in the Writings of Germaine de Staël

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*Men with Muskets, Women with Lyres:  
Nationality, Citizenship, and Gender  
in the Writings of Germaine de Staël*

Susanne Hillman

On 23 May 1812 Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), Europe's best-known enemy of Napoleon Bonaparte, set out from her estate on Lake Geneva to escape to England. In her reminiscences, she reflected on the pivotal event as follows:

[A]fter ten years of ever-increasing persecutions [. . .] I was obliged to leave two homelands as a fugitive, Switzerland and France, by order of a man less French than I. For I was born on the banks of the Seine, where his only claim to citizenship is his tyranny. He saw the light of day on the island of Corsica, practically within Africa's savage sway. His father did not, like mine, devote his fortune and his sleepless nights to defending France from bankruptcy and famine; the air of this beautiful country is not his native air; how can he understand the pain of being exiled from it, when he considers this fertile land only as the instrument of his victories.

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Where is his *patrie*? It is any country that accepts his domination.  
His fellow-citizens? They are whatever slaves obey his orders.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, de Staël deliberately links nationality and citizenship. In her view, citizenship status was acquired simply by being born on French soil. Her family's tireless labors on behalf of the nation added another irrefutable proof of Frenchness. In addition, growing up in France and breathing the country's invigorating air had created an emotional attachment that a person raised elsewhere simply could not fathom. We thus have a triad of birth/service/sentiment that connects the deserving individual to his or her nation (in this case *la grande nation*).

In this essay I explore de Staël's understanding of the twin concepts of nationality and citizenship through the lens of gender. Nationality and citizenship were of perennial concern to her thought, partly because of the turbulent times she lived in, partly because of her personal experience in exile. Influenced by history and literature, she early on admired the gallant men with muskets who heroically sacrificed their lives for the glory of the nation. But it was the exceptional women with lyres who were destined to act as the nation's unifying agents by recreating the gallants' deeds in writing. By imagining the nation these women fulfilled the supreme task of citizenship. In what follows I will argue that de Staël conceived of the ideal citizen as a woman writer or artist who served her nation by inspiring its members with enthusiasm and virtue.<sup>2</sup> In elaborating her view of the superior woman as *citoyenne* and national muse she made an important contribution to the debate on the nation and the citizen.

The only daughter of Louis XVI's finance minister Jacques Necker and the salonnière Suzanne Curchod-Necker, of Genevan and Vaudois citizenship respectively, de Staël gained fame and notoriety through her brilliant conversational talents, political intrigues, and unconventional relationships with famous men. Though she considered herself a "true Frenchwoman" (*véritable française*),<sup>3</sup> she was a citizen of Geneva and a Swedish subject by marriage, at least until 1803 when she took advantage of the *Code Civil*

<sup>1</sup> Madame De Staël, *Ten Years of Exile*, trans. Doris Beik (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 138–39. I have used English translations of de Staël's published works wherever good ones are available. Otherwise, translations from the original French are mine.

<sup>2</sup> On de Staël's concept of enthusiasm see Kari Lokke, "L'Enthousiasme, l'Éternité, et les 'Armes du Temps' chez Madame de Staël," *Cahiers Staeliens* 57 (2006): 63–76.

<sup>3</sup> De Staël to Villers, 19 Nov. 1803 in Madame de Staël, *Correspondence Générale*, ed. Béatrice W. Jasinski (Paris: Hachette, 1982), 5, 1: 118.

and officially claimed French citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Considering this multiplicity of conflicting loyalties, it is not surprising that her major writings reveal a sustained preoccupation with these issues.

Despite their undeniable significance for early nineteenth-century European intellectual history, historians have so far devoted scant attention to de Staël's writings. In fact, in the US, Staëlien studies have largely been dominated by literary criticism and theory.<sup>5</sup> This has had the effect of prioritizing her novels over her non-fiction, downplaying the historical context of her oeuvre and, most grievously, ignoring de Staël's historical contribution to socio-political thought.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the complex ways in which her personal experience informed her writing, her oeuvre is best examined as a unified, though certainly inconsistent, whole. Her writings were rarely "products of intense deliberation, but rather reflections" of a particular state of mind, as Madelyn Gutwirth notes; it thus makes sense to treat them as a cohesive "repository of her thought."<sup>7</sup> Only in viewing her oeuvre as it evolved over time can we do justice to the author's contribution to one of the most exciting and controversial discourses of her day: the discourse on citizenship in the emerging nation and its relation to gender.

Although there is no scholarly consensus on the actual appearance of "the nation," the French Revolution and Napoleon's quest for European hegemony certainly contributed to the awakening of national consciousness across the continent. As Peter Sahlins remarks, France on the eve of revolu-

<sup>4</sup> De Staël to Necker, 22 Nov. 1803 in de Staël, *Correspondence Générale*, 5, 1: 118. For de Staël's nationality and citizenship see Pierre Kohler, *Madame de Staël et la Suisse: Étude biographique et littéraire* (Lausanne, Paris: Librairie Payot & Compagnie, 1916), 680–81. On the convoluted nature of de Staël's nationality also see Renée Weingarten, *Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant: A Dual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Lumières et Liberté* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1979); Angelica Goodden, *Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1978); and Charlotte Hogsett, *The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987). On de Staël's life see, e.g., Ghislain de Diesbach, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1983) and J. Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age: A Life of Madame de Staël* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> See Sergine Dixon, *Germaine de Staël, Daughter of the Enlightenment: The Writer and Her Turbulent Era* (New York: Humanity Books, 2007); and Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist*, 50. For the case of treating de Staël's oeuvre as a "repository of her thought" see Albertine Necker de Saussure, *Notice sur le caractère et les écrits de Mme de Staël in Oeuvres Inédites* (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1820), 1: xlvj.

tion was above all an “*imagined* national space.”<sup>8</sup> There was neither linguistic uniformity nor a sense of allegiance to a specifically *French* polity. Indeed, Normans, Bretons, Alsatians, and others were wont to identify themselves as “nations” on a par with France. How far the situation differed for urban revolutionaries of both sexes continues to be a matter of lively debate.<sup>9</sup>

Considering the momentous political and social transformations of the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, de Staël’s preoccupation with issues of nationality and citizenship should not come as a surprise.<sup>10</sup> The overthrow of Louis XVI and the displacement of “power and national identity” from the ruler to the sovereign *people* was a crucial step in the establishment of the French nation-state.<sup>11</sup> In its various phases the revolution extended legal equality to white males, “revived the classical conception of active political citizenship,” and created boundaries between individuals of different nationalities.<sup>12</sup> Generally limited to a set of political privileges bestowed on some and withheld from others, the conventional concept of citizenship underestimates the manifold “dimensions of control and negotiations which take place in different areas of social life,” in Nira Yuval-Davis’s words.<sup>13</sup> Put differently, there is power *outside* the bounds of citizenship as well as powerlessness within—without a necessary causal link between the two.

French intellectuals of the period undoubtedly had a fairly precise notion of what a citizen was or ought to be. A *citoyen* was the enlightened man, the property holder, and, increasingly, the patriot.<sup>14</sup> As such, he was “naturally French.”<sup>15</sup> A *citoyenne*, on the other hand, could be a “part-time

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sahlins, “Natural Frontiers Revisited: France’s Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century,” *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1425.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Dominique Godineau, “Femmes en citoyenneté: Pratiques et politique,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 2 (1995): 198.

<sup>10</sup> David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, “Writing the Nation (Mme de Staël),” *French Forum* 30 (2005): 43.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 49.

<sup>13</sup> On the conventional understanding of citizenship see, e.g., Alfonso Alfonsi, “Citizenship and National Identity: The Emerging Stirrings in Western Europe,” in *Citizenship and National Identity: From Colonialism to Globalism*, ed. T.K. Oommen (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 1997), 53 and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Women, Citizenship and Difference,” *Feminist Review* 57 (1997): 5–6.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Rétat, “Citoyen-Sujet, Civisme,” in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680–1820*, eds. Rolf Reichhardt and Eberhard Schmidt (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1986), 9: 84–88.

<sup>15</sup> For the problem of foreigners and naturalized citizens see Peter Sahlins, *Unnaturally*

patriot” at best, as William Sewell notes, since women were biologically handicapped as wives and mothers.<sup>16</sup> Noting the conspicuous equation of citizenship with patriotism, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that both were meant to be the province of men. As we shall see, de Staël was among those who challenged this reductionist and frankly misogynist understanding of women’s function as citizens of their nation. The creation of modern citizenship is thus inconceivable without the concurrent establishment of the French nation-state.

No discussion on the appearance of the nation can dispense with the work of Benedict Anderson, whose characterization of the nation as a “limited imagined community” has had an indelible impact on historiography.<sup>17</sup> If we accept Anderson’s definition, it follows that nationality, i.e. the status of belonging to a particular nation, is equally a product of the imagination. Whether French revolutionaries would have accepted this definition is debatable. In his pamphlet *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers État?* (1789) the revolutionary Abbé Sieyès equated the nation with the Third Estate, since the latter contained “everything needful to constitute a complete nation.” Unlike Anderson, Sieyès understood the nation as something primordial and thus essentially timeless. The nation was not only “prior to everything,” but actually “the source of everything.”<sup>18</sup> De Staël similarly insisted that the nation “always exists; it cannot die.”<sup>19</sup> But this does not mean that she thought of it primarily in terms of the Third Estate, though she occasionally advocated the Republican ideal of civic equality. Over time she came to define the nation as a specific cultural community created by print and conversation. As such, it depended on the spirit and the imagination of individuals endowed with talent or “genius.” It is therefore accurate to say that de Staël understood citizenship, at least in the case of women, as an essentially creative process, an act of the imagination that ultimately aimed at the betterment of all society.

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*French: Foreign Citizens in the Old Regime and After* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> William Sewell, “Le citoyen/la citoyenne: Activity, Passivity, and the Revolutionary Concept of Citizenship,” in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), 2: 116.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 15–16.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Sieyès quoted in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 156, 171.

<sup>19</sup> Madame de Staël, *Considerations on the Principle Events of the French Revolution*, eds. Duke de Broglie and Baron de Staël, trans. from the French (New York: James Eastburn and Co., 1818), 3: 117.

Does this make her a proto-feminist? In stark contrast to writers like the Marquis de Condorcet and Olympe de Gouges who demanded political equality for women, or to the revolutionary women of Paris who claimed citizenship by practicing it, de Staël was disappointingly timid when it came to these issues—unless they happened to concern her.<sup>20</sup> As will become clear, de Staël was far from consistent in her discussion of women. Though occasionally purporting to speak on behalf of all women, for the most part her reflections are limited to the few exceptional women who, in her view, genuinely affected society. Scholars like Madelyn Gutwirth and Charlotte Hogsett have shown how difficult it was for de Staël to reconcile her “universal” voice with her woman’s voice.<sup>21</sup> To make her writings palatable to male readers, she tended to uphold clichés regarding women’s vocation, ritually acknowledged the general superiority of men, and paid obeisance to specific individuals like Rousseau or her adored father. What Mary Seidman Trouille says about the multifaceted nature of Rousseau’s thinking and writing on women applies to de Staël as well: “To fully grasp the richness and complexity of his views on women, one must resist the desire to systematize what is not systematic, to simplify what is not simple; more importantly, one must resist the urge to resolve or efface tensions and contradictions that are deeply rooted in, even constitutive of, Rousseau’s thought and the thought of his period.”<sup>22</sup>

The contradictory nature of much of her writing on gender not only illustrates the shifting nature of the concepts she was struggling with but also reflects the turmoil of the times in which they emerged. It hardly needs to be stressed that like all of us, Germaine de Staël was the product of a particular historical environment and intellectual climate. In stark contrast to the majority, she felt called upon to challenge the prejudices of her day,

<sup>20</sup> For the link between revolutionary practices and citizenship see Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, “A Political Revolution for Women? The Case of Paris,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, third ed., eds. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 265–92. For Condorcet and de Gouges see *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, eds. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 1: 99–103 and 1: 104–10.

<sup>21</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth, “Circé et Corinne: Germaine de Staël face à la calomnie,” *Cahiers Staëliens* 57 (2006): 61 and Hogsett, *The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël*, throughout.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 14. On de Staël’s contradictory thought on women see Geneviève Fraisse, *Reason’s Muse: Sexual Difference and the Birth of Democracy*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), chapter 4.

and occasionally she transcended them. It would be uncharitable indeed to expect consistency where none was intended. I would like to suggest that it is precisely the fluidity of her thought and the lack of conceptual clarity that highlight the unstable nature of the ideas she grappled with. As such, they provide a salutary corrective to a teleological reading of history that condemns the Revolution as the beginning of women's exclusion from liberal democratic politics.

## I. LITERATURE AND WOMEN: FRANCE IN TRANSITION

At age twenty-two Germaine Necker published her first work of literary criticism, the much lauded *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* (1788)—astounding proof of her precocious talent and her eagerness to tackle subjects generally reserved for men. Over the next decade de Staël would write a number of texts including newspaper articles, political pamphlets, and pieces of fiction. Her busy literary activity culminated in a major treatise on literature in 1800, sometimes hailed as one of the founding texts in comparative literary criticism. *De la littérature* contains her first extended elaboration of what would become some of her key ideas such as the perfectibility of the human spirit, the power of the writer and the literary imagination, and the precarious situation of the exceptional woman.

Let us begin with the first, the Enlightenment belief in the progress of the human spirit. Why would such a belief be important for this inquiry? De Staël expressed it poetically: “If you turn your eyes towards heaven, your thoughts become more noble: it is in elevating yourself that you find the air more pure, the light more brilliant.”<sup>23</sup> To imbibe this salutary atmosphere was the pleasure of the reader; to inspire by imagining its existence the task of the writer. By drawing attention to such lofty concepts as liberty, morality, and virtue, the writer created a model worthy of imitation. In short, the perfection of the human spirit depended on the advancement of literature, including fiction.

In an early essay on fiction de Staël had written that “[m]an ha[d] no faculty more precious than his imagination.”<sup>24</sup> Superior products of the imagination such as Samuel Richardson's novel *Clarissa* or Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* dissolved temporal, class, and psychological distinctions

<sup>23</sup> De Staël, *De la littérature*, ed. Gérard Gengembre and Jean Goldzink (1800) (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 393–94.

<sup>24</sup> De Staël, *Essai sur les fictions* in *Oeuvres Inédites*, 2: 176.



by creating a community of readers united by sensibility.<sup>25</sup> Equally important, such works could be conducive to national attachment. De Staël, for one, was fervently convinced of the writer's patriotic duty to his or her people: "Only eloquence, the love of letters and the arts, [and] philosophy can turn a territory into a *patrie* by imbuing the nation that inhabits it with similar tastes, habits and sentiments."<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, like many of her fellow writers she considered patriotism to some extent as identical with citizenship. To be sure, never had such patriotic literary efforts been more important than in the chaotic post-revolutionary years.

After France's descent into the anarchy of the Terror, nothing was more urgent than to rekindle the spirit of Enlightenment. Whereas courage may have sufficed to battle the royalists, something more was needed to found "the nation in the Republic," de Staël posited. Only through the advancement of enlightened ideas, so tragically interrupted by the Jacobin and counter-revolutionary blood-letting, could a "new society" be created in "an old nation."<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, she lamented in *De la littérature*, the revolution had virtually extinguished women's influence on society. Under monarchies women had played a substantial though indirect role in politics, but this had changed. Since the revolution women had been reduced to the "most absurd mediocrity;" they were being addressed in a "miserable language without either delicacy or *esprit*," and they had entirely lost any motive for "developing their reason." Though frivolous amusements were still tolerated, every attempt at serious study was decried as "pedantry."<sup>28</sup> Deprived of *lumières* and hence rationality, de Staël warned, women had actually become *more* dangerous, not less. Why should this be so? It was because uneducated women easily escaped their duties and thus dragged their nation down rather than lifting it up. Women's loss of virtue and national degeneration thus went hand in hand. To ensure the durable foundation of "all social and political relations," she asserted, it was essential "to enlighten, to instruct, to perfect women just like men, nations just like individuals."<sup>29</sup> Lest we think her insistence on the power of literature exag-

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Lipking, "Aristotle's Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 74.

<sup>26</sup> De Staël, *De la littérature*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Madame de Staël, *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la république en France*, ed. Lucia Omacini (Geneva and Paris: Librairie Droz, 1979), 96. Also see p. 274. Note her inconsistent use of terminology.

<sup>28</sup> De Staël, *De la littérature*, 335.

<sup>29</sup> De Staël, *De la littérature*, 337–38.

gerated, we need to remember that this opinion was shared by many of her contemporaries, including her future nemesis Napoleon.<sup>30</sup>

Ostensibly favoring the enlightenment of *all* women, what really concerned de Staël was the woman of genius, i.e. herself. Thanks to her superior talent, such a woman was able to imagine the national community and to exert a positive influence on its habits and mores. In constructing the celebrated character of Corinne, the national muse par excellence, de Staël envisioned a version of creative citizenship that was as memorable as it was problematic.

## II. ITALY: THE NATION AS WOMAN

When Germaine de Staël set out on her first Italian trip late in 1804, the peninsula was still reeling from Napoleon's conquering expeditions and a drastic reorganization of the political map. De Staël viewed the country she traversed with a critical eye. Delighted by both the Southern climate and the enthusiastic reception she met with, she nonetheless found reason to denounce this political anomaly called "Italy." "[Italy] is not a nation," she declared to a French acquaintance, "because there is neither togetherness, nor truth, nor strength in its existence."<sup>31</sup> Italian men lacked "the dignity and pride characterizing free, military nations" and therefore only rarely aroused women's "enthusiasm and love."<sup>32</sup> Centuries of oppression had resulted in intellectual apathy and resignation: "Italians have lost all taste for truth, and, frequently, the very possibility of speaking it. It follows that not daring to go near ideas, people have grown accustomed to the pleasure of words." In short, Italian writers had gradually lost their voice and influence on the well-being of the "nation."<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, it was precisely in such an inauspicious environment that a female genius like Corinne could flourish.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., J. Christopher Herold, *The Mind of Napoleon: A Selection from His Written and Spoken Words Edited and Translated by Christopher Herold* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 268.

<sup>31</sup> De Staël to Hochet, 23 Jan. 1805 in de Staël, *Correspondence Générale*, 5, 2: 481.

<sup>32</sup> Madame de Staël, *Corinne, Or Italy*, trans. Avriel H. Goldberger (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 104. Also see, *The Novel's Seductions: Staël's Corinne in Critical Inquiry*, ed. Karyna Szmurlo (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> For the genesis of the novel see *Les carnets de voyage de Madame de Staël: Contribution à la genèse de ses oeuvres*, ed. Simone Balayé (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1971).

The heroine of *Corinne, ou l'Italie* strikingly fits her creator's view of the inspiring power of the talented individual and clearly expresses the link between nation and imagination—with one minor difference: Corinne is not a writer but an *improvisatrice* probably modeled on the celebrated improviser Corilla Olimpica (1727–1800), the only Italian woman writer ever to be crowned poet laureate.<sup>35</sup> Corinne's declamations in front of an enraptured audience invoke the country's former grandeur. Glorious as these ruminations are, they also contain an implicit reproach of the criticism habitually raised: "Throughout the ages, making this beautiful country a prey for their ambition, foreigners have conquered and torn her to shreds, only to reproach her bitterly for the faults of nations vanquished and torn to shreds!"<sup>36</sup> Against the melancholy background of a majestic past and a bleak present, Corinne's eloquence inspires her listeners with a vision of a more hopeful future when all Italians would once more be unified. Speaking for the (imagined) nation rather than for a prince, Corinne brings community into being through vision, not violence. "For de Staël," Bonnie Smith correctly observes, "the declamation of history built community and understanding based not on Napoleonic forces but on a visualized reciprocity and politeness."<sup>37</sup> The nation, in other words, is being created in the very act of being imagined.

Writers were not the only ones to act upon the "nation," however. For de Staël there existed an equally close connection between a country's political institutions and its inhabitants' character and way of life, as the following passage reveals:

It is so true that governments form the character of nations that remarkable differences in manners are to be seen in the different states that make up this same Italy. The Piedmontese, who used to form a small national group, are more military-minded than the rest of Italy; Florentines, who have known freedom or liberal princes, are enlightened and gentle; the Venetians and Genoese prove capable of political thought because of their republican aristocracy.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> On Corilla Olimpica and her impact on *Corinne* see the excellent chapter by Paola Giuli, "Tracing a Sisterhood; Corilla Olimpica as Corinne's Unacknowledged Alter Ego," in *The Novel's Seduction*, 165–81.

<sup>36</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Bonnie G. Smith, "History and Genius: The Narcotic, Erotic, and Baroque Life of Germaine de Staël," *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996): 1068–69.

<sup>38</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 101.

And the list continues in a similar vein. There is much in this section that smacks of hyperbole. What stands out nonetheless is the inseparable connection between government and society. Indeed, de Staël perceived public and private, or politics and the individual as a dialectical interplay of forces which, if properly motivated and balanced, would bring about the highest stage of the public good, a state marked by justice and virtue. In Corinne's eyes, the polity that had come closest to the realization of this vision was the polis of the ancient Greeks: "As they conceived it, the social order was no arid combination of calculation and power, but a happy set of institutions that stimulate the faculties, develop the soul, and give man the goal of perfecting himself and his fellow men."<sup>39</sup> This reference to ancient Greece is of great interest for our analysis since the Greek polis evidently did not extend the benefits and duties of political citizenship to women.

This brings us to the question of gender. In her first novel *Delphine* (1802) de Staël had insisted on society's need for high-principled, refined women who, by virtue of their mere presence, challenged and inspired men and raised the general level of sophistication and manners. At the same time, she denied them active participation in political affairs. "[I]t is not appropriate for a woman to take part in political debate," remarks Delphine, the novel's heroine and one of de Staël's alter egos; "her destiny shelters her from all the dangers it entails, and her acts can never lend importance or dignity to her words."<sup>40</sup> What are we to make of this puzzling statement that seems to contradict the author's own vigorous participation in political cabals and intrigues? It is evident that on one hand, de Staël considered herself a woman apart from the rest, a woman, moreover, whose duty it was to lend her prodigious vitality and resources to the cause of liberty. On the other hand, we should not conclude that such clandestine political activity constituted her highest goal in life, even if it brought her into contact with most political luminaries of her age. In her view, a woman's life could not be complete, her destiny never truly fulfilled unless she found happiness in marriage.

Corinne's tragic destiny makes this clear. Even at the peak of her fame, upon being crowned at the Roman Capitol, "Corinne's eyes pleaded for the protection of a friend, a protection no woman can do without, however superior she may be."<sup>41</sup> This was unmistakably de Staël's personal opinion.

<sup>39</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 205.

<sup>40</sup> Madame de Staël, *Delphine*, trans. Avriel H. Goldberger (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1995), 60.

<sup>41</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 22.

Sadly, Corinne was soon to realize that for a woman, talent and love were irreconcilable. Which of the two should one choose? Though a life without an enduring love was inconceivable, it does not necessarily follow that forsaking one's talent would automatically guarantee bliss. "For the sake of her happiness," the narrator informs us, "Corinne was wrong to cast her lot with a man who could only thwart her natural self, and repress rather than stimulate her gifts."<sup>42</sup> The indictment of men's inability to deal with a superior woman cannot be doubted.

In sharp contrast to Corinne who consistently pleads for love *and* glory, Lord Nelvil, her beloved, is the mouthpiece of an unabashed conservatism. Deploring the absence of the traditional gender arrangement of male protector and female protected, Nelvil maintained that "[i]n Italy you would almost think that women were the sultan and men the harem"—clearly no alluring prospect for the puritanically reared Scotsman who contemplated marrying the half-Italian Corinne.<sup>43</sup> To some extent de Staël shared these views. Consider the following observations, jotted in her traveling diary: "The Italians have the character of woman. . . . The protector and the protected does not [*sic*] exist. . . . The Italians have the gracefulness of women, but this is more appropriate for women."<sup>44</sup> While de Staël limits herself to cautious criticism here, her sympathies for masculine England are colored by strong ambivalence. Usually an enthusiastic imitator of her father's life-long Anglophilia, in *Corinne* her stance towards the nation whose representatives treat her heroine so shabbily is much more equivocal. When Corinne deplores the dreariness of English provincial society, one cannot help but hear de Staël herself lament the soul-destroying effect of endless rounds of afternoon-tea and insipid talk. Compared to this unvarying dullness, even an Italian convent seemed positively "full of life."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately for Corinne, the endless rounds of tea were precisely the sort of domestic idyll Nelvil desired for his future wife.

Nelvil's limited vision was partly the result of his father's unabashedly patriarchal views. "A man born in our fortunate country must be English first and foremost," the elder Nelvil maintained; "he must fulfill his duties as a citizen since he has the good fortune to be a citizen. And in countries whose political institutions give men honorable occasions to act and to prove themselves, women should remain in the background." If he were to

<sup>42</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 303.

<sup>43</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 99.

<sup>44</sup> Balayé, *Les carnets de voyage*, 238. On the interrelationship of gender identities and national differences see Guerlac, "Writing the Nation," 44 f.

<sup>45</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 256.

marry Corinne, to please his wife, Nelvil “would try to introduce foreign ways into his household. Soon he would lose that sense of nationality, those prejudices, if you will, that bind us together and make our nation one body, a free but indissoluble association that cannot perish until the last one of us is dead.” Even worse, seeing his wife’s unhappiness (which the father anticipates as a matter of course), Nelvil junior would feel compelled to abandon his native land and move to Italy. Not only would Corinne thereby rob her husband “of the honor of serving his country,” she would also rob him of his masculinity: “What a fate for a man from our mountains to drag out an idle life in the lap of Italy’s pleasures? A Scotsman playing his wife’s *cicisbeo*, if he is not dancing attendance on some other man’s wife!”<sup>46</sup>

Nelvil senior’s assessment of the danger attending his son’s union with Corinne can be summed up in one over-arching fear: the talented woman emasculates the citizen-patriot. By distracting her husband from his duties, the wife deprives him of his natural destiny, undermines his patriotism, and ultimately corrodes his national attachment. What can we conclude from this damning judgment? Namely this: for the elder Nelvil exceptional women have no place in the social order, since they neither recognize the preeminence of the public man, nor do they content themselves with their proper place in the domestic sphere. By subverting the “natural” spheres of public and private, such women pose a threat of the greatest magnitude to the nation and its citizens. Interestingly, de Staël believed just the opposite. Her ideal woman inspired attachment to the nation by conjuring its glories in writing. In so doing she clearly fulfilled the duties of citizenship. In this sense *Corinne* is a strong condemnation of a society that forces a woman of genius to choose between the demands of her intellect and those of her heart.

The sober ending of *Corinne* supports this view. Abandoned by the fickle Nelvil and left with nothing but the memory of her once dazzling fame, the heartbroken heroine lies down and dies.<sup>47</sup> Her triumphs cannot satisfy, let alone mend, her broken heart. But this is not the whole story. In a fascinating twist on the theme of the wronged woman, Corinne expires only after having revenged herself in the most imaginative way possible. Asking permission to instruct Nelvil’s daughter in the arts and music, she hopes to turn the girl into a future Corinne, thereby not only delivering a

<sup>46</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 329–30.

<sup>47</sup> On the primacy of “couplehood” for de Staël see Madelyn Gutwirth, “Woman as Mediatrix: From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Germaine de Staël,” in *Woman as Mediatrix: Essays on Nineteenth-Century European Women Writers*, ed. Avriel H. Goldberger (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 21–22.

crushing blow to Nelvil's rigid gender ideology but also forcing him to remember the one he so shamelessly abandoned. Clearly, this is not the gesture of a submissive woman who powerlessly succumbs to her destiny. Italy has endowed her with the ability to develop and flaunt her talents for the benefit of the community of citizens. Conscious of her proud heritage, she passes it on to a future muse.

### III. GERMANY: A NATION WITHOUT MUSES

When *De l'Allemagne* was first published in London in early 1813, it had already attained the status of a *cause célèbre*. Condemned as "un-French" when the first volume went to press in 1810, Napoleon ordered the already printed 10,000 copies seized and pulped. "It seemed to me that the air of this country did not agree with you," General Savary informed the devastated author, "and we have not yet reached the point where we have to model ourselves on the nations you admire."<sup>48</sup> As with *Corinne*, the undiscerning reader may find little in this unusual book that would offend a ruler, no matter how punctilious. What was it then that aroused Napoleon's ire? To answer this question we have to ascertain what de Staël hoped to achieve in *De l'Allemagne*.

In writing *De l'Allemagne*, de Staël had set herself the task of "revealing the glory of the works of the human spirit."<sup>49</sup> This glory she thought at present to reside in German lands, and it is certainly no coincidence that she considered at least the Northern part of Germany (more specifically Prussia) "*la patrie de la pensée*."<sup>50</sup> In describing these German riches of the spirit, she hoped to make them accessible to other peoples. After all, it could not be the intention of the French, she postulated in a passage deleted by the censor, to erect a "great wall of China" around French literature to impede the penetration of ideas."<sup>51</sup> Nowhere does she sum up her cosmopolitan convictions more beautifully than in her chapter on the Schlegel brothers:

<sup>48</sup> Savary to de Staël, 30 Oct. 1810 in *Madame de Staël, ses amis, ses correspondants: Choix de lettres*, ed. Georges Solovieff (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1970), 406.

<sup>49</sup> Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, ed. Comtesse Jean de Pange, with Simone Balayé (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1958), 1: 10. For the book's polemical intent see John Clairborne Isbell, *The Birth of European Romanticism: Truth and Propaganda in Staël's "De l'Allemagne," 1810–1813* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>50</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 1: 12. Also see de Staël to Villers, 1 Aug. 1802 in *Madame de Staël, ses amis*, 208.

<sup>51</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 1: 23.

The nations have to serve each other as guides, and all would do wrong to deprive themselves of the enlightenment [*lumières*] that they might impart to each other. There is something very singular in the difference of one people from another: the climate, the aspect of nature, the language, the government, [and] last but not least, the events of history—the power that is more extraordinary still than all the others—, they contribute to these diversities, and no man, no matter how superior he may be, can guess what develops naturally in the spirit of a man who lives on different soil and breathes different air: therefore it would be a good thing for all to welcome foreign ideas.<sup>52</sup>

De Staël's celebration of the splendid tapestry of national cultures, woven of all the intellectual riches of mankind, carries undeniable Herderian overtones. Oddly, what is missing is an explicit reference to women and to the role they might play in this cosmopolitan transfer of ideas from one culture to another. The question is surely a legitimate one: why were there no German Corinnes taking advantage of the current political chaos?

Similar to the Italian states, the German lands had long suffered from political fragmentation. Religious divisions going back to the Reformation had undoubtedly aggravated the situation. To be sure, Napoleon's rise to imperial power and his subjugation of many of the German states had done much to spark an incipient national consciousness. The establishment of the Confederation of the Rhine under French tutelage (July 1806), the abolition of the Holy Roman Empire (August 1806), Prussia's disastrous defeat at the twin battles of Jena and Auerstädt (October 1806), the humiliating Treaty of Tilsit (summer 1807), the Austrian defeat at Wagram and the resultant Peace of Schönbrunn (October 1809)—these were only some of the most traumatic events of this traumatic decade that showed what a lack of cultural unity and political independence could lead to. To make matters worse, the Germans lacked a true capital and hence a social center where public opinion could develop. Even more disturbingly, the love of liberty—which, for de Staël, was at the core of every patriotic attachment—hardly seemed to be developed among them, and there was no proper awareness of the German destiny.

Instead of transcending their parochial attachments and actively exerting themselves for the betterment of their undignified condition, the Ger-

<sup>52</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 352–53.



mans had taken refuge in the abode of the spirit and created a “republic of letters, at once animated and independent.” The “citizens of this ideal republic” distinguished themselves by unearthing “the intellectual riches of the human race”—and by completely ignoring public affairs.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, there seemed to be no place for women in this ideal republic.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps permanently blinded by the brilliance of Parisian society (which, as she repeatedly stated, had no equal in the world), de Staël was unable to rise above a rather crude cliché in her discussion of German women. “The German women have a charm exclusively their own,” she asserts, “a touching voice, fair hair, a dazzling complexion.” German men, on the other hand, were heavy [*lourd*] and “smoke-filled in the moral as well as in the physical sense,” she reported to her father.<sup>55</sup> The women, however, were not perfect either. Their modesty, assertiveness, loyalty, and high level of education notwithstanding, they lacked that which de Staël considered the outstanding attribute of the superior woman: a proper awareness of the propriety and sacredness of marriage. Partly due to the ease of obtaining divorce in Protestant states, German women “change husbands with as little difficulty as if it were a question of arranging the incidents in a drama.”<sup>56</sup> As we have seen above, the notion of marriage as the one true goal of a woman’s life was a key concept in de Staël’s thought.<sup>57</sup> Keeping in mind the significance she attributed to the marital bond, it comes less as a shock when, in her chapter on love in marriage, we come across the following startling contention: “It is right to exclude women from political and civil affairs; nothing is more opposed to their natural vocation than all that would bring them into rivalry with men; and for a woman, glory itself would only be a striking bereavement of happiness.”<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps because she herself was deprived of marital happiness for so long, de Staël tenaciously clung to the vision of a conjugal union founded on complete mutual submission and devotion. The oft-vaunted freedom and power accorded to French women under the *ancien régime* had not, she believed, led to the improvement of their general position. In fact, just the opposite had been the case:

<sup>53</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 1: 201.

<sup>54</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 1: 238.

<sup>55</sup> De Staël to Necker, 10 Dec. 1803, *Correspondence Générale*, 5, 1: 134.

<sup>56</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 1: 69.

<sup>57</sup> For a moving description of the misery of an unhappy marriage and the suffering it entailed see *De l’Allemagne*, 4: 373.

<sup>58</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 4: 369.

Of all the countries in the world France has perhaps been the one in which women are the least happy at heart. France was called the paradise of women because they enjoyed a great degree of liberty there; but this very liberty arose from the facility with which men detached themselves from them. The Turk who shuts up his wife at least proves to her by that very conduct that she is necessary to his happiness; the man of independent means [. . .] chooses women as victims of his vanity; and this vanity consists not only in seducing, but in abandoning them.<sup>59</sup>

Put differently, liberty was nothing without love, and if one had to choose between the two, the sensible woman, de Staël suggests, would surely prefer love to liberty. As we have seen in *Corinne*, even the most talented woman depended on the protection of a man.

According to Madelyn Gutwirth, *De l'Allemagne* represented a rather reactionary phase in de Staël's writing career.<sup>60</sup> Considering that on several hundreds of pages only one woman artist is mentioned by name (the dancer Ida Brun), one cannot help but agree with this assessment. De Staël's disregard of such major female Romantics as Caroline Schelling, Dorothea Schlegel, or Rahel Varnhagen is not easily explained, especially since she knew some of them personally and was almost certainly acquainted with their written work. As a result of her preference for male writers and thinkers, de Staël depicts a somewhat lop-sided picture of "Germany" as a nation without muses. With the aforementioned exception, the anonymous women she discusses are limited to exercising their influence in the home, a task they were not particularly good at, as we have seen.

De Staël's decision to leave out women writers from her account becomes even more puzzling when we consider her abiding concern with women's enlightenment. In fact, she would insist on its importance in a new preface written for her letters on Rousseau, reissued in 1814. Rather than discussing the body of the work, she devoted the preface to a settling of scores with the writer whom she had always so ardently admired and who was so critical of intellectual women. In direct challenge to her idol, she now defended the value of a woman's "distinguished education" and demanded the "elevation of the soul" that allowed her to converse with her

<sup>59</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 1: 79–80.

<sup>60</sup> Gutwirth, "Madame de Staël, Rousseau, and the Woman Question," *PMLA* 86.1 (Jan. 1971): 105.

beloved in “enlightened sympathy” and “reciprocal admiration,” as she expressed it.<sup>61</sup> We may read this as a reflection on her past literary triumphs and, more broadly still, as a valorization of the superior woman. Unfortunately, none of these observations had a discernible impact on her investigation of German high culture.

Though hardly accurate from a historical point of view, de Staël’s work on Germany poignantly exposes the intertwined nature of nationality, citizenship, and gender. As such, it fits neatly into our analysis. Of broader import for this study, I would argue that as long as we do not look at her vision of women’s specific role in society, we will be unable to appreciate her understanding of the problem of political agency as conventionally understood. This interconnection assumes primary importance when we consider her views on England and France as elaborated in her last work, *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*.

#### IV. ENGLAND AND FRANCE: ON THE NATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN

Germaine de Staël had last visited England in 1793 to spend several months in the *émigré* colony at Juniper Hall. Almost twenty years were to pass until, to escape Napoleon’s persecution, she set foot on British soil again in the summer of 1813. Like her father, she had long admired the English political system and often expressed high regard for its institutions, prosperity, and liberty.<sup>62</sup> There was something glorious “to be found in limited, representative governments,” she insisted, adding that in England personal merit could achieve anything.<sup>63</sup> As I have shown, in *Corinne* she had expressed herself far more critically on England’s stifling private sphere. Some of these ambiguities made their way into her last book, which, as her final word on politics, is of the greatest value to elucidate the author’s views on nationality, citizenship, and gender.<sup>64</sup> Like her other major works, this

<sup>61</sup> De Staël, *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau in Oeuvres Complètes* I, 1, ed. Florence Lotterie (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008), 40–41. Also see Gutwirth, “Madame de Staël, Rousseau, and the Woman Question,” 100–109.

<sup>62</sup> For her remark on English prosperity and liberty see her letter to the Queen of Sweden, 8 July 1813 in *Madame de Staël, ses amis*, 451.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Moreau, 12 Aug. 1813 in *Madame de Staël, ses amis*, 455.

<sup>64</sup> Linda Orr, “Outspoken Women and the Rightful Daughter of the Revolution: Madame de Staël’s *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*,” in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, eds. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 133–34.

one too builds its “case” on the polarity of two opposites. The *Considérations* explore the differences between England, which she admired, and France, which she loved. What was common to her discussion of both was her concern with the position each accorded to women.

It had long been one of de Staël’s convictions that the true character of the sexes could only be appropriately “known and admired” in free countries. In England, she asserted, all women, from the Queen down to the lowliest commoner, were united in their devotion to marriage and motherhood and could or should therefore feel some sort of kinship with each other. The division into distinct sex roles was not only morally beneficial but actually essential to the constitution of the social order. Under an arbitrary government such as had existed under Louis XVI women had been transformed into “a sort of third factitious sex, the sad production of a depraved social order.”<sup>65</sup> The conclusion is inescapable: women who meddled in politics and immoral dealings forfeited their femininity and assumed the perverse hybridity of “hermaphrodites.” Luckily, the orderly government of England made such interference unnecessary.

In part, de Staël’s quite narrow vision may have resulted from her opposition to the new order in France, typically couched in contrast to an imaginary England. Though she welcomed the Bourbon Restoration (“I wish the return of the king with my whole soul,” she told a friend in 1815),<sup>66</sup> it was not necessarily what she had desired. At least from the time of her arrival in Sweden in the summer of 1812 she had quietly worked for the coronation of Count Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, a French marshal turned Swedish Crown Prince and known by historians as Karl Johan. In supporting the dashing warrior, she hoped to restore some of its former glory to the French nation. This was more urgent than ever after the terrible ravages caused by years of revolutionary turmoil, civil war, and Napoleonic despotism. “The abortive French Revolution,” she wrote Bernadotte in a telling formulation, “has dimmed the lights everywhere.”<sup>67</sup> In the event, her dream would not come true, and de Staël had to content herself with Louis XVIII, the departed king’s brother.

The return to monarchical government filled the erstwhile Republican with palpable relief. De Staël welcomed the reestablishment of a stable government that would foster order and its inevitable result, progress, and that

<sup>65</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 3: 367.

<sup>66</sup> De Staël to Harrowby, 9 June 1815 in Madame de Staël, *Selected Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Kathleen Jameson-Cemper (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> De Staël to Bernadotte, 20 Aug. 1814 in *Selected Correspondence*, 345.

might in time inspire its citizens with the noble ideals of equality and liberty. Always concerned with the need for superior individuals who would be able to “guide the nation” by virtue of their genius, she was doubtful if not apprehensive about the possibility of genuine social equality. Were human beings not equipped with differing degrees of talent, intellectual abilities, and social graces, and hence “naturally” unequal? This ambivalent attitude vis-à-vis the masses is strikingly apparent in her description of the mob marching on Versailles early in October 1789, the frightening “women and children, armed with pikes and scythes.”<sup>68</sup> Her own attempt to flee Paris on 2 September 1792 almost ended in disaster:

Scarcely had my carriage advanced three steps, when, at the noise of the whips of the postilions, a swarm of old women, who seemed to issue from the infernal regions, rushed on my horses, crying that I ought to be stopped; that I was running away with the gold of the nation, that I was going to join the enemy, and a thousand other invectives still more absurd. These women gathered a crowd instantly, and some of the common people, with ferocious countenances, seized my postilions, and ordered them to conduct me to the assembly of the section of the quarter where I lived.<sup>69</sup>

An insurrectionary mob, she concluded, is generally “inaccessible to reasoning” and may be acted upon “only by sensations rapid as electricity.”<sup>70</sup> It is hardly conceivable that de Staël would have considered these unruly masses sufficiently mature to take the nation’s fate into their own hands. One only had to recall the horrors of the revolution to recognize what centuries-long oppression, neglect of education, and general ignorance among the so-called lower orders could lead to.<sup>71</sup> Thus, although the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 had equaled its English and American counterparts in scope and nobility of vision, “it would have perhaps been better,” she mused, “to have confined it . . . to what would not have admitted of any dangerous interpretation.”<sup>72</sup>

The sentence on the wisdom of limiting the constitution should make us pause and reconsider the notion of “universality,” a staple of Enlighten-

<sup>68</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 1: 340.

<sup>69</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 2: 72.

<sup>70</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 1: 340, 343.

<sup>71</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 1: 202.

<sup>72</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 1: 273.

ment discourse. As Joan Scott has shown, the very concept of the individual, though supposedly universally applicable, “could also function to exclude those who were thought not to possess the requisite traits”—that is, women, people of color, and slaves who were seen as non-individuals.<sup>73</sup> Though de Staël stops short of articulating her misgivings in precise terms, there can be little doubt regarding the gist of her argument: the framers of the Declaration had been too rash in including too many French under the twin categories of “man” and “citizen” and had thus made it perilously liable to blur the lines between distinct classes.

Lest we consider her reasoning reactionary, we have to remember that what she found particularly reprehensible about absolutism was not necessarily its minuscule power base but rather its vainglory and stupidity. Instead of attempting to acquire reason and wisdom for the benefit of the nation, the Bourbon court under Louis XVI had engaged in a frenetic, harmful, and ultimately futile pursuit of naked power—and thus forfeited not only the right to lead it but the prerogatives of citizenship as well.<sup>74</sup> If the new government managed to remedy the egregious errors of its predecessors, France might once again attain a superior position among the nations. De Staël, for one, had no doubt that “France alone [would] always be the mistress of Europe.”<sup>75</sup> This brings us back to our initial problem: who deserved to consider him- or herself a citizen of the *grande nation*? Put differently, what was it that earned one the privilege of citizenship?

In an early analysis of public opinion de Staël had regarded anyone who *thought* as quintessentially French; conversely, “[t]he partisans of the Old Regime, who assert that their status as gentlemen exempts them from thinking, must no longer be regarded as French citizens.”<sup>76</sup> On the surface, this would seem to include women as deserving of citizenship as well. As we have seen, de Staël envisioned women’s role in the nation differently from that of men. Instead of actively participating in politics, women should concentrate on transcending factional strife.<sup>77</sup> This did not exclude them from the joys and pains of patriotic feelings, though.<sup>78</sup> If endowed

<sup>73</sup> Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 6–7.

<sup>74</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 1: 145.

<sup>75</sup> De Staël to Moreau, Sept. 1813 in *Selected Correspondence*, 323. Note the feminine “mistress” rather than master.

<sup>76</sup> De Staël, “Of Public Opinion” in *Madame de Staël on Politics, Literature, and National Character*, trans. and ed. Morroe Berger (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 135. This analysis was part of *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la révolution*.

<sup>77</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 2: 193.

<sup>78</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 3: 326.

with genius, women could draw on these sentiments for the benefit of the free nation. And for de Staël, freedom began in the imagination of individuals who desired to improve both themselves and their compatriots. "Liberty is the only thing that is in the blood of all ages, in all countries and in all literatures; and that from which it cannot be separated, love of one's *patrie*," she had once written.<sup>79</sup> When all was said and done, it was women writers like herself who deserved the benefits of citizenship.

### QU'EST-CE QU'UN CITOYEN?

I began this essay with Germaine de Staël accusing Napoleon of having usurped the key attributes of Frenchness that bound her to the nation she considered her own: birth, service, and sentiment. Throughout her life she had many opportunities to ponder the dual conundrum of national identity and citizenship and what it meant for women. While the French Revolution brought the problem of citizenship to the forefront of the revolutionary discourse, women only rarely figured in the debate, with the exception of a few intrepid voices. In this article I have tried to show that Germaine de Staël was one of the more original among them.

De Staël's observations on nationality and citizenship were born in large part of her own experience, but they had a general significance as well. In a generic sense, the term nation as de Staël conceived it connoted a spiritual and cultural homeland, a place where one's friends dwelled, and a land for which one might need to sacrifice oneself. What it was not was a specific territory with precisely delimited political borders. Instead, it constituted an imagined entity, an idea that inspired feelings of love and belonging regardless of its geopolitical shape and that demanded one's loyalty, ultimately for the benefit of humankind.

As a woman, de Staël considered herself particularly qualified to put her talent, imagination, and sentiment at the service of her nation. Her literary success to a certain extent vindicated her conception of her role as "national muse." Unlike Rousseau who despised intellectual women, she consistently stressed the potential of the Corinnes of all nations to perform acts of creative citizenship. As talented individuals endowed with superior imagination they were able to inspire the masses; as women they were par-

<sup>79</sup> Letter to Benjamin Constant, 23 Jan. 1814 in *Madame de Staël, ses amis*, 472. For a concise analysis of de Staël's thought on liberty see Simone Balayé, "Staël and Liberty: An Overview" in *Germaine de Staël*, 13–21.

ticularly well suited for this task by virtue of their enthusiasm, eloquence, and empathy—characteristics traditionally associated with females.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, exceptional women were much less likely to find happiness in private life.

The situation was evidently less complicated for “common women.” Such women could reasonably well be expected to find domestic bliss if they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to their marriage. This is a crucial point. Regardless of “natural” distinctions of intellect and talent, women citizens had an important role to play as virtuous bearers of moral values and thus as active participants in and crucial shapers of the body politic. As Geneviève Fraisse put it so well: “[R]ecognizing the individual’s freedom at home might well be the same thing as affirming the citizen’s independence.”<sup>81</sup>

De Staël’s singling out of the feminine predisposition for virtue was indeed a principal aspect of her socio-political thought. In emphasizing humanity and generosity, de Staël transcended the divide between a communitarian model that ignores individuals and an excessively individualist liberalism. In so doing she formulated the concept of “loving citizenship.” “In associating the feminine with face-to-face relations, a concern for individual lives, the value of emotional and familial ties, and a focus on the particular as opposed to the universal,” Lori J. Marso maintains, “de Staël points toward a model of citizenship that transforms democratic practice.”<sup>82</sup> Patrick H. Vincent has similarly analyzed de Staël’s thought under the rubric of a “politics of the feminine,” that is to say, “a liberal, anti-utilitarian ethos or culture grounded in the development of ‘feminine’ passions such as sympathy and aimed at furthering the Enlightenment ideal of perfectibility.”<sup>83</sup> Drawing on these insights, we may conclude that women who worked towards the betterment of society were equally as important to the constitution of the superior nation as the men who defended the

<sup>80</sup> For an excellent discussion of the ways female eloquence creates the nation see Guerlac, “Writing the Nation,” 49.

<sup>81</sup> Fraisse, *Reason’s Muse*, 118.

<sup>82</sup> Lori J. Marso, *(Un)Manly Citizens: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s and Germaine de Staël’s Subversive women* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 26. Also see Marso, “The Stories of Citizens: Rousseau, Montesquieu, and de Staël Challenge Enlightenment Reason,” *Polity* 30 (1998): 435–63. For a similar interpretation see Laurence M. Porter, *Women’s Vision in Western Literature: The Empathic Community* (London: Praeger, 2005), 14 and 189 and Patrick H. Vincent, *The Romantic Poetess: European Culture, Politics, and Gender, 1820–1840* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2004), 12.

<sup>83</sup> Vincent, *The Romantic Poetess*, 9.



nation with arms. In fact, it was the combination of the two that constituted the model polity.

Ruminating on the “noble country” in which men ruled the realms of politics and the sciences and women the province of literature, de Staël offers a poignant image of her view of the ideal society: “I imagine the women singing the exploits of the warriors in beautiful verses on the lyre, interpreters of the future, priestesses of glory, and receiving more directly the inspiration of heaven because they are not charged with the practical interests of the world.”<sup>84</sup> The juxtaposition of the doer of the deed with its interpreter is an alluring one. We may well wonder whom de Staël considered more powerful: the men with muskets earning glory in combat or the women with lyres creating and preserving the national cultural patrimony or “soul” by celebrating its undying glory. What is certain is that she viewed women’s position in the nation as essential and indeed constitutive of the social order. Her example powerfully reveals the limits of the conventional equation of citizenship with legal equality and civic duties. Considering the impact of her major works, Germaine de Staël’s pen indeed proved mightier than Napoleon’s sword.

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<sup>84</sup> De Staël, *Éducation de l’âme par la vie* (unpublished fragment) in *Oeuvres Complètes* I, 1: 325.