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The Weapon of Personality:

A Review of Sexist Criticism of Mme de Staël, 1785-1975[1]

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Je n'aime pas que les femmes écrivent.
Napoléon[2]

Bonaparte's pronouncement notwithstanding, Mme de Staël had been writing since girlhood, when family and friends formed a ready public. By the time she turned twenty in 1786, young Germaine Necker had produced three *nouvelles* for future publication - *Mirza, Adélaide et Théodore* and *Histoire de Pauline* - and was completing *Sophie*, a sentimental comedy in verse. Between 1786 and 1788 she wrote two more plays - *Jane Gray* and *Montmorency* - and produced her topical and widely-read essay, *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*.[3] At twenty-two, now Mme de Staël, she stood expectantly at the threshold of a professional literary career.

From close at hand, however, came rumblings of discouragement and disapproval. In an ominous foreshadowing of wider critical reaction, Controller-General Jacques Necker opposed his daughter's literary ambitions.[4] Well versed in the values of a society created for men and long aware of the challenge to custom inherent in Germaine's passion for writing, Necker had steadfastly advocated for his daughter woman's traditional, restrictive role of devoted subservience to husband and family. He feared, of course, that by writing professionally, by expanding an amusing hobby from recreation to vocation, Germaine would be guilty of defying her female destiny, of perversely sacrificing the "natural" for the assumed. He understood that she must suffer accordingly, that internal conflict, public resentment and critical condemnation would be her lot. Necker might well have warned his ambitious daughter that there was, for the *femme-auteur*, small hope of professional gain in the patriarchal system. At best, she would be tolerated as meddling amateur in an established male preserve; at worst, she would be attacked - not only as incomplete artist, but (even more particularly), as incomplete woman.

Child of the times and a fervent admirer of her father, young Germaine did not dispute the legitimacy of Necker's sexist admonitions. After all, the great Jean-Jacques himself had said of woman: "Sa dignité est d'être ignorée; sa gloire est dans l'estime de son mari...."[5] As far as Germaine was concerned, tradition could not better be served than by two such voices, and she had

long since idealized their chauvinistic judgements into eternal truths. Thus, at age nineteen, embracing the very biases that were to form the basis for future criticism of her work she had enthused:

> Mon pére a raison. Que les femmes sont peu faites pour suivre la même carrière que les hommes! Lutter contre eux, exciter en eux une jalousie si différente de celle que l'amour leur inspire! Une femme ne doit avoir rien à elle et trouver toutes ses jouissances dans ce qu'elle aime.[6]

To Jacques Necker's shocked dismay, however, his daughter's actions were soon at conspicuous variance with her expressed attitudes: Germaine persisted in writing; she wrote to be published. And at age twenty-two - in spite of Necker, in defiance of Rousseau - talented, intelligent and infinitely energetic, she moved determinedly ahead into a new phase of her professional career. Henceforth, through three decades of controversial social, political and artistic activism, torn between convention and her need for self-expression, Germaine defiantly produced for publication political and social analyses, literary theory, novels, essays, autobiography, biography, plays and poetry. Major works like *De la Littérature* (1800), *Corinne* (1807) and *De l'Allemagne* (1810) vividly attested to her eclectic interests and assertive social and political involvement. Watchful critics, curiosity piqued by the unconventional and the outspoken, avidly followed the active life and the prolific work, observing with regret, ridicule or resentment that both appeared to defy the conventions of femininity. Compared, they suggested, with her contemporary, languidly beautiful Mme Récamier (the beloved norm, the reflection of male fantasy), forceful, unreticent Germaine de Staël appeared "different," unwomanly. "... elle aurait pu être plus simplement, plus purement femme qu'elle ne l' a été, soit dans sa vie, soit dans son oeuvre ...,"[7] explains critic André Le Breton, echoing the reproach of his disapproving forebears.

Through the years, critical comment focused increasingly on Mme de Staël's life, reinforcing a pattern of criticism that eventually spanned three centuries - from the prophetic sexism of Jacques Necker in 1785, through the patronizing chauvinism of Le Breton in 1901, to the misogynous hysteria of Anthony West in 1975.[8] (Only recently, with the emergence of feminist scholars like Madelyn Gutwirth, has such criticism begun to subside.)[9]

Certainly, sexism served Staël's critics well. Whether purportedly constructive or blatantly devastating, it blurred outrageously the line between writer and woman, effectively hindering objective appreciation of both. Sexist comment was especially useful as a form of moral reproach, directed at discrediting or minimizing the author's natural strengths. Writing to Pauline Beyle, for example, on the virtues of a true woman, Stendhal cautions his sister that a lady of sense and modesty does not display her knowledge: "Mme de Staël a perdu entièrement la grâce en montrant sa supériorité; elle ... a voulu être aimée comme une femme, après avoir brillé comme un homme."[10] Benjamin Constant, contemplating marriage, contrasts Germaine ("quel esprit d'homme")[11] with women like Charlotte Dutertre ("Ange adorable!")[12], lamenting that he is tired of that "homme-femme."[13] Lamartine recognizes Mme de Staël's abilities, but complains that beside the lady-like presence of Mme Récamier, the former seems "un peu colorée, un peu virile."[14] And in malicious tribute to Staël's active personal and professional life, Champcenetz and Rivarol dedicate to Germaine their *Petit Dictionnaire des grands Hommes de la Révolution*.[15]

Predictably, while reproaching Mme de Staël for a lack of femininity, many detractors readily ascribed to her and her writing the traditional weaknesses of her sex. Both were declared exces-

sive, unreliable, illogical and trite. As a result, critics who were unwilling or unfit to assess Staël's work seriously on theoretic or artistic grounds, resorted easily to a pernicious mixture of critical fallacy and sexist belittlement. Stendhal's notes on her *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la révolution française* abound in comments like "Puérilités de femme; ... Conclusion de femme."[16] Sorel maintains that Staël's feminist heroine, Delphine, "n'a qu'une aventure, où le coeur seul est en jeu."[17] Herold dismisses *Corinne* as a "three-volume rhapsody of self-delusion, self-pity and posturing."[18] J. J. Duttault states that, as the work of a woman, what Mme Staël wrote in *De l'Allemagne* was "le produit de la passion et non de la raison."[19] Anthony West scorns her woman's writing in *Corinne* as "infantile" and in *De l'Allemagne* as "pretentious waffle."[20] And André Le Breton, down-grading both the woman and her work, contrasts Mme de Staël's conspicuous assertiveness with the quiet perfection of Mme de Lamartine and Mme Hugo, two ladies who "... sans bruit, sans tapage ... ont créé deux oeuvres immortelles qui valent un peu plus que tous les chants de Corinne: elles ont créé l'âme de leur fils ...."[21]

Mme de Staël's success as a writer could not be denied, however. Her works were published and widely read, with respected critics like Nodier, Sainte-Beuve and M.-J. Chénier praising her talents.[22] Unfortunately, in a sexist society neither censure nor praise escapes the bias that puts the woman before the writer, thereby reinforcing the unfeminine image. Even favourable criticism dwelt patronizingly on Mme de Staël's "masculine" intelligence. Lamartine praised the "génie mâle dans un corps de femme";[23] admiring Byron stated that "she ought to have been a man";[24] Sainte-Beuve referred to her "mâle raison";[25] "virile" is a chosen epithet of Brunetière, Sorel and Kohler;[26] J. de Lacretelle, commenting in 1966, acclaims Mme de Staël's "cerveau masculin,"[27] and John Weightman refers in 1973 to "the tensions between the emotional woman and the thinking brain."[28]

Though used by admirers as a tribute to Staël's genius, masculine analogy easily added to the general perception of the author as unnatural, even monstrous. This view was readily exploited by detractors who, replacing ostensible praise with obvious insult, shifted critical focus on Germaine's "maleness" from the internal (intellect) to the external (appearance). Accordingly, although Germaine did not affect men's clothing, smoke cigars or use a masculine pseudonym (indeed, she favoured ultra-feminine attire, had several lovers, was twice married and bore five children), hostile critics nevertheless persisted in promoting a caricature of the author as repugnantly masculine in habit and appearance. "Elle a réussi à nous représenter, elle et moi, déguisés en femmes," mocked Talleyrand at the *roman à clef* success of *Delphine*.[29] "Elle est la seule personne de France qui puisse tromper sur son sexe .... Je n'aime que les sexes prononcés," declared Rivarol.[30] "Her carriage and manner were so masculine," complains Anthony West.[31] In particular, such critics focused on Staël's physiognomy, publicly assessing her for that traditionally most valued and vulnerable of female attributes - physical attractiveness.[32] When measured against popular stereotypes, Germaine de Staël was found wanting, a ready target for ridicule and dislike. Critics' repeated references to coarseness, size and weight succeeded in shifting the Staëlien image even further from the ideal of dainty femininity toward the antipodes of mannishness and the grotesque. Although portraits by Lebrun and Gérard show Germaine to be pleasantly attractive, Fiévée ridiculed women like the author and her heroines as "grandes, grosses, grasses, fortes."[33] Danish poet Oelenschlaeger found Staël not lacking in charm, but with "la voix forte, le visage un peu mâle."[34] G.R. Michiel observed "une allure décidée et martiale ... regard hardi ... grande bouche, grandes épaules, grosses proportions."[35] Herold noted that "her complexion was swarthy; her lips thick ... her nose prominent ...."[36] The plethora of references to parts of the author's body - eyes, eyelids,

mouth, teeth, hair, neck, shoulders, bosom, arms, fingers, thighs, legs - has persisted into our own era with little abatement. Félix-Faure in 1974 acknowledges Staël's "poitrine généreuse," but finds her to have "les traits assez grossiers."[37] In 1975 West derides "the buck teeth, the weakly greedy mouth, the bulbous nose and protuberant eyes ... the deteriorating stomach, the beefy thighs, and the tremendous width of hips ...."[38] Tragically, such comments continue and perpetuate the Mme de Staël of popular caricature: a creature monstrously overblown, at once a muscular virago riding to glory over the bodies of her victims, and a blowsy buffoon blissfully unaware of her own vulgarity. "Germaine de Staël was probably the largest, loudest, lustiest woman who ever strode the pages of French history," trumpets *Time* magazine, influenced by and contributing to the popular image.[39]

Clearly, Madame de Staël, woman and writer, provoked feelings of fear, resentment, mockery, even loathing in many critics. So excessive have been some anti-Staël reactions that they prompted notice before this feminist age. An aware Sainte-Beuve chose to downplay the virulence of such criticism, dismissing it as "le persiflage des esprits railleurs."[40] Larg empathetically attributes irrational and irresponsible attacks on Staël to her making male critics feel "déconcertés."[41] Sorel, in a flash of ingenuous insight, admits that "pour anéantir l'écrivain, ils outrageaient la femme."[42] And often-ironic Herold acknowledges that "had she been born a man, three-quarters of her talents would not have been spent in combat to hold affection and to justify her right to be herself."[43]

What was Germaine's own reaction to such criticism? Displaying a restraint that belies her personal pain and underscores the shrill excesses of her critics, she summed up her dilemma with discerning simplicity:

> Quand une femme publie un livre, elle se met tellement dans la dépendance de l'opinion, que les dispensateurs de cette opinion lui font sentir durement leur empire.[44]

Germaine was herself spurred on rather than deterred by such adversity, and she continued throughout her life to write and publish. With resigned awareness, however, her mature works often advocate conscious non-involvement as a practical solution to women's dilemma in the patriarchal system: "... la raison leur conseille l'obscurité";[45] "... l'ordre social ... est tout entier armé contre une femme qui veut s'élever à la hauteur de la réputation des hommes."[46] Lamentably, she concedes, the gifted or assertive woman must, if she wishes to live unharrassed in society, learn to compromise: "ne vous fiez pas à vos qualités, à vos agréments; si vous ne respectez pas l'opinion, elle vous écrasera."[47] Staël reiterates her advice in *Corinne*: "... il ne faut pas lutter contre les usages du pays où l'on est établi, l'on en souffre toujours."[48] At forty-four, long-acquainted with the Napoléons of politics and criticism, she observes of women, in words markedly reminiscent of Rousseau: "...nul bonheur ne peut exister pour elles que par le reflet de la gloire et des prospérités d'un autre."[49] Although such attitudes did not affect Mme de Staël's own expression of self or signify surrender to her critics, they do suggest the great distress and frustration that lay behind her actions.

Jacques Necker's apprehensions were indeed justified: his daughter became one of the longest-suffering victims of what feminist Gutwirth aptly designates "codpiece criticism."[50] Unfortunately for professional writer Germaine de Staël, such criticism, by discrediting and sensationalizing the woman, precluded for almost two hundred years objective appreciation of the work.

NOTES

1. While defending the use of male pseudonyms for "authoresses," Charlotte Brontë explained that "critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality." See her 1850 biographical notice in E. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Pan, 1967), p.22.

2. See S. Balayé's *Notes* in Madame de Staël, *Dix années d'exil* (Paris: Bibliothèque 10/18, 1966), p. 253.
3. Mme de Staël's early works were published in the following years: *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau,* 1788; *Sophie* and *Jane Gray,* 1790 (*Montmorency* was not published); *Mirza, Adélaide et Théodore* and *Histoire de Pauline,* 1795.
4. See Mme Necker de Saussure, "Notice sur le caractère et les écrits de Madame de Staël," in *Oeuvres posthumes de Madame la baronne de Staël-Holstein,* ed. Auguste de Staël (Paris, 1861; rpt. Genève: Slatkine, 1967), p. 6.
5. J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile* (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1961), p. 519.
6. G.-P.O. d'Haussonville, *Le Salon de Madame Necker* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1882), II, 49.
7. A. Le Breton, *Le Roman français au XIXe siècle - avant Balzac* (Paris: Société Française d'Imprimerie et de Librairie, 1901), p. 149.
8. See A. West *Mortal Wounds* (London: Robson Books Ltd., 1975).
9. See M. Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
10. Stendhal, *Correspondance* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, C 1962, Editions Gallimard), I, 315-316.
11. B. Constant, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, C 1957, Editions Gallimard), p. 194.
12. *Ibid,* p. 557.
13. *Ibid,* p. 556.
14. A. de Lamartine, *Souvenirs et portraits,* I, 293, as quoted in M. Braunschvig, *Notre Littérature étudiée dans les textes* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1964), II, 328.
15. C.-A. de Sainte-Beuve, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, C 1960, Librairie Gallimard), II, 1070.
16. Stendhal, *Marges des Considérations, II, 33; 200, as quoted in J. Félix-Faure, Stendhal, lecteur de Mme de Staël* (Aran, Suisse: Editions du Grand Chêne, 1974), p. 51.
17. A. Sorel, *Mme de Staël* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1890), p. 98.
18. J.C. Herold, *Mistress to an Age* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 340.
19. See I.A. Henning, *L'Allemagne de Mme de Staël et la polémique romantique* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929), p. 68.
20. A. West, *op. cit.,* p. 107; p. 152.
21. A. Le Breton, *op. cit.,* p. 149.
22. C. Nodier, "Oeuvres de Madame de Staël," *Le Drapeau blanc,* mercredi 20 octobre 1819, p. 4.
    Sainte-Beuve, *op. cit.,* pp. 1060-1063.
    M.-J. de Chénier, *Tableau historique de l'état et des progrès de la littérature française, depuis 1789* (Paris: Chez Maradin, Libraire, 1818), p. 237.
23. See M. Le Roy's *Notes* in Sainte-Beuve, *op. cit.,* p. 1490.
24. P. Quennell, ed., *Byron, a self-portrait* (London: John Murray, 1950), I, 227.
25. Saint-Beuve, *op. cit.,* p. 1082.
26. F. Brunetière, "Les Romans de Mme de Staël," *Revue des deux mondes,* Tome XCIX (Paris, 1890), 688.
    A. Sorel, *op. cit.,* p. 213.
    P. Kohler, *Madame de Staël et la Suisse* (Paris: Payot, 1916), p. 359.
27. J. de Lacretelle, *Discours* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1966), p. 4.
28. J. Weightman, "Madame de Staël," *Encounter* Oct. 1973, p. 54.
29. See J. Félix-Faure, *Stendhal, lecteur de Mme de Staël* (Aran, Suisse: Editions du Grand Chêne, 1974), p. 94.
30. A. Le Breton, *op. cit.,* p. 115.
31. A. West, "The Supreme Egotist," rev. of *Mistress to an Age,* by J.C. Herold, *The New Yorker,* 6 Dec. 1958, p. 221.
32. Even Gutwirth declares that Staël was: "Never a beauty ...." See Madelyn Gutwirth, "Madame de Staël, Rousseau, and the Woman Question," *PMLA,* 86, No. 1, Jan. 1971, p. 106.
33. J. Fiévée, "Delphine," *Mercure de France,* No. LXXIX, 1 janvier 1803, p. 71.
34. See Saint-Beuve, *op. cit.,* p. 1119.
35. See G. Gennari, *Le premier voyage de Madame de Staël en Italie et la genèse de Corinne* (Paris: Boivin, 1947), p. 131.
36. J.C. Herold, *op. cit.,* p. 52.
37. J. Félix-Faure, *op. cit.,* pp. 19-20.
38. A. West, *Mortal Wounds,* p. 159.
39. "French Circe," rev. of *Mistress to an Age,* by J.C. Herold, *Time,* 3 Nov. 1958, p. 74.
40. Saint-Beuve, *op. cit.,* p. 1070.
41. D.G. Larg, *Madame de Staël: La Vie dans l'oeuvre* (Paris: Champion, 1924), p. 59.
42. A. Sorel, *op. cit.,* p. 96.
43. J.C. Herold, *op. cit.,* p. 233.
44. Mme de Staël, *Oeuvres complètes de Madame la baronne de Staël-Holstein* (Paris, 1861; rpt. Genève: Slatkine, 1967), I. 302.
45. *Ibid.,* p. 301.
46. *Ibid.,* p. 304.
47. *Ibid.,* p. 648.
48. *Ibid.,* p. 780.
49. Mme de Staël, *op. cit.,* II, 10.
50. Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist,* p. 291.