

Portraits: A Feminist Appraisal of Mme de Staël's *Delphine*

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Mme de Staël

Madame de Staël has suffered from superficial and fallacious criticism disposed to dismiss her novels as clumsy, dated romans à clef. Certainly there are weaknesses in Staël's writing—she is, for example, annoyingly prone to prolixity and repetition—but her contribution as a writer of fiction has been unduly minimized, especially by critics prepared to see no more in Staëlien theme and characterization than hysterical retaliation and posturing self-pity. Approached thus, her two major works of fiction, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, become mere outbursts of self-dramatization, their many characters reduced to vindictive portrayals of resented relatives and out-of-favour lovers.¹ And such criticism assumes that, the novels' sensational value having inevitably declined, *Delphine* and *Corinne* lack both merit and interest and may, with justification, be relegated to fictional limbo.

In spite of such dismissal, Mme de Staël's heroines have maintained a curiosity value as contemporaries of melancholy loners like *Oberman* and *René*.² And in recent years there has been renewed interest in *Corinne* for its presentation of the female artist in society.³ But these approaches, too, have been misguided and inadequate, failing to do the novelist justice. For to identify *Delphine* and *Corinne* with neurotic romantic heroes is to diminish their appeal as women and overlook the sexist

nature of their conflict. And to concentrate attention on *Corinne* as the portrait of an exceptional female is to disregard Mme de Staël's concerned interest in problems common to all women.⁴

More recently, given careful and sympathetic reading, analyzed intrinsically, and approached in the light of current feminist writing, Staël's fiction has begun to take on significant new life.⁵ Indeed, liberated from prejudgement as autobiographical ranting, inferior Chateaubriand or gifted heroinism, the novels emerge as perceptive studies of the destructive effects of entrenched sexist discrimination. This is particularly true of *Delphine*, describing as it does the struggles of a young woman and her friends desperately trying to sort out their lives as female persons in late eighteenth-century Paris society. Though written in 1802, *Delphine* strikes today's reader as uncannily topical in theme and characterization.

Society in the novel is a patriarchal power structure in which state and church work together to foster and protect "traditional values"; that is, as the author emphasizes throughout, to maintain a system of attitudes, laws and customs created and perpetuated by the world of men principally for the pleasure, security and advancement of men. Anticipating modern feminist literature by over one hundred and fifty years, Mme de Staël sets to work to expose these deeply ingrained, chauvinistic values, showing how they operate, often below the level of consciousness, to obstruct the development and fulfillment of women, to undermine relations between the sexes, and to poison the moral outlook of society. Since the era of *Delphine*, woman's subjection to the forces of male superiority has, of course, outwardly diminished. However, because the novel focuses on underlying tendencies which perennially subvert female self-

realization, and because sexist attitudes are still at work in society today, Mme de Staël's representation is fascinatingly relevant.

As one would expect, the author makes her most sustained and powerful assault on the destructiveness of male-dominated society through her presentation of the character and fortunes of the heroine, Delphine d'Albemar. Staël adds support to this central attack with descriptions of the characters and careers of a number of women who make up the circle of Delphine's acquaintances—women of varying tastes and capabilities who, far from being unique or superior, are ordinary individuals facing the social pressures of everyday life under a patriarchal regime. Permitted no reality beyond their male-related roles, they live in a world where females are routinely channelled towards lives of service and subservience to men. Should marriage, the approved route to woman's "fulfillment," prove impossible or untenable, retreat to the non-life of a waiting convent is the only condoned alternative. In *Delphine's* gallery of female portraits we see women trapped in these realities, victimized whether they resist or comply. Non-conformity brings alienation from society and conformity brings alienation from self.

Elise de Lebensei, for example, finds herself ostracized for defying the barbaric custom of arranged marriages enthusiastically promoted under a system of patriarchal tyranny. As Mme de Lebensei succinctly puts it when referring to her early marriage: "Il . . . me demanda, m'obtint. . . ." (p. 405) Contrary to custom, however, Elise fought to gain freedom from the misery and frustration of an incompatible union; persevering against masculine threats of violence and financial reprisal, she finally gained deliverance through a Dutch divorce.⁷

Inexorably, as Mme de Staël demonstrates,

Elise's entrapment is re-established by French society. Woman's fealty in marriage lasts forever in a system that subordinates female worth to wifely duty, and society in the novel cannot tolerate a woman who throws off the ties of matrimony to seek personal fulfillment. Furthermore, divorced Elise is guilty of the ultimate defiance as "une femme qui s'est remariée pendant que son premier mari vivait encore." (p. 401) Mme de Lebenzei must be punished. Ostracism is her lot. Although her second husband is relatively untouched by harassment and continues to function forcefully in the business community, lonely, sequestered Elise pays the price for challenging convention, rejected by friends, family and Church.

Another female who rebels against the limits set for women and incurs the wrath of society, is Mme de R. Separated, childless and in her thirties, Mme de R. attempts to pursue her personal and social life as a kind of swinging single, propelled dizzily "de distractions en distractions" (p. 550) through several indiscreet affairs. Similar conduct in a male might be condoned, even applauded, but Mme de R.'s reputation is soon irreparably damaged. Like Elise she must pay woman's penalty for flouting the rules. In public Mme de R. is snubbed, not only by the ladies, but also by the gentlemen—the very men who may well have pursued her in private. As Delphine observes, ". . . ils veulent, en séduisant les femmes, conserver le droit de les en punir." (p. 383)

In contrast to Mme de R.'s free-wheeling defiance of feminine limits, Mme de Cerlebe's separation is cautiously restrained. Disenchanted with love and marriage (" . . . je ne crois point au bonheur de l'amour. . . ." [p. 582]), she quietly moves out, accompanied by the children. Because such action, though discreet, leaves Mme de Cerlebe liable to

public attack as a derelict wife, it is followed by her immediate withdrawal into rural seclusion.

Mme de Cerlebe is not able to pursue her new-found independence, however, even in isolation, for society rearranges and re-establishes its hold upon her through the children. Socially conditioned to feel guilty and apprehensive about the uncertainties of single parenthood, separated Mme de Cerlebe overcompensates for marital break-up by compressing her own existence into the narrow confines of meticulous maternity. As she admits to Delphine, "Dans la route du devoir, l'incertitude n'existe plus. . . ." (p. 582) By sacrificing her briefly-revived individuality to the duties of motherhood, Mme de Cerlebe has followed alienation from society with alienation from self.

Obviously ostracism is a common punishment imposed by the conforming establishment upon the rebel who breaks the rules. But it may also be used as self-castigation by a conformist conditioned to see herself as inadequate or remiss. Such is the case of pathetic Thérèse d'Ervin, a young wife processed by society for unquestioning conformity. Wed as a sensitive girl of fourteen to a hard-nosed opportunist twenty-five years her senior, Thérèse is so accustomed to non-existence, to a life shaped by chauvinistic forces in the world of men, that she has in fact lost all sense of her own identity. When, at twenty-four, she falls in love with charming M. de Serbellane, she cannot conceive of her own right to happiness, even after her husband's timely death. On the contrary, overcome by guilt feelings, utterly confused and unable to cope, society's child sentences herself to society's punishment: Thérèse d'Ervin retreats from a self she cannot recognize and a world she scarcely knows to pass the rest of her days in a convent, "immolant sa jeunesse, ensevelissant elle-même sa destinée." (p. 421)

It is the essence of female entrapment as observed by Mme de Staël that those who conform are those most victimized. While outwardly respecting male-oriented convention, women undergo, knowingly or not, an inward form of alienation more crippling than social ostracism—an insidious warping of the soul, often so complete as to eclipse or destroy the victim's natural self. Sophie de Vernon, for example, leads a life of conventional, outward propriety and reaps the rewards of acceptance and acclaim. In fact, hers is an existence that bears testimony to the power of the establishment to pervert and destroy.

Sophie began life with all the attributes of vulnerability: she was orphaned; she was poor; she was female—a gentle, trusting child delivered into the charge of a boorish male relative for whom female children were amusing toys and female adults witless mistresses. When her guardian decides to marry her off to an unprepossessing stranger, Sophie recoils in panic and disgust. But she is powerless to resist. Penniless, haphazardly educated, threatened with the alternative of banishment to a convent, she enters into marriage with a frightened hatred for the forces of power that festers for the rest of her days, albeit hidden beneath a controlled and congenial exterior. For Sophie's defense against the injustice of female oppression is neither outward revolt nor physical retreat; it is cynical conformity. Suppressing all natural feeling, operating with calculated dissimulation, Mme de Vernon cultivates for her own and her daughter's protection a façade of domestic devotion and respectful restraint.

Not until death is imminent does Sophie risk articulating her grievances against a social structure that destroyed her as a person long before the approach of physical death. Bitterly but rationally she explains her views to Delphine:

Je crus fermement que le sort des femmes les condamnait à la fausseté; je me confirmai dans l'idée conçue dès mon enfance, que j'étais, par mon sexe et par le peu de fortune que je possédais, une malheureuse esclave à qui toutes les ruses étaient permises avec son tyran. (p. 445)

. . . les femmes étant victimes de toutes les institutions de la société, elles sont dévouées au malheur, si elles s'abandonnent le moins du monde à leurs sentiments, si elles perdent de quelque manière l'empire d'elles-mêmes. (p. 446)

Cynical, deceitful and manipulative, Sophie de Vernon's warped existence is an example of the corruptive power of a society that thrives on the vulnerability of its female victims, insidiously processing them through self-betrayal for the perpetuation of their own oppression.

Mlle d'Albémar, Delphine's unmarried sister-in-law, conforms so completely to society's standards that she both accepts and inflicts her own alienation. Louise's problem stems initially from her lack of physical attractiveness. As a girl, she never knew the capricious attention awarded by men to pretty young faces; as a lonely adult, she refers frequently to her "désavantages naturels." (p. 528) Not able to attract and not expected to want to, Louise accepts the fact that as an ugly "old-maid" she is an unwholesome oddity in the world of men: ". . . j'ai l'extérieur du monde le moins agréable; . . . je ne suis point faite pour inspirer de l'amour . . . Il était ridicule pour moi d'aimer. . . ." (p. 346) Well aware, as she reminds Delphine, that ". . . la société . . . n'a permis qu'un seul bonheur aux femmes, l'amour dans le mariage . . ." (p. 470), Mlle d'Albémar anticipates unhappiness from her out-of-step role as spinster. Indeed, with her singleness a disturbingly unfinished state in the eyes of

society, Louise finds that she is increasingly unwanted, her presence an embarrassment to others, as well as to herself. Rather than exist in the world without social dignity, she retires to a distant convent, preferring to live vicariously through beautiful Delphine. In complying with society's value system for women, Mlle d'Albémar has had to betray her innate intelligence and her sense of self-worth, condone her own social rejection and inflict upon herself society's penalty for those who are different—isolation.

Like Louise, Léontine de Ternan accepts society's high evaluation of youthful female beauty. Unlike Louise, Léontine was born pretty. Her looks have brought her marriage, glory as a social decoration, and wide popularity as a flattered booster of male vanity.

But in a society where female youth and beauty are loudly fêted, female middle and old age are equated with loss of worth. Through flashbacks of Léontine de Ternan's life, Mme de Staël touchingly recreates the tragedy of society's beautiful woman who panics and despairs at the fatal touch of decline and death. Staël's character reacts with all the horror that growing old and "unfeminine" holds for a woman who has, with masculine encouragement, staked her existence on sexual attractiveness. Once courted and pursued, now rejected and replaced, Mme de Ternan sums up her life and her dilemma: "J'ai été fort belle, et j'ai cinquante ans. . . ." (p. 575)

Léontine's commitment to masculine praise as the ultimate reality, though superficially and temporarily gratifying, has in the long run brought personal, domestic and social alienation. It has blinded her to her own self-worth, warped her growth as a person, sabotaged her relationship with her family and, finally, provoked her humiliating with-

drawal from the system to which she has so completely accommodated. On the verge of breakdown, Léontine de Ternan enters a convent and subsequently takes her vows.

Two of Delphine's acquaintances, Matilde de Vernon and Mme de Mondoville, have been so "successfully" absorbed into the male value system that they are themselves active promoters of the status quo, proud to defend as woman's reality the warping sexist abstractions imposed on society by the world of men. Both women conceive of no *raison d'être* for female existence beyond the servicing, male-related roles of domesticity, in marriages initiated primarily as business contracts. Protectively cloaked in the social prestige denied rebels like Mme de R. and outsiders like Louise d'Albémar, they seem oblivious to their own want of soul and are prepared to stake their lives and those of their children on the reliable rewards of conformity.

Mme de Staël depicts such women as the bedrock of society, guaranteeing by their actions and their attitudes the continued prosperity of the patriarchal structure. Predictably, these women are appalled and repelled by Delphine's displays of "unfeminine" assertiveness. Matilde speaks for both of them when she cautions the heroine: ". . . vous prenez une mauvaise route, soit pour votre bonheur intérieur, soit pour votre considération dans le monde." (p. 339)

Like other non-conformists in the novel, Delphine d'Albémar finds herself attacked and alienated when her attempts at self-expression offend the conventions of female behaviour established and sanctified by the collective forces of society. Delphine is assaulted on two fronts: through Léonce de Mondoville, her intimate and peer, and through her moral inferiors in the social set—people like small-minded Mme du Marset and gossip M. de

Fierville. The heroine's inferiors arm themselves for the attack with society's weapons—slander, cruelty, sexism, fraud—all wielded in the guise of moral and religious authority against the woman whose assertive self defies the dictates of convention and threatens society's existence. Wounded externally by the onslaught of her inferiors and weakened internally through her love for rigidly conformist Léonce, the heroine is doomed to destruction.

Delphine has, from early childhood, been propelled toward the role of misfit in a man's world. An orphan, she was raised in the country by elderly, eccentric M. d'Albémar—first her indulgent guardian and then, in name only, her solicitous husband. The recipient, according to acerbic Sophie de Vernon, of "une éducation à la fois toute philosophique et toute romanesque" (p. 351), Delphine has grown up with the aura of a creature from a better world. She is "notre angélique Delphine" (p. 527) to her friends, and newly-smitten Léonce de Mondoville feels that ". . . elle respire ce qui est bien, comme un air pur, comme le seul dans lequel son âme généreuse puisse vivre." (p. 370) Celestial analogy is reinforced by the heroine's lack of human "roots." No mention is made of her antecedents; nothing is recalled of her infancy. Consequently, no intervention of family background or patriarchal heritage colours the purity of the character's presentation; nor does it dull the freshness of her emergence into reality when, newly widowed, she moves from the quiet security of rural seclusion into the conflict and hustle of Paris life. In fact, at twenty years of age, Delphine is Rousseau's newborn babe entering the world with loving, generous and trusting heart, her full-blown sensibility vulnerable to the onslaught of self-serving society. That Delphine's innocence is not accompanied by unsureness or fear is attributable, paradoxically, to the insulated cocoon of her pastoral upbringing, an idyllic existence that has served as a liberating

force, permitting and encouraging her to follow proudly the promptings of her own heart: ". . . c'est de mon Dieu et de mon propre coeur que je fais dépendre ma conduite." (p. 362) Furthermore, because M. d'Albémar married her only to ensure her inheritance, Delphine emerges into life not only young, self-confident and beautiful, but financially independent ("indépendante par ma situation et ma fortune" [p. 519]).

Therein lie the seeds of conflict, and therein lies the force of Mme de Staël's presentation. Orphaned, widowed, without male relatives or friends, lacking a male-related female model on which to pattern herself, personally free, therefore, from the dictates of patriarchal authority, Delphine moves naïvely into a patriarchal system with its established values and conventions. How will the heroine, confidently expecting to put her moral and financial freedom into practice, cope with the restraints of male prejudice? How will she react upon encountering the divergence between ideal and real? If she follows her personal credo: "Je ne suis rien, si je ne puis être moi" (p. 585), conflict is certain. And because she is female, defeat at the hands of society is highly likely.

The chauvinistic establishment into which the heroine moves is represented by male relatives and friends of the women who appear in Staël's gallery of portraits, men who, however weak or insignificant as individuals, possess and project an acknowledged social identity as citizens, workers and heads of households. By virtue of power and prestige based on recognized legal, educational and economic foundations, such men are, in their relations with women, lords and masters, entitled by their superiority to be exactors of service and receivers of sacrifice. Accordingly, Staël's men purchase child-brides, own wives

and pursue mistresses. But while relatively free to seek their pleasures within the framework of male-oriented convention (“... ayant fait les lois, les hommes sont les maîtres de les interpréter ou de les braver” [p. 430]), men are also touchy defenders of name and honour, neurotically preoccupied with externals. Of great importance to male characters in *Delphine*, therefore, is the public image of their women—fiancées and wives whose finest function in the eyes of society is to appear beautiful, dutiful and virtuous, a credit to their owners and an enhancement to the family name.

Léonce de Mondoville, Delphine’s love and the principal male character in the novel, is the product and the advocate of the patriarchal system. In the ultra-conventional Mondoville family, a man’s name is of the highest importance, public opinion is a supreme force, and visible identification with that which is unconventional or scandalous is to be avoided at all costs. On the public stage (but within the broad context of masculine privilege) a Mondoville performs not only for general acceptance, but preferably for admiring approbation. These are the principles that have molded young Léonce, inducing him to suppress his natural sensibility (an unpredictable, “feminine” quality) and encouraging him, through constant surveillance, to cultivate for himself and to demand in a prospective spouse an image of admirable and irreproachable correctness. These are the standards that, as a superior male, he confidently expects to bring to bear on spontaneous Delphine: “. . . elle soumettra, j’en suis sûr, ses actions à mes désirs. . . .” (p. 376) Tragically, in the process of asserting his masculine values, Léonce belittles Delphine as a person, fractures an inherently harmonious union and precipitates the heroine’s untimely demise.

Delphine d’Albémar is not the first woman destined for Léonce. Before the novel begins,

the hero has committed himself to the imminent reality of an acceptable, arranged marriage, common practice when female suitability is a prime requisite for matrimony, and engagements are more often decided by money, appearance and reputation than by love. Designated as bride-to-be is Delphine’s pious cousin, Matilde de Vernon, a brittle beauty whom Léonce has never seen, but whose qualifications are vouched for by his family. Before the wedding plans are finalized, however, Léonce and widowed Delphine meet for the first time and are overwhelmed by mutual attraction and the delicate sensibility they have in common: “Ah! nos âmes avaient été créées l’une pour l’autre. . . .” (p. 567) Although Léonce aims almost immediately at halting his proposed union with Matilde so that he may marry Delphine, he does not abandon his instilled priorities. On the contrary, fascinated by the charm, goodness and sensitivity of Delphine (“... elle n’attache du prix qu’à plaire et à être aimée” [p. 386]), Léonce envisages her as the perfect wife for him to possess: a woman whose many qualities may be directed toward delightful enhancement of the Mondoville image and, as a marvellous “plus,” a loving spouse promising the private bliss of physical compatibility and a touching union of souls. It is, regardless of the excitement of mutual attraction, a conventional vision, with emphasis on Delphine’s role as an enlargement of her husband’s self-image and an extension of the Mondoville identity. Writing to his mother of Delphine’s appropriateness, Léonce assures her, “. . . que n’obtiendrai-je donc pas d’elle, et pour vous, et pour moi.” (p. 386)

As their romance continues and Léonce’s “idea” of Delphine meshes more and more with his cherished “idea” of self and family, Delphine the person is pushed increasingly aside, her beautiful soul superseded by her beautiful image. Naturally, as a Mondoville

acquisition she is expected to parade her dream-come-true perfection in the public arena for general viewing, thereby flattering Léonce's social vanity and augmenting his pride in himself and his name. Certainly Léonce places high value on the heroine as a precious, fascinating object, a possession a man may be proud of, may display with a heady mixture of jealousy and exhilaration. Describing Delphine dancing at a party before the assembled guests, Mondoville reports excitedly, "Les hommes et les femmes montèrent sur les bancs pour voir danser Delphine; je sentis mon coeur battre avec une grande violence quand tous les yeux se tournèrent sur elle. . . ." (p. 377) But while social accomplishments like beautiful dancing and sparkling conversation may be encouraged by man for his woman, acting on her own decisions is not. Increasingly concerned that Delphine's assertive sensibility, admittedly a positive force and quite charming in private, may nevertheless prove publicly embarrassing, Léonce craves a Delphine without the risks of independent action. When, inevitably, his "intended" acts on her own in a non-conforming way, asserting herself as a free person, as subject rather than object, Léonce is confused and angry.

Such is the case early in their relationship when the heroine conspicuously crosses the floor at a court function to sit with tearful, ostracized Mme de R.—a defiant act that antagonizes society and embarrasses Léonce. When vindictive gossips hint that Delphine shares Mme de R.'s promiscuous lifestyle, thin-skinned Léonce sinks into credulous despair, racked by fears for the Mondoville name. Delphine's explanation that she acted "par un mouvement de pitié tout à fait irréfléchi" (p. 384) gives shaky comfort to the man whose self-centered scale of values is clearly revealed in a subsequent admonition: ". . . soyez plus fière que sensible, quand il s'agit de la réputation de votre ami." (p. 523)

Léonce's egotistic apprehensions are justified, for Delphine continues sympathetically helping those in need, regardless of risk to her own reputation. She is dismayed to find, however, that she now hesitates before acting, increasingly aware of Léonce's reputation and disturbed by fears of the young man's disapproval ("la crainte de déplaire à Léonce, cette crainte toujours présente" [p. 383]).

Delphine's fears are shortly realized. Prompted by pity, she allows unhappily married Thérèse d'Ervin's and the latter's admirer, M. de Serbellane, to meet in her home—a move that brings scandal, death and charges of immorality against Delphine. Léonce is traumatized; in a rage of anger, jealousy and self-pity he abandons Delphine, and rushes vengefully into marriage with arid but untarnished Matilde.

Léonce's hasty marriage, with its bitter aftermath, points up the nefarious potential of a social structure built on male privilege. Favoured by virtue of his sex with a superior role as arbiter of female destinies, and protected by a system that encourages him to capitalize on his own weaknesses, vain and vacillating Léonce is able to move selfishly from Matilde to Delphine, to Matilde, to exonerated Delphine, adversely affecting the lives of both women. Through the arrogant imposition of Léonce's will both Matilde and Delphine are devalued as individuals, a fulfilling relationship between Léonce and either woman is rendered impossible, and Delphine begins her tragic decline into disillusionment and death. At the same time, the hero initiates his own descent from the proud heights of private impeccability, shamelessly preying now on the virtues of his female inferiors.

Nowhere is Léonce's egocentricity more apparent than in his post-marriage pursuit of the recently absolved heroine. As Matilde's husband doggedly pushes for re-establishment of a relationship with Delphine, he manoeuvres the lives of both women in a display of male egotism appalling for its frank denigration of female worth. Smugly Matilde is dismissed with distaste and Delphine tempted with flattery: "Songez quel est mon supplice . . . renfermé dans ma maison, avec une femme qui a pris ta place" (p. 460); presumptuously the heroine is pressed for discreet tête-à-tête, to be arranged "sans jamais causer la moindre peine à Matilde." (p. 468) Resorting to specious logic, reproach, self-pity and plain threat, Léonce in fact urges Delphine to become his mistress—the man who had required of Delphine-as-fiancée that she live up to his and society's most demanding expectations now using every ploy to prevent her from doing so. Dismissing as irrelevant the gods of tradition, conformity and opinion (" . . . oublie tout ce qui n'est pas nous; . . . anéantissons l'univers dans notre pensée, et soyons heureux" (p. 461), Léonce calculatingly assures Delphine that " . . . rien de pareil à notre situation ne s'est encore rencontré; . . . devant ton Dieu, nous sommes libres." (p. 460) Cunningly Delphine's own sensibility is used against her: "Je ne te reconnais pas, mon amie; tu permets à tes idées sur la vertu d'altérer ton caractère: prends garde, tu vas l'endurcir. . . ." (p. 461) Ruthlessly the reluctant heroine has thrust upon her full responsibility for Léonce's own life and for Matilde's well-being: " . . . me croyez-vous si loin de la mort. . . ." (p. 460); " . . . savez-vous qui souffrira de ma douleur? Matilde, oui, Matilde, à qui vous me sacrifiez." (p. 463) With the ultimate in male arrogance, Delphine—spurned as wife, pursued as mistress—is reminded: " . . . il faut que tu renonces pour moi à l'existence que je ne puis te promettre dans le monde. . . . Mais,

j'en suis sûr, tu me feras volontiers ce sacrifice. . . ." (p. 457)

Finally coerced into seeing Léonce on a regular basis after he has stationed himself in front of her galloping horses threatening suicide, Delphine makes every effort to remain "virtuous." But she must constantly check the increasing demands of her aspiring lover, his pregnant young wife forgotten and all but deserted.

Through Delphine's renewed involvement with Léonce, Staël shows how society accepts (and expects) from a man behaviour that it savagely condemns in a female, even when the woman is a victim of circumstance—or of circumstantial evidence. Predictably, Delphine's liaison with Léonce swells the undercurrents of gossip long directed against her independent behaviour, until they burst forth. When Léonce attacks M. de Valorbe outside Delphine's home at one in the morning, it is Delphine who is publicly condemned. Accused of brazenly juggling late-night assignations with two lovers—one a married man with a saintly young wife—the innocent heroine is confronted by Matilde, sneered at by the gossips and publicly snubbed. Notwithstanding, she visits unhappy Valorbe in his room, not reappearing for several hours. Her reputation now in shreds, Delphine knows she is the victim of society's accepted double standard: as a man, Léonce may with impunity dabble in adultery; as a man, Valorbe may without reproach detain a woman in his room; but as a woman accused of having loose morals, Delphine d'Albémar is ruined. In fact, Delphine is destroyed for not sufficiently controlling appearances, even when she has nothing to hide. Fearing Léonce's wrath, and totally disillusioned with the injustices of patriarchal reality, Delphine commits herself to the seclusion of a Swiss convent, agreeing to

take her vows: “Qu’est-ce donc que je sacrifie? une liberté dont je ne puis faire aucun usage. . . .” (p. 594)

In being shunned by society, accepting exile and betraying her conscience by taking the veil, Delphine becomes yet another victim of a social structure that preys on and is nourished by vulnerability, a structure openly committed to the exploitation of its traditionally most vulnerable element—the female. Although Delphine’s flight to the non-life of a convent removes her from exposure to overt daily exploitation, it represents, as she despairingly realizes, her acceptance of the ultimate in suppression—total passivity, a prelude to physical death as annihilation of the heroine’s assertive self.

Mme de Staël has documented Delphine’s pathetic descent from the pre-Léonce, halcyon days of liberated vitality, through the Léonce-dominated era of anguished ambivalence, to the painful resignation of passivity and approaching death. That Delphine in her vigour should have been susceptible to such mutation is attributable to a particular aspect of her refined sensibility, to the “flaw” that did indeed bring tragedy—her urge for an intimate human relationship, for a soul-mate. Sophie de Vernon answered the need to some extent as friend, but when critically wounded Léonce appeared on the scene—handsome, sensitive and in need of tender care—Delphine fell into romantic love, fantasizing him as the perfect mate, a superior being to serve and cherish, her key to domestic bliss. The enraptured heroine began viewing herself in relation to Léonce, and felt thrillingly humbled by his socially bestowed superiority: “. . . je jouis de me sentir inférieure à lui.” (p. 489) In a flight of fancy she enthused to Louise d’Albémar, “Il me semble que je suis née pour lui obéir autant que pour l’adorer. . . .” (p. 490); and in

her imagination Léonce became the symbol of life itself: “Je ne suis rien que par Léonce. . . .” (p. 628)

Crushed by Léonce’s betrayal and the perverseness of his union with a woman he did not love, Delphine declined rapidly. Her agony was aggravated by the realization that however passionately the young man was attracted to her, his real “love” was not for a woman, but for a concept—the Mondoville image. So that, even if he were again free to do so, Léonce could not bring himself to marry discredited Delphine. Eventually Delphine acknowledges Léonce’s frailties, but having once committed her love to him, having once confirmed their communion of souls on which, as a woman of sensibility, she places the highest value, the heroine is pathetically ensnared. Desperately she has tried to compensate in her imagination for the revealed Léonce, actually willing herself to inferiority and dependence: “Léonce, que ferais-je seule? . . . je ne puis rien pour moi-même. . . .” (p. 625) Such self-abasement is fatal, even when interpreted ideally as an act of will.

Tragically, commitment to Léonce has brought Delphine not wholeness, but fragmentation: “J’étais d’accord avec moi-même autrefois. . . .” (p. 488); not confirmation of self but its diminution: “. . . je n’ai point de confiance en mes propres forces. . . .” (p. 625) Instead of continuing to look within herself for her identity, she has looked for it in Léonce’s distorted gaze (“Léonce, Léonce! est-il donc devenu ma conscience. . . .” [p. 380]) and her agonized awareness of such alienation of self is articulated in a terse but moving reproach to Mondoville: “. . . je souffre pour mériter votre estime. . . .” (p. 464) By the time she enters the convent, sliding into inertia, Delphine d’Albémar is not far from death.

But retreat brings only temporary respite

from outside intervention, for Léonce—his wife and infant son both dead—appears suddenly at the convent, threatening suicide now that Delphine is no longer available. He is dissuaded from death only when Delphine agrees to renounce her vows and run away with him. However, in the midst of flight and increasingly vague talk about marriage, Léonce deserts the heroine, tormented by thoughts of public condemnation of his intent to marry a *religieuse*. Mondoville is located in Verdun where, though not actually a member of the émigré forces, he has been made prisoner and condemned to death. Just before Léonce is shot, Delphine takes poison and dies.⁸

From a moral point of view death is the only solution for Delphine d'Albémar in a society where virtue goes unrewarded and love does not triumph. In feminist terms, Delphine's death is complete suppression, the total eradication of a woman of intelligence and sensitivity whose qualities have been constantly devalued and whose potential has been destroyed. It is the establishment's final triumph. Significantly, Léonce perishes too, suggesting that Staël's heroine is victim of a system that, in its self-satisfied commitment to male prerogative, in effect betrays both sexes. By systematically undermining the strengths of the female and openly serving the weaknesses of the male, the patriarchal system in *Delphine* sabotages women, men, marriage and society.

With Delphine's shattered portrait rounding out Staël's gallery of oppressed women, one might well ask if there are no undiminished females in the novel. Hidden among the persecuted wives, lonely outsiders and warped conformists is there no portrait of a female fulfilled? Is there no woman enjoying even the socially approved paradise of "l'amour dans le mariage?" (p. 471) Mme de Staël does indeed include such a portrait—that of Mme de Belmont.

The de Belmonts appear to be the perfect family unit: mother, father and two children living together in love and admiration, rejoicing in one another's company, leading an idyllic existence in a country cottage where all is harmony and joy. The key to their domestic bliss is, along with the competent involvement of Mme de Belmont, the complete devotion of M. de Belmont to his wife and family. There is, however, an ironic twist: M. de Belmont is blind. Dependent on the eyes, arm and voice of his wife, unable to function without her, he has no duties or distractions in the outside world, traditional purlieu of male endeavour; on the contrary, as he explains to Delphine, home is life and ". . . tout mon être est concentré dans le sentiment. . . ." (p. 483)

Indeed, the de Belmont household challenges the cultural definition of "husband" and "wife"; cut off from the socially imposed, masculine image of self-seeking lord and master, handicapped, impecunious M. de Belmont blends effortlessly into the traditionally female scene, into the *sensible* atmosphere of domesticity. At the same time, his wife, though largely disinherited for her undesirable marriage, begins to emerge as an individual, secure in the knowledge that her presence and her small annuity are vital to the welfare of husband and family. In society's eyes, of course, a man without economic status and the woman who is his equal or superior are both inferior to the masculine ideal promoted in and by that society. Because in the "real" world the de Belmonts would be made to suffer the rejection of pity or derision, it is indeed fortunate that they enjoy country life.

As the result of an asocial reshuffling of male and female roles and the creation of a self-contained utopia in physical and psychological isolation from the status quo, Mme de Belmont's happiness is hardly a tribute to convention. Indeed, the obvious irony of Mme de Staël's "de Belmont solution" to sexism

—fulfillment through mutilation and segregation—underscores the hopelessness of woman's lot within the patriarchal system. Self-realization with an uncrippled mate in a social setting seems a reasonable expectation. Yet to function "normally" in the system a woman must betray herself and her sex by accepting values that belittle, restrict and victimize the female. To demur is to condemn oneself to excommunication. Delphine d'Albemar resisted and perished. Her creator was exiled.

While the action of *Delphine* is necessarily played out in the context of a patriarchal structure with masculine values permeating the scene, and while there are constant references in letters and conversations to husbands, guardians and male relatives, comparatively few men perform up front. Léonce, M. de Serbellane, Henri de Lebensei and M. de Valorbe are the principal male characters, while standard male social types such as doctors, tutors, soldiers, priests and valets form a backdrop. In *Delphine* it is, fittingly, the female characters who appear in the foreground. It is the women in the novel who come across as three-dimensional and who, although socially defined in terms of their male-related roles, are portrayed as individuals in relation one to another, and in their own right.

Infancy, childhood, youth, mid-life, old-age; daughter, fiancée, wife, mother; spinster, mistress, widow, nun—the novel is a striking collection of female portraits, testifying to the author's interest in and concern for woman's oppressed state in a sexist society. Anticipating modern feminism by almost two hundred years, Mme de Staël clearly recognized that the key to female oppression lay in the self-perpetuating nature of the tradition, as she observed women like Delphine and her friends caught up in the double bind of powerlessness victimized by power, and power sustained and

nurtured by the powerless. The novel *Delphine* is a dramatization of that fact, a fact that Staël had noted two years earlier when writing on women in *De la littérature*:

. . . si elles veulent acquérir de l'ascendant, on leur fait un crime d'un pouvoir que les lois ne leur ont pas donné; si elles restent esclaves, on opprime leur destinée. (Seconde partie, chapitre IV)⁹

NOTES

1. The following statement is typical: ". . . in *Delphine*, Madame de Staël took her revenge on Talleyrand and portrayed him in the character of Madame de Vernon. . . ." J. Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 93.
Corinne's British hero, Oswald, Lord Nelvil, has been variously identified as Benjamin Constant, Prosper de Barante, Vincenzo Monti, Dom Pedro de Souza e Holstein, Lord John Campbell, le chevalier de Pange and Edward Gibbon.
2. Chateaubriand's *René* first appeared in April, 1802; *Delphine* in December, 1802; Senancour's *Oberman* in 1804; *Corinne* in 1807.
3. See "Performing Heroism: The Myth of Corinne," Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Anchor Press, 1977), pp. 263-319.
4. Exclusive emphasis on Corinne-as-genius or Delphine-as-paragon leads to faulty generalisations like the following: "Madame de Staël believed in the rights of the exceptional individual but was quite uninterested in the condition of the majority." Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Mentor, 1976), p. 153.
5. See Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
6. All references to *Delphine* are to Volume I of the *Oeuvres complètes de Madame la baronne de Staël-Holstein* (3 Vols.; Paris, 1861; rpt. Genève: Slatkine, 1967).
7. Elise obtained her divorce in Holland in the mid 1780's. Henri de Lebensei, eloquently promoting divorce for France in a letter to Delphine dated September 2, 1791, states that ". . . le divorce doit être décrété dans un mois par l'assemblée constituante. . ." (p. 531) By 1792 a law establishing divorce had been passed.
8. Sensitive to criticism that she advocated suicide, Mme de Staël wrote a revised ending which appeared in the 1820 edition of her complete works: emotionally exhausted and physically frail after her sojourn in the convent, Delphine declines further at evidence of Léonce's mounting reluctance to wed a *religieuse*. Decline leads to death. A month after Delphine's demise, Léonce is killed in action in the Vendée.
9. Mme de Staël, Vol. I, p. 301.