Preface

> His legs bestrid the ocean: his rear'd arm
> Crested the world.
>
> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, act V, scene ii

"Think you there was, or might be, such a man . . .?" Cleopatra muses. And Dolabella brings her mistress back to reason: "Gentle madam, no." Who indeed could bestride the ocean? Germaine de Staël's fame, as it happens, extended in her day from Monticello to Moscow. What then has befallen that fame in the afterglow of posterity?

This study explores Staël's work and action, hoping that in unearthing a true portrait of her – in bringing, as she put it, a stone to the collective pyramid – some sense of what has been lost will be restored to thought. In so doing, it offers a glimpse of the Groupe de Coppet that surrounded Staël in those years. Benjamin Constant, Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi, and August Wilhelm Schlegel play their parts in this story of European Romanticism at its inception, bearing their liberal standard from the Bastille's fall in 1789 to July 1830 and the new *Roi des Français*. Art and politics were, for these thinkers, inseparable. They lived and died *engagés*, under Napoleon, Louis, or Louis-Philippe as they had under Citizen Robespierre.

"Le génie n'a pas de sexe," Staël allegedly declared, and in this hope she was perhaps optimistic. Staël's gender may not determine each word she wrote, but it shapes each book she put out on her European stage, as it shapes the two long centuries of her reception. English lacks the term *stateswoman*, as French lacks the term *femme d'État*; the role of Jacques Necker's daughter is literally inexpressible in either language. Even in literature, gender boundaries marked each step Staël took. They shaped her European exiles; they shaped her omissions; they shaped her in sickness and in health. Necker's son might perhaps have governed France; for his daughter, such an option did not exist. What hope then had any other woman of the age of shaping their nation's destiny? Olympe de Gouges, like Madame Roland, like Marie-Antoinette, went to the guillotine.

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Staël for her part turned out to be unlucky in a variety of lesser ways. Straddling as she does both century and nation divides, she has faced her share of tribalism, from French scholars, German scholars, Italian scholars, from those nineteenth-century scholars who believe their period began in 1830. She has, in brief, been decanonized. What after all can British credit theory mean in France? What can a Frenchwoman know of Immanuel Kant or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe? How can a Pre-Romantic expect to grasp what we might call the Romantic dilemma? It seems worthwhile, in assessing Staël's long and contested game at cards with history, to remember the hand she had been dealt. Europe, for instance, was thrust upon her – hence her regret for the rue du Bac. Staël often thought the same of the fame she experienced, though posterity is not well placed to regret the woman's lived unhappiness – for she was indeed unhappy – at the expense of what she left our world.

Yes, Dolabella, there was a person who bestrid the ocean. Not Napoleon, who lost his fleet twice over to Lord Nelson and had to sell Louisiana to Staël's friend Thomas Jefferson. But Staël had her part in shaping George Eliot's and Alexander Pushkin's thinking, just as she shaped Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Giacomo Leopardi's. She intervened in divided Germany and Italy as she intervened in Russia or Sweden. Her sun set long ago, but it may be time to see again that dawn of hope for humanity on whose behalf she once went into exile.

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