Introduction

This book, fruit of some years of archival research, follows Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), daughter of Louis XVI's minister Jacques Necker, from a childhood watched by Denis Diderot in her mother's salon on to Revolution – during which the Bastille fell three days after her father's dismissal – to her years with Benjamin Constant as the Republic died and her ten years of exile at Napoleon Bonaparte's hands. It tracks her flight to Moscow, weeks ahead of Napoleon's army, and on via Stockholm and London at last to Paris in 1814, three years before her early death. It follows Staël through a close reading of her manuscripts and publications, recreating her life as author and stateswoman and thereby reworking some received wisdom both about Staël's various publications and about her literary and political action.

Staël has had an uphill battle to enter the canon, in French literature and historiography alike. Genevan, Protestant, liberal, and female, she has faced resistance since the 1780s. In the 1950s, the comtesse de Pange was told by the director of the Pléiade that Staël would never appear in that series. Well, now she has. Her complete works are being reedited for the first time since 1821, in critical editions sometimes doubling in length what was previously known. It seems time for an analysis of her complete works. Staël may emerge the truer for it, as two centuries of agendas begin to fall away.

This study has two overarching theses. The first is that Staël's works focus, almost without exception, on the future – they are tools designed to shape France and, later, Europe according to Staël's vision. Staël is *engagée*. True of Staël's 1788 *Lettres sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, this is equally true in 1818 of Staël's posthumous *Considérations sur la Révolution française*. The second is that Staël, whose early works concern France, began around 1800 to sketch out a living Europe of the imagination to answer the death of the French Republic and the ongoing French invasion of its neighbors. Staël opposes to Napoleon's lifeless European hegemony a concert of

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nations not unlike that later imagined by Robert Schuman; she is, in that sense, the first European, and it is no coincidence that the word *nationalité* first appears in her novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807).

If a new Staël is to appear, what are her outlines? Well, she is a fighter, to begin with, unprepared to settle for the private sphere increasingly imposed on Frenchwomen after Olympe de Gouges went to the guillotine. She is a strategist, rewriting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Immanuel Kant or the Revolution the better to advance her aims in a lifelong struggle for freedom – hence my chapter on Staël and abolition (Chapter 17) – for justice, for a little truth. Staël is an enemy of every kind of oppression. Ill-wishers have long seen in Staël's "errors" proof that the woman knew no better: Her revisions from manuscript truth to printed propaganda annihilate that thesis. Staël is no fool; witness a European success that few contemporaries – Goethe, Byron, Walter Scott – could rival. Staël is a dreamer, confining her thoughts for the future to the closing pages of almost everything she wrote. Staël is, in fact, a visionary, elaborating a Romantic contract of representation, a theory of public credit, to replace Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision of direct democracy, with its catastrophic working-out under the Terror. Staël is, in this sense, an elitist, believing in careers open to talent, where an exceptional genius rises up from the nation's soil to speak on the silent nation's behalf. We may regret the sansculottes, but Staël's vision is that of modern representative democracy, which has its debts to her. There is much to admire in the Staël here offered to the public.

Extensive archival research and a complete overview of Staël's writings in context here restore Staël to the canon as political philosopher, historian, theorist of nationalism and European Romanticism, and revolutionary actor. Patriarchy kept Staël from direct political power as it kept her from the canon – she acted therefore through the men around her. The brilliant game of masks and proxies imposed on her by patriarchy is here documented in detail, as is Staël's unending fight for the oppressed, from the nations of Napoleon's subjugated Europe to the victims of the Atlantic slave trade, for whom Staël sought freedom and representation.

As for the individual chapters, each focuses on a moment in Staël's life as seen in her works: *la vie dans l'œuvre*. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of Staël's entire career. In Chapter 2, the complex publication of Staël's first book is retraced and much of her *Recueil de morceaux détachés* is redated. Her collaboration with Louis de Narbonne, minister for war in 1791–1792, is sketched out in Chapter 3, while her collaboration with Benjamin Constant under the Directoire is examined in Chapter 4, in which her foreshadowing of Constant's famous two liberties distinction is presented in detail. Reasons are adduced for her *De l'influence*

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des passions of 1796 in Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 reviews Staël's advance toward a European vision in *De la littérature* (1800). Chapter 7 recounts the suicide controversy launched by Staël's 1802 *Delphine*, with previously unknown materials provided for the reader. In Chapter 8, Staël's memoir of her father is analyzed for almost the first time since its publication in 1804. *Corinne ou l'Italie* is presented in Chapter 9 as a Faustian bargain, and Chapter 10 retraces the history of Staël's work in theater. Chapter 11 follows the pulping of *De l'Allemagne* by Napoleon's police almost hour by hour; this is Staël's homage to Germany. Chapter 12 demonstrates how in the *Dix années d'exil*, begun around 1811 though unpublished until 1821, a hermetic code is uncovered, showing the possible influence of apocalyptic thought on Staël at the time. Staël's role in her second husband Albert Jean Michel (John) Rocca's Spanish war memoir is followed in detail in Chapter 13. Turning to the Groupe de Coppet as a whole in Chapter 14, August Wilhelm Schlegel's, Staël's, and Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi's simultaneous Romantic manifestos of 1813–1814 are reviewed. In Chapter 15, the birth of Italian Romanticism in 1816–1821 is followed in a sketch of Staël's influence on the Milan Romantics and Giacomo Leopardi. Staël's 1818 *Considérations*, with its long homage to English liberty, is shown in Chapter 16 to be anchored in a new and coherent authorial credit theory stretching from art, to politics, to economics. And finally, in Chapter 17, Staël's decades-long involvement in the fight against the Atlantic slave trade is detailed.

In conclusion, one may ask about Staël's place in the Romantic era she inhabited. Necker's son might have governed France; that path was closed to Necker's daughter, who instead wrote and promoted the men around her. Madame de Chastenay remarked in 1814 that there were three powers in Europe: England, Russia, and Madame de Staël, and certainly Staël wielded a direct political power of which other Romantics, except perhaps François-René de Chateaubriand, could only dream. Her publications meanwhile were epochal – Georges Poulet sees in the *Lettres sur Rousseau* the birth of modern criticism; *Corinne ou l'Italie* has echoes from Edgar Allan Poe to George Eliot; *De l'Allemagne* does as much as any text to bring Romanticism to Europe, while her 1816 article in the *Biblioteca italiana* launched Italian Romanticism. Historians, finally, have seen in Staël's *Considérations* the moment the French Revolution enters history. It is increasingly hard to grasp the thinking of that forgotten 1950s director of the Pléiade. Friend of Tsar Alexander, of Byron, and of Thomas Jefferson, Staël enjoyed a European fame in her lifetime matched by few indeed among Europe's Romantics. Her action lives on today.

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