CHAPTER 10

Interlude
In Search of Romantic Theater

So far in this book, we have viewed Staël's entering the Romantic canon neither as a dramatist nor as a theorist of drama. This textual interlude argues that Staël has to an extent missed a rendezvous with history here, due to a variety of external factors shaping her dramaturgical work and its reception. Her place in the history of French theater is therefore here reviewed, from her critical discussions in treatises like *De l'Allemagne*, to her performances in Geneva and across Europe, to her substantial dramatic output, progressing from respectable Voltairean verse tragedies to vaudevilles – one of which was later borrowed by E. T. A. Hoffmann – and avant-garde *drames*. Staël's complex relationship to German Romanticism, from Hoffmann to Ludwig Tieck and the Schlegels, gains from this overview.

Staël's actual impact on French nineteenth-century theater comes above all from *De l'Allemagne*, to which Romantic drama theory owes profound and somewhat neglected debts: Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* and Victor Hugo's *Préface de Cromwell*, for instance. Other intellectual sources for French Romantic theater – Benjamin Constant, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi – wrote under Staël's roof at Coppet, and indeed, almost the entire intellectual framework of French Romantic theater may be found in the works of this group Staël led. The translators for Pierre-François Ladvocat's *Chefs-d'œuvre des théâtres étrangers* (1822–1825) are a list of Coppet intimates, and their enterprise answers *De l'Allemagne*'s call to renovate French literature by translating nonclassical drama. Romantic France's pantheon of German heroes – Friedrich Schiller, Zacharias Werner, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose *Faust* she transformed in introducing it to France – again follows Staël's lead. Hector Berlioz and Charles Gounod echo her choices. The scope of

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this influence, which seems to fade after 1848, deserves study. *Corinne* may stand next among Staël's works in impact, offering a stronger heroine than the Gretchen–Ophelia model she also popularized. Gioachino Rossini borrows Corinne's name and companions, along with snatches of the plot, for *Il viaggio a Reims* in 1824; the Bibliothèque nationale has a manuscript *Corinne ou La Fatalité* – a prose *drame* with songs – alongside a print *Corinne ressuscitée* in 1815 and a third text, a print *Corinne drame* in verse by Monier de La Sizeranne (Théâtre-Français, September 23, 1830), which offers Corinne not death but a nunnery.

Were Staël's plays known? A dozen copies each of *Sophie* and *Jane Grey* were published in 1790; these and seven other plays appeared in 1821, and five remained in manuscript. Clearly, Staël's theater was nearly invisible before 1821, though her own performances of her work, in Geneva, Vienna, Moscow, Stockholm, and London, caused some stir. Two Romantic authors do, nonetheless, owe debts to Staël's theater. First, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1815), which opens his *Nachtstücke* and also Jacques Offenbach's *Contes d'Hoffmann*, the hero falls in love with an artist's dummy, as in Staël's *Le Mannequin*. Hoffmann's friend Adalbert von Chamisso was at Coppet as Staël wrote her play. Second, on July 20, 1822, Henri de Latouche staged *Le Vieillard malgré lui* at the Panorama-Dramatique; the comedy is an egregious plagiarism of Staël's *Capitaine Kernadec*, down to the characters' names (Paris, Archives nationales, F^{18} 590/F^{21} 993). In short, Staël's theater missed its rendezvous with a century she heavily influenced elsewhere. How did this happen, and did her theater deserve better? The first obstacle to Staël's success was her own decision not to publish: As I write, the arguable center of this *œuvre*, four Voltairean tragedies, has just appeared. Second, her other plays were buried in the posthumous *Œuvres complètes*, though Latouche alertly spotted her art. In the 1820s, her dramatic innovations may have been lost in the scuffle; by the 1830s, their novelty was superseded. Publication before 1821 might have brought a different impact: Staël's revolutionary-era theater was streamlined and up to date, while her empire theater was avant-garde. But as Staël told Constant for *Wallstein*, success in theater comes down to luck and sweat. She may have felt unable to guarantee her plays' success, while exiled from Paris and in light of the political climate; she may also have felt a name as dramatist unfitting to the "private" persona she cultivated in answer to endless charges of her political influence. All this is ironic since theater lies at the heart of her thought on France's moral and political regeneration. Nor did Staël's theater deserve oblivion. The homage of Latouche is a fitting compliment to her comedic skill; *Le Mannequin*

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is equally fine comedy, and *Jane Grey* is equal to many post-Voltairean tragedies. Staël's current reputation as a dramatist is thus in transition. The influences noted earlier are previously uncited, and work in the field is thin. None of Staël's plays were republished in the twentieth century; her manuscript tragedies should do much to open a dusty window on a past green as ever.

Staël's life and works are grounded in the transformations of a Europe in revolution and in Staël's awareness of her sex. She was involved in European politics from 1786 to her death in 1817, and her art reflects that engagement. Outside the busy years 1805–1808, theater is not Staël's top priority and must be seen against her much longer novels and treatises. Within this sweep, Staël's dramatic output divides into two periods: 1778–1791 and 1805–1811. Two known projects lie outside this divide: the Voltairean tragedy *Jean de Witt* (1797) and the lost short plays from Byron of 1814. Martine de Rougemont reviews Staël's performances, where a similar divide appears between 1777–1794 and 1803–1814, though records may be lacking.[1]

Staël loved theater from childhood, building a puppet theater to perform tragedies; she had acting lessons from Mademoiselle Clairon, with Jean François de La Harpe and Jean-François Marmontel supporting and Denis Diderot in attendance. In 1778, Friedrich Melchior von Grimm praises her *Inconvénients de la vie de Paris* to the crowned heads of Europe; the work is a short *comédie larmoyante* in prose. She performed endings of tragedies with her cousin and in 1785 starred in La Harpe's *Mélanie* (which resembles her novel *Delphine*) in her mother's salon, remarking that she preferred comic roles.

Sophie and *Jane Grey* bracket Staël's Swedish marriage in 1786. *Sophie*, a *comédie larmoyante* in verse echoing Pierre-Claude Nivelle de La Chaussée's *La Gouvernante*, has a governess and her married employer – as in *Jane Eyre* – discover and renounce their mutual love. Sophie then rejects her other suitor and leaves for England. The play is set in an English garden, where the count's locked pavilion hides Sophie's bust. The frequent use of the terms *père* and *mère* in the play solicits a Freudian reading; extremely close to her father, Staël refused a marriage to William Pitt so she could stay in Paris. Passable verse, dramatic irony, and private affect add merit to this meditation on love in marriage, which has two picturesque touches: the erotic denouement, where Mother finds the count at Sophie's feet in the unlocked pavilion, and Sophie's romance, sung to her pupil while the count eavesdrops. Staël wrote on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Sophie before 1786. *Jane Grey*, a sound Voltairean tragedy, shows Jane in

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England and married off by an ambitious father(-in-law), a villain who goes to the scaffold seeking the crowd's hate. Freud again seems apt since Jacques Necker did profit from his daughter's marriage. Politics, intrigue, promises, and misunderstanding swirl around the resolute heroine, proclaimed queen in act I and a prisoner of Bloody Mary in act III. Written by a Genevan in 1787, the year Louis XVI restored the Protestant civil rights Louis XIV had revoked, the play is built on a Protestantism in vogue since Voltaire. Performance might easily have brought success; several scenes are splendid, notably Jane's arguments with Northumberland and Pembroke in which her heroic virtue triumphs, and the trial, where Jane and her husband Guilfort each refuse to say the word that would save them. Complex pretrial discussions distill to one-word replies and silence, matching the officious speed of this kangaroo court. Time is nicely managed, notably in act IV's confessor scenes, set in prison. Besides Shakespeare's history plays, *Romeo and Juliet* stands behind the young leads, but odd echoes of Jean Racine also add baroque local color: "Faudra-t-il donc, seigneur, regretter votre haine?" – "J'espère le néant et redoute le ciel." Racine's question–answer hemistichs are reworked, and some baroque detail verges on excess, in Romantic fashion: "Ah! viens, viens sur mon sein reposer cette tête, / Qu'à faire, hélas! tomber un barbare s'apprête."

As for the four draft or manuscript tragedies, *Thamas* (c. 1790) follows a page of verse with twenty-five pages of dullish prose allegorizing Necker's fall, but *La Mort de Montmorency* (c. 1790) is fine work, the character of Richelieu in particular. Staël told her husband it too concerned Necker, but the pivot – aristocratic honor – and the intrigue – with the duc d'Orléans – are both alien to Necker and very present for the comte de Narbonne, then Staël's lover. Narbonne joined the Club de Valois after 1789, presided over by the current duc d'Orléans, who again intrigued against the French king. Staël would hardly have announced this key to her husband in 1790, and, if true, it might explain her son Auguste's reluctance to publish this with other *inédits* in 1821. In *Rosamonde* (summer 1791), written in middling verse, the opening dialogue between Rosamonde and her father gains poignancy if Staël and Necker loom there in filigree; talk of Rosamonde's illegitimate son and of divorce may be equally topical. Chapters 2 and 8 consider some implications of these hypotheses. *Jean de Witt* (1797) reviews Dutch history, rather like Goethe's *Egmont* and uniquely in Staël's corpus, paralleling Directoire France's oscillation between liberty, Jacobins, and the rise of Napoleon.[2]

Staël's return to dramaturgy after 1805 was anchored in performance. François-Joseph Talma, whose acting *De l'Allemagne* superbly analyzes,

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was an old friend; he talked of playing *Iphigénie* with her. Staël had detailed knowledge of the theater, as a society actress and director alike. She staged plays by Louis-Carrogis Carmontelle, Georges Duval, Philippe-Néricault Destouches, Michel-Jean Sedaine, and Bernard-Joseph Saurin; also, Rousseau's *Pygmalion*, Pierre de Marivaux's *Le Legs*, the *Barbier de Séville*, and some friends' works. She staged Voltaire ten times, Racine nineteen, her own plays sixteen, all with herself as heroine (she also played *soubrettes*, a rare combination in contemporary theater). She staged one Molière, *Les Femmes savantes*, and one *drame*, La Harpe's *Mélanie*. Eight of eleven dramatists were recent comic authors. In 1808, she staged her son Auguste's *Gustave Vasa*; this is Duval's *Edouard en Ecosse* with the names changed to appease Napoleon's police, a sign of the publicity Staël's society theater did generate. Racine, despite A. W. Schlegel, seems to have been her favorite playwright: she declaims from *Phèdre* in 1803–1805 and 1813, staging it in 1806 and 1807, declaims from *Athalie* in 1804 and 1813, recites from *Andromaque* in 1804, and stages it in 1807. From Voltaire, Staël declaims scenes of *Tancrède* and *Adélaïde du Guesclin* in 1793–1794; she stages *Mérope*, *Mahomet*, *Alzire*, and *Zaïre* in 1805–1806, then *Sémiramis* in 1807. A. W. Schlegel ran stage design for her theater, grounded in cutting-edge theory, while Staël as actress seems to have combined professional skill with meditation on her art. Two productions close this cycle of performances at Geneva and Coppet, 1806–1808: Constant's *Wallstein*, adapted from Schiller, with stage design complete before its cancellation in 1808, and her friend Werner's *24. Februar*, staged in 1809. Staël writes to Madame Récamier on October 1, 1809, "[C]e qui m'a pris un peu de temps, c'est d'arranger une pièce de Werner" (*CG* VII 56); do her revisions survive in this remarkable German play that gave Albert Camus *Le Malentendu*?

Staël inaugurated her new burst of theater in 1805, writing *Agar dans le désert*, then *Geneviève* and *La Sunamite* in 1807–1808, three religious *drames*. Staël's beloved father died in 1804, and these years marked a religious, indeed quietist, revival for her. The break with Constant – father of Staël's daughter Albertine – also pierces her art's veil; Albertine probably played the child in all three. Agar is African, with dark features like Corinne; Staël's art does much to launch the Romantic blonde–brunette opposition, drawing on her self-image as not white enough. But these *drames* are also experiments in nonclassical technique. In 1806, Staël told Henri Meister that her dramatic experiments continued, giving her the type of ideas she wanted, as *De l'Allemagne* and these *drames* attest. Staël now abandons verse, and her new plays all share dreams and masks as

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topoi. Discussing *Agar*, Staël's son Auguste mentions debts to Madame de Genlis and to Népomucène Lemercier; Staël follows Genlis throughout, borrowing Ishmael, the spilled jug, and Agar's comments on her rival Sarah, all absent from Genesis 16. What novelty does Staël then bring to the subject? Simplicity above all; Genlis's tendentious prose yields to the silence underlying Staël's *scène lyrique*: After Abraham expels his wife's handmaid Agar and their child Ishmael, an angel succors them. As in Staël's other *drames*, sustained dramatic poetry as a genre is replaced by Sophoclean lyric interludes, an experiment echoing new developments both in *opéra-comique*, with its spoken dialogue, and in German theater since Schiller, much in discussion at Coppet. Music and the divine move onstage.

Geneviève de Brabant is a curious French pendant to Tieck's sprawling Romantic manifesto, *Leben und Tod der heiligen Genoveva* (1802/1811), which A. W. Schlegel must surely have mentioned to her. Sigefroi finds his innocent queen and their daughter sheltered by a forest hermit, years after ordering their death. It is no accident that Staël writes *Geneviève* just before *De l'Allemagne*; there, German Romantic theater is roundly rejected in favor of Schiller and Goethe, with a sharp review of Tieck's *Genoveva* as a "roman dialogué." Staël thus answers Tieck from outside *De l'Allemagne*, much as she bans Heinrich von Kleist from its text to attack him in her 1813 *Réflexions sur le suicide*; *De l'Allemagne* is propaganda, systematically misrepresenting Staël's German sources to guarantee her impact in France. Since Staël's main thesis is that recent German drama is unperformable, theater "dans un fauteuil" as Alfred de Musset has it, *Geneviève* has the special interest of a project taken onward to performance. Staël submits Tieck's heroine to the unities, leaping past ten years of events to his conclusion, the arid Sigefroi's return. Tieck's presence is hinted at by elements less present in the folk legend: Sigefroi's hunting horns, Geneviève's veil. The French Empire public had seen religious decor in melodrama, even animals onstage like Staël's doe, but this is a leap from her Voltairean tragedies and a far cry from what Diderot called a *drame*. Every object is charged with affect: "Où donc est-il le poignard qui soulagerait mon cœur?" Again, life and art combine: Staël calls Sigefroi's son Adolphe, like Constant's hero, and Geneviève's ten years of exile parallel her own autobiography's title.

La Sunamite turns once more to the Old Testament: 2 Kings 4, Elisée (Elisha) and the Shunamite. As in *Geneviève*, Staël replaces the biblical son with a daughter. In 2 Kings, the aging Shunamite is blessed with a son who dies abruptly at the harvest; the prophet Elisha then performs the Old

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Testament's only resurrection. Staël embroiders – promised to God, Sémida dies at the feast her proud mother insists on despite a sister's warnings. The scenario may speak to Staël's biographers, but will the play stand alone? As in *Geneviève*, flowers, dreams, music, and religion add local color, part of Romantic theater's early history; after horns, a flute and a harp now appear onstage. Sémida performs the veil dance Madame Récamier taught Albertine, combining music, dance, and theater as Lulli did with Molière. Light and music mark an onstage resurrection. These three dramas merit a place in French Romantic theater. Staël's religion, local color, and lyric interludes mark a reasoned break with neoclassical and boulevard traditions alike, which the early nineteenth century could certainly have used.

Staël's three short *proverbes* of 1808–1811, her next dramatic work, are a world apart. *La Signora Fantastici* stars a sort of comic Corinne, bringing theater with her daughter to placid Geneva. The opening scenes anticipate Eugène Ionesco, as Staël skewers the vapid dialogue of a loveless household: The Germanic M. de Kriegschenmahl (with pipe) and his English wife (with tea) have appropriate accents for local color. This couple and their two sons clearly meant more to Staël's circle, for the play is full of just-intelligible private jokes: Licidas recites *Phèdre*, as Staël had, and the stuttering commissaire comes like Napoleon's prefects to order the heroine out of town but ends by joining the converted Kriegschenmahls in her troupe instead. *Le Capitaine Kernadec*, in turn, may be Staël's best pure theater, a well-oiled machine to which each crisp character contributes. Captain Kernadec wants his daughter Rosalba to marry a sailor, not the artistic Derval. That night, during his drunken sleep, the others age the household seven years. Kernadec's faithful Sabord, with a fake wooden leg, presents the maid Nérine as his wife. Derval enters with mustachios, in navy uniform and swearing (quietly) like a trooper, using navy jargon so absurd the captain reacts; they explain that with the new regulations, the maneuver has changed a lot. Finally, Madame de Kernadec enters, and her husband so insists on how she's aged that she reveals the fraud. Lovely moments echo A. W. Schlegel's thesis of gratuitous comedy: Sabord's lament that before losing his leg he never came in through the door, but "toujours par la fenêtre, monsieur, toujours par la fenêtre"; Rosalba's comment that seven years on from age sixteen they have so little time left that marriage would hardly be worth it; naming the captain's ship the *Belle-Poule*, the model for Louis XVI *coiffures à la frégate* after its sinking by the English. Staël's *Le Mannequin*, finally, is set in a Huguenot household in Berlin, where M. de La Morlière's daughter Sophie prefers

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the poor painter Hoffmann to her father's choice, the Parisian comte d'Erville, echo of Erfeuil in *Corinne*. Erville finds silent women less of a threat to his vanity. Sophie therefore presents a tailor's dummy behind curtains as her rich cousin, and Erville quickly proposes marriage, struck by the dummy's modest silence and other lacunary qualities: The dummy does not read, draw, sing, or dance, and never interrupts. This striking image precisely expresses the gender dispensation of postrevolutionary France, and the ideology of silence and submission *Corinne* attacks; indeed, the image is larger than its vehicle, a perfect window on nineteenth-century gender roles and one of Staël's great mythic symbols. Within this fabric, there is much of Molière, in the two men's rival vanities, for instance, or in M. de La Morlière's dialogue; but the enduring image is of the Frenchman and his puppet wife.

Remarkably, Staël wrote these comedies amid despair: Constant's abandonment and departure after 1808, *De l'Allemagne*'s pulping by Napoleon in 1810, and Staël's virtual house arrest at Coppet, ended by her flight to England via Moscow weeks before the city burned. To some extent, Staël's comedies transpose her great dilemmas to a comic universe, as Schlegel felt Aristophanes did; but as 1810 ended, Staël also met John Rocca, her second husband, and his devotion was something new. Moreover, Staël had always had a gift for joy and despair together; thus, 1811 also brought *Sapho*, which ends in suicide. *Sapho* shares the two heroines, one brilliant, one submissive, who are central to Staël's fiction but oddly absent elsewhere in her theater except in *Agar*. The theme of Sappho was much in vogue in Europe, and Staël had written an earlier Sappho romance by 1785. In *Sapho*, Phaon abandons Sapho for Cléone's beauty; Sapho, "une femme qui ne craignait point la tempête" (895), blasphemes Apollo after being crowned his priestess, preferring Venus. She then persuades Cléone to marry Phaon, and, after a final hymn, leaps into the sea at their wedding. Staël enjoys this Racinian telescoping of ceremonies, where altars serve for marriage, God, or sacrifice. In another innovation, *Sapho*'s lyric interludes feature an actual lyre, as Staël continues her Romantic search for Greek authenticity. This play has drawn excellent biographical analysis, as another Staël self-image: Witness François Gérard's famous painting of Corinne, with a lyre and with Staël's own features.

Finally, in *De l'Allemagne* and her other treatises, Staël offers a history and theory of drama. The *Lettres sur Rousseau* prefer *Pygmalion* to the *Devin du village*; *De la littérature* covers the Greeks and Romans, Shakespeare's tragedies, and French classicism; *Corinne* reviews Vittorio Alfieri and Pietro Metastasio. Corinne's improvisations and her triumph at

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the Capitol remind us, like the constant lyric interludes in Staël's dramas, that our separation of theater, music, improvisation, and other public ceremony was drawn differently around 1800, and that Staël put considerable effort into the project Hugo and Wagner both inherited, of breaking down those barriers to total esthetic continuity. That rigidity offers perhaps a final word on why Staël the experimenter chose, if not Musset's *Spectacle dans un fauteuil*, at least a *Spectacle dans un salon* to perfect her art.

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